

GOD THE PROVIDER

Matthew 6:25-34

The reading this morning from Matthews gospel begins with the word ‘therefore’. That tells us that this passage is linked to what has just gone before, it’s mainly linked to verse 24 – so let me begin by reading verse 24 to you:

“No-one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” (Matthew 6:24 NIV)

The NIV says you cannot serve both God and money, but many other modern translations and indeed older translations such as the AV render this as “You cannot serve both God and Mammon.” Mammon comes into English from the Latin ‘mammona’ or wealth which was borrowed from the Aramaic *māmōnā* meaning wealth or profit. In the Middle Ages Mammon was personified into a demonic creature and generally the term carries a rather pejorative view of wealth. However, there is no evidence that it carried any derogatory connotation in Jesus’s time. The Mishnah uses the word mammon to denote money or property without any hint of a pejorative connotation, unless the word is qualified by other words to denote ill-gotten or dishonest gain. So, Jesus’s warning here is not specifically restricted to ill-gotten wealth, but is about material possessions in general. However neutral their character, possessions can become a focus of concern and greed which competes with God himself for our loyalty. That’s the sin of idolatry. Materialism is in inevitable conflict with the kingship of God. It’s interesting that the original Hebrew root of the word mammon meant to ‘entrust’ (as wealth was often entrusted to bankers), but we’ve tended to turn this on its head into something *we* trust *in*. God entrusted us with all the material things of this world, let us keep our trust in God and not in the material things with which we have been entrusted. It is the highest treason to prize the gift above the giver. So, let us not put mammon before God, but rather let us honour God with our money through our Christian giving.

So having looked at the context for today's reading let's move on to consider it in more detail, beginning with verse 25:

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?" (Matthew 6:25 NIV)

Those who accept the demand to be slaves of God rather than money and possessions might well wonder how their material needs will be provided for if they have forgone the wealth that would have provided for them. Initially, the parallel reference to 'life' and 'body', might seem to suggest that Jesus is drawing a distinction between soul and body. But I think Jesus is saying that material worries can apply to all aspects of our existence. Food and drink enable our continued existence, our life, while clothes protect the body. But, these things must serve us, not the other way around.

Jesus is saying that neither food nor clothing is an end in itself, it's the life and body for which they provide which are more important. As we shall see in the following verses, it is these which are the subject of God's concern. Not only is life more important than food, it also consists of much more. If we allow ourselves to focus on the food then we'll be missing out on that 'more'. A 'more' which, as we shall see, will be spelled out later in the passage as God's kingship and righteousness. A life which puts materialism first is a life enslaved to mammon.

Jesus uses an illustration from nature to emphasise that in relation to the first of the material matters he's mentioned – food - in verse 26: "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" (Matthew 6:26 NIV)

This passage echoes Job 12:7-10:

"7 "But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds of the air, and they will tell you; 8 or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish of the sea inform you. 9 Which of all these does

not know that the hand of the LORD has done this? 10 In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind.” (Job 12:7-10 NIV)

But, let’s not misunderstand the meaning of these passages. They’re not saying that we have no part in this provision, they’re not saying that God will just drop food into the bird’s beaks. Birds must hunt and search for their food even though it is provided by God’s creation. Similarly, man must sow and reap using the seeds of God’s creation, or husband the animals God has provided to us. Jesus is not giving either birds or mankind a charter for laziness.

Jesus now throws in another thought into his series of rhetorical questions – worry. See verse 27:

“Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?” (Matthew 6:27 NIV)

Worry does no good at all, and indeed, although the point is not made here, it is more likely to shorten our lives than extend them. As Jesus says, worry will certainly not lengthen our lives.

Jesus then returns to the second of the matters he started with, our concern over clothes, in verses 28-30:

“28 "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. 29 Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. 30 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?” (Matthew 6:28-30 NIV)

Here, Jesus is saying that wild flowers don’t just survive, they are magnificent beyond the best that humans can achieve. Indeed their survival is not an issue for they are here today and gone tomorrow and then thrown into the fire. Yet God lavishes upon them such care and craftsmanship that their beauty exceeds that of the most ostentatious monarch. God, who is the creator and sustainer of a lavishly beautiful universe, can be trusted to meet all our essential needs. Thus, those who refuse to trust in God’s care and provision are ‘of little faith’.

