

Series: Seek

Title: Generosity

Text: Matthew 6:31-34

Date: March 5, 2023

Our study of the pursuit of God brings us to the subject of money and material things. Jesus used the word “seek” in reference to financial matters in His famous Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 6:33, He said, “But seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you.” Jesus’ words were uttered within a lengthy passage that dealt with material resources and wealth. As a result, His teaching revealed that there is an intricate relationship between our pursuit of God and our relationship to money and material things.

If we are going to grow into all that God wants us to be, and if we are going to be used by Him as He desires to use us, we must develop a proper relationship toward finances and possessions. There is no way around this reality. Spiritual maturity, strength, and usefulness are built upon a proper relationship to the material world. J.C. Ryle once commented:

Among the children of this world he is thought the greatest man who has most land, most money, most servants, most rank, and most earthly power: among the children of God he is reckoned the greatest who does most to promote the spiritual and temporal happiness of his fellow-creatures. True greatness consists, not in receiving, but in giving — not in selfish absorption of good things but in imparting good to others — not in being served but in serving — not in sitting still, and being ministered to, but in going about and ministering to others.¹

Because money and material things are grounded in the physical realm, some mistakingly assume that they have no impact on the spiritual realm. Such a perspective has caused great harm in the modern church. There is good reason that Jesus spent so much time talking about these things. He dedicated a large section of His most famous sermon to the topic, because He knew that the a proper relationship to finances and possessions is necessary for a healthy pursuit of God. Through His words in Matthew 6:31-34, we find four important ideas related to generosity and our relationship to material things.

A MATTER OF PEACE

In our study of generosity and the pursuit of God, it first helps to note the relationship between material things and the state of our souls. Bible scholars have often remarked on the high frequency of references to money and material things in the teachings of Jesus. Why did our Lord speak so often about such things? Jesus knew the material world has a way of blinding our eyes to our need for the Lord. In addition, He knew that material things have no capacity to sooth the deepest yearnings of our souls.

¹ Murray, Iain H. *J.C. Ryle: Prepared to Stand Alone*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 51.

Seeking Security

This is where many err in life. They mistakenly believe the lie that more stuff will make them happy. Since the Garden of Eden, humanity has been trapped in the shackles of sin and the shame such sin produces (Genesis 3:8-13). As a result, each innately seeks to satiate the pangs of shame and insecurity through various means. Since the beginning of time, many have sought solace through Satan's values — "...the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (1 John 2:16, KJV).

An illustration from the New Testament illustrates this point. Jesus once told the story of a rich man who hoarded riches. Since grain was the currency of a first-century agrarian society, the man built bigger barns to stockpile reserves. In his short-sighted planning, the man desired to achieve a sense of lasting security. He wanted to be able to say, "You have many goods stored up for many years. Take it easy; eat, drink, and enjoy yourself" (Luke 12:19).

Jesus' story depicted the deceptive nature of wealth — it promises lasting peace that it cannot provide. Jesus rebuked the man in His story, saying, "You fool! This very night your life is demanded of you. And the things you have prepared — whose will they be?" (Luke 12:20). To conclude His parable, Jesus encouraged His disciples to be "...rich toward God" (Luke 12:21). Jesus wanted His disciples to know that material wealth could never provide lasting security for the human psyche. Only God can do that!

Money, Material Things, and Anxiety

The way we approach money matters has major implications for our souls. Jesus made this clear through the sheer volume of references He made to money, but He also gave explicit reference to the way money and material things impact our spiritual lives. We saw such to be true from the story about the man who built bigger barns, but we also find such to be true from Jesus' explicit teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. In urging His disciples to "seek first the kingdom of God," He also said, "So don't worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'" (Matthew 6:31).

Take note of the word "worry" in Matthew 6:31. The Greek word underlying English translations of the New Testament is one that referred to anxious care. Interestingly, the term only appeared nineteen times in the New Testament, but nine appearances of the word appeared within Jesus' teaching on money in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:25, 27, 28, 31, 34; Luke 12:22, 25, 26). What does Jesus' use of the word teach us? It reveals that there is a huge link between emotional anxiety and material things. In order to experience lasting peace in the human soul, one must adopt the proper perspective toward money.

Peace is What We Need

All of this brings us to the topic of peace. Scripture often contrasts the virtue with anxiety. In Philippians 4:6-7, Paul said, "Don't *worry* about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the *peace* of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." Interestingly, Paul used the same Greek word for "worry" that Jesus

used in Matthew 6:31. In doing so, he revealed that “peace” is the opposite of, or substitute for, the worry that tends to plague our souls.

Putting the words of Jesus and Paul together, we learn that the rat race for more material possessions never pays off or pans out. Lasting and enduring peace only come from the a right relationship with the Lord, a relationship in which we look to Him regularly for security, satisfaction, and sustenance. I recently read a memoir by a well-known endurance athlete and podcaster. Though there are a lot of things we would disagree on, I believe he did a good job of depicting the emptiness of materialism:

The American Dream is an elegant, aspirational ideal originally premised on egalitarianism: equal opportunity for all. A mandated right to seek self-improvement. An open door to pursue potential, and in turn, contribute the fruits of one's journey for the benefit of all. But along the way, the foundational ethos of this enchanting concept lies a smoldering carcass on the shoulder of a modern superhighway, supplanted by a relentless compulsion to accumulate and consume...Our social currency is stuff - worth dictated not by who we are but by what we own, fueled by a cultural mandate that forsakes the value of service, struggle, and authentic expression for the pursuit of luxury, instant gratification, and ease. The implicit promise of this perverted paradigm? Happiness, of course. Peace of mind. Contentment. This is perhaps the greatest lie ever perpetrated on humankind. Because stuff doesn't make one happy.²

Though I don't fully agree with everything associated within the aforementioned author's worldview, I think his words powerfully point to an important reality in life — money and material things don't bring lasting happiness. The pursuit of wealth never gives peace to the human soul. Only the Lord can provide such a thing. Charles Spurgeon once said, “There is no peace like the peace which Jesus gives; it is like a river, deep, profound, renewed, ever flowing, overflowing, increasing and widening into an ocean of bliss.”³ As we think about the pursuit of God and generosity, it is important that we have our spiritual eyes open to such realities. We must be fully convinced that the hoarding of more stuff will never satiate the shame and insecurity that is endemic to our souls.

A MATTER OF PROVIDENCE

In talking about money and material things, Jesus made a contrast between His disciples and those who weren't His disciples. He said, “For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things...” (Matthew 6:32). The word “Gentile” was used amongst first-century Jews to refer to people who were not ethnic Jews. However, the term had implications beyond a person's ethnicity. The term also depicted a person as being an unbeliever, a pagan. Our Lord's use of the term revealed that the children of the Lord should have

² Roll, Rich. *Finding Ultra*. (New York, NY: Harmony Books, 2012), xi.

³ Spurgeon, C.H. *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Volume 27, 1881*. (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1984), 299.

an approach to money and material things that is different than the approach found amongst the children of the world.

Unbelievers often strive and spin their proverbial wheels, trying to amass gold and gain. They usually commit themselves to the mad dash for more stuff. Their lives are driven by one overarching purpose — achieve, obtain, and prosper. Believers are to live differently. Their lives are to be driven by a humble trust in the Father’s provision. Jesus instructed His disciples in this matter, saying, “...your heavenly Father knows that you need them” (Matthew 6:32).

Our Lord’s words bring us to an important Bible doctrine known as “providence.” The word “providence” does not appear much in Scripture. It actually doesn’t appear at all in most modern translations. The only use of the word in the King James Version is found in the book of Acts. Its use in that book was uttered by an opponent of Paul as the man spoke about the “providence” or “foresight” of Ananias, the high priest who oversaw a trial in which Paul was a suspect (Acts 24:2). The Bible never uses the word “providence” explicitly in reference to the Lord. However, we see the idea of God’s providence throughout the pages of Scripture.

What is the doctrine of providence? Well, it is first important to consider the meaning of the term. The word “providence” is made up of two words. The first is one that meant “before.” The second one is a word that meant “see.” Perhaps you can see the word “video” in the second half of the term. Strictly, the word “providence” means “to see in advance.” As used in reference to the Lord, the term speaks of the way our timeless Lord sees and knows all things in advance.⁴ Such truth is underscored by titles like “First and Last,” “Beginning and End,” and “Alpha and Omega” that are often applied to our Lord in Scripture (Revelation 1:8, 17; 21:6; 22:13).

The doctrine of providence teaches us that the Lord sees our need. He knows our cares and He is familiar with our necessities. We can trust Him with our material wealth. The Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs once said, “There is nothing that befalls you but there is a hand of God in it – this is from God, and is a great help to contentment.”⁵ Jesus promoted such truth when He said, “...your heavenly Father knows that you need them” (Matthew 6:32).

As we consider the subject of generosity, giving, money, and material things, it is imperative that we consider the subject of God’s providence. Many are slow to entrust their earthly wealth to Jesus because of a fear of going without. If one was to peer beneath the surface, one would find that stinginess and poor stewardship is rooted in a distrust of God. The words of one modern author are helpful at this point:

The doctrine of providence sees a Person behind everything. There is purpose, intention, plan. There’s a wise and loving Father behind every experience you walk through in life, every person you “chance” to meet, every bruise or cut you receive,

⁴ Shared in Renewing Your Mind with R.C. Sproul podcast by R.C. Sproul, February 4, 2023, Episode: *Providence*.