The Greek word used here for those who are of little faith, *oligopistoi*, is used a good deal by Matthew for those who are afraid rather than turning to God and trusting Him for their survival or needs. Indeed he says it means having less faith than a mustard seed – which is practically no faith at all. For Matthew, faith in God means having confidence that God can and will act on our behalf. Without that confidence we are faithless.

In verses 31 and 32 Jesus turns back again to food whilst continuing to think about clothing:

“31 So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32 For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.”
(Matthew 6:31-32 NIV)

The ‘worry’ that Jesus forbids here is set in contrast with God’s prior knowledge of our needs. It is our awareness of that knowledge and our reliance on it which creates the faith which is the opposite of worry. Worry is essentially a failure to trust God. Of course, it is our *needs* rather than our *wants* which are the object of God’s fatherly care and provision. He may not give us a channel handbag, but he will provide our daily bread. Of course, we must be realistic here, Christians in some parts of the world are starving and are persecuted even unto the point of martyrdom. But nevertheless we maintain our trust in a loving God who will not allow anything to happen to us which is not for the ultimate good. As Paul says in Romans:

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28 NIV)

The question of making God our priority, with which we began in verse 24, arises again in verse 33:

“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:33 NIV)

We are told to make it our priority to find – to seek first – God’s kingship and righteousness. To seek God’s righteousness means to live in the way that God requires us to live, keeping His laws and

decrees and following in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ. As such living in this way represents something done, but also something we eagerly desire – just as we desire food and drink when we hunger and thirst. As Jesus’s disciples, our deepest wish and resolve must be to live in God’s way, to be as much like His son Jesus Christ as we are able in this life. Seeking God’s kingdom is really another way of saying the same thing, for it calls us to live under God’s direction and control. When we do this the kingdom of heaven belongs to us.

Living in this way is to be our constant preoccupation, not some vague hope or resolve for the future. This is one of the few places that Matthew speaks of the kingdom of God rather than his more usual kingdom of heaven. That’s probably just because this passage requires a more personal reference to God himself rather than the idea of heavenly authority. Verse 32 referred to God as our heavenly father concerned for our needs and the idea of the kingdom of God follows naturally from this.

“All these things” refers to any and all material needs which are not to be the object of worry, but for which we must trust in God. Let’s remember once again that we’re talking about needs here. We’re promised survival not affluence – this is no *carte blanche*. Although, if we live in God’s way he loves to give in abundance.

The final verse of our reading is verse 34:

“Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (Matthew 6:34 NIV)

This saying is fully consistent with what we’ve been saying about not worrying about our material needs, but to have faith that God will provide them. Jesus is saying that our loving heavenly father will provide for us not just this day but tomorrow and indeed throughout our lives.

Jesus is also saying that there’s no point in anticipating tomorrow’s problems. This is not cynical advice to live only for the present – which is a view condemned by Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 15 and

verse 32 and indeed by Jesus himself in Luke 12:19-20. However, the reference to tomorrow's problems brings us back to earth. Having emphasised the provision of our loving heavenly father, Jesus now reminds us that in this life we will also suffer problems. God's provision is assured, but life will not be one long picnic. Each day will have its troubles, but the preceding verses assure us that by means of God's grace, mercy and provision these can be survived. Indeed as we saw from Romans even these troubles will be for our ultimate good.

So, what have we learned this morning, firstly, we must not make a God out of material possessions, rather we must honour God with them especially with our Christian giving. Secondly, we must not allow our material possessions to cause us to miss out on the 'more' in our lives – God's kingship and righteousness – trusting God to provide for our daily needs remembering that this may not be all we want and desire. We must live in a way which honours God. Thirdly we are not to worry. Worry is useless and achieves nothing, indeed doctors tell us that it causes many kinds of illness. Again, we must depend on and have faith in God, who provides us with all our needs. Even when we have troubles we can rest secure in the knowledge that God works all things together for good for those of us who are truly His disciples.