⁵ Burroughs, Jeremiah. *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 112.

every paycheck you earn, every flat tire you endure, every missed connecting flight, every possession that slips out of your pocket.⁶

If you are struggling with committing your budget and finances to the Lord, perhaps there is a problem with your view of God. Pray and ask the Lord to soften your heart. Ask Him to give you a greater regard for His greatness and His providence. When you began to see your Heavenly Father as the all-wise God who knows what you need, you will be more likely to give and govern your finances according to His will.

A MATTER OF PRIORITY

Mastering the love of money is key for faithful Christian living. Paul warned first-century Christians, saying, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and by craving it, some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Timothy 6:10). Killing greedy desires does not happen in a vacuum. One cannot simply try to avoid the lust of material things. To experience victory, one must replace the love of money with a greater love.

Jesus intimated that such is true in His Sermon on the Mount. When talking about passions concerning earthly wealth, He said, “But seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33). Our Lord’s words revealed that the battle for faithful stewardship involves a battle regarding one’s priorities. To loosen the grip of greed and to become more generous, one must make the pursuit of God one’s first focus.

In encouraging such a pursuit, Jesus used the Greek word rendered “seek” that is famously used throughout Scripture for the pursuit of God. We’ve referenced the word multiple times already in our study, and we’ve talked about Jesus’ use of the word in Matthew 6:33. For the purposes of our current discussion, it is important to note the way the term was used in reference to the management of money and material things.

The Greek word for “seek” (zētēō) was used in the ancient world to speak of the act wherein one searched for or looked for an object. In some contexts, it meant “to strive to find.”⁷ One has said the word carried the idea of directing one’s attention toward a person, place, or thing.⁸ As applied to the Christian life, the term depicted the humble and sincere act of following and obeying God.⁹

Jesus highlighted the importance of such an activity in the Christian life through the intensity of the language He employed. In the original language of Matthew 6:33, He used a verb that portrayed a continual action. One has said that His choice of

⁶ Davis, M. Andrew. *The Power of Christian Contentment*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2019), 57.

⁷ Zodhiates, 700.

⁸ France, R.T. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Matthew*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1985), 145.

⁹ Zodhiates, 700.

words called for “a constant attitude.”¹⁰ According to Jesus, a careful and consistent pursuit of the Lord and the Lord’s will is the frame of mind that is necessary to overcome materialistic urges.

The Kingdom of God

To further clarify what He meant by seeking God, Jesus provided two qualifiers to define the nature of such a pursuit. He first spoke of “the kingdom of God.” There is a lot of debate concerning what Jesus meant when He mentioned the kingdom. Some point to the spiritual reign of Christ through the hearts of Christians. Others emphasize the end-of-the world political reign of Christ upon the Earth. For the purposes of our study, it is helpful to note that “the kingdom of God” simply refers to the Lord’s sovereign rule and reign over His people.¹¹ Yes, the kingdom of God will not be fully actualized until the end of time, but we can still seek the Lord’s reign in our hearts. By crowning Him as ruler over all areas of our lives, even our finances, He gains prominence in all that we do.

The Righteousness of God

Jesus also told His disciples to seek after the “righteousness” of God. The term rendered “righteousness” in the New Testament was one that spoke of “conduct in agreement with God’s will.”¹² As beings created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), God’s people are made to reflect His character to a lost world (Ephesians 2:10). They do so as they embrace His laws concerning what is right and just. The ordinary Christian life involves an adherence to and obedience of what the Lord deems righteous (John 14:15). Since the Moral Law instructs believers that greed and covetousness are off limits for the people of God (Exodus 20:15, 17), it stands to reason that the pursuit of righteousness will affect how one relates to money and material things. It is for this reason that Jesus told His disciples to “seek first...His righteousness” when talking about possessions and the necessities of life.

Do You Own Riches, or Do Riches Own You?

Jesus’ instruction reveals that priorities are important when it comes to our stewardship of material resources. At the end of the day, money and material things are not inherently evil. They are neutral in a moral sense, neither morally righteous or unrighteous. It is our perspective toward such things that can make them evil or just. Be aware of these things as consider your relationship to money and as you think about God’s call for you to practice generosity. One has said, “It is not wrong to own riches, but it is wrong to trust in them, to treat them as though they constitute what life

¹⁰ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 15.

¹¹ McKim, Donald. *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 154.

¹² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 15.

is all about.”¹³ To be the good stewards God wants us to be with our material wealth, we must make sure we have the right perspective in life. We must keep a close watch on our life priorities.

A MATTER OF PROVISION

In His teaching on money and material things, Jesus made a wonderful promise to His people. After calling His disciples to seek first God’s kingdom and righteousness, He said, “...all these things will be provided for you...” (Matthew 6:33). Notice the Lord’s promises concerning provision. According to Jesus, God’s people can have confidence that He will meet their needs when they faithfully put Him and His kingdom first in their lives.

Powerful Provision

The language used by Jesus in His promise was powerful. The Greek word of the New Testament was a compound word that literally meant “to add to.” It was used in the ancient world of one adding a deposit to an account. It was also used in references to a master who paid allowances to household workers and servants.¹⁴ Matthew employed the language to depict the way the Lord dutifully provides for His people.

To stress the power behind the Lord’s provision, Matthew employed what Bible scholars now call “the theological passive.” In the Greek language of the New Testament, one could speak of an action that was performed by using one of three voices — the active voice, the middle voice, or the passive voice. The active depicted one performing an action (“he/she talks”). The middle depicted one performing an action on self (“he/she talks to himself/herself”). The passive voice portrayed an action being performed upon a person.

Matthew used the passive voice in Matthew 6:33. His intent was to graphically depict the Lord as the one who does the providing in the life of the believer!¹⁵ The apostle wanted his readers to cultivate a trust that God is faithful to meet the needs of His people. For those who prioritized the Lord’s kingdom, there was promise that the Lord would generously provide for needs.

“Our Daily Bread”

It is important to clarify the exact nature of Jesus’ promise. The modern prosperity gospel has used the teaching of our Lord as a platform for “naming and claiming” material wealth. In such a system of belief, poverty is regarded as an omen of inferior spirituality. Riches are regarded as a token of God’s favor.

What did Jesus mean when He said, “...all these things will be provided for you...” (Matthew 6:33)? The language of the verse contained a demonstrative term (“these”) to point to the exact object of Jesus’ promises. A simple reading of Matthew 6:25-33 makes the nature of Jesus’ promise obvious. In the verses preceding Matthew

¹³ Barnes, Peter. In Whom Do I Trust? *The Banner of Truth Magazine: Feb 2020*, 677. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2020), 21.

¹⁴ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 15.

¹⁵ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 15.

6:33, our Lord had discussed humanity's worry concerning food and clothing. As a result, His reference to "these things" in Matthew 6:33 was a clear reference to the basic necessities of life.

There are times in which the blessing of the Lord will make one rich. Solomon talked about such realities in the Proverbs (Proverbs 10:22). In His all-wise providence, the Lord sometimes bestows wealth upon certain individuals in order to advance His kingdom purposes. However, one should not interpret the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:33 as a promise for material wealth. I've often heard it said that God never promised to meet our *greeds*, but He did promise to meet our *needs*.

Jesus' words in Matthew 6:33 were an assurance concerning the basic staples of life. When God's people are faithful to put Him first in all things, they have a guarantee from Jesus that they will never go without. As the Lord's prayer reveals, God is good to give His people their "daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). The Lord's people can live with a confidence that He will give them the food and clothing they need.

Great Is His Faithfulness

Sure, there are exceptions to this rule. Through evil and injustice, God's people are sometimes persecuted. Because of the faith and because of bad rulers, some of the Lord's choicest servants have been impoverished or have perished. However, such realities do not undo the promises of Jesus. In all generations, Christians can live with a trust that the Lord will meet their needs.

The Psalmist was aware of these realities. In singing of the Lord's goodness, He said, "I have been young and now I am old, yet I have not seen the righteous abandoned or his children begging for bread. He is always generous, always lending, and his children are a blessing" (Psalm 37:25-26). Paul was aware of such truth as well. When he wrote his letter to the first-century church at Philippi, he said, "And my God will supply all your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). Paul's words were not empty, positive talk. The apostle knew that his readers had faced dire circumstances. Though they endured deep poverty, they were faithful to give to his mission ministry. Paul gave witness to such things in 2 Corinthians 8:1-6. Perhaps Paul had the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:33 in mind as he wrote to the Philippians. He wanted the church to remember that the Lord had promised to reward their faithfulness to the kingdom by meeting their needs.

Conclusion

As we close our study on the relationship between generosity and seeking God, may we leave with a confidence in God's goodness. These things had to become personal to me at a point in my life. Because of a season in which I struggled and went without in a financial sense, I developed a spirit of fear concerning the provisions of life. I had to learn to trust God to meet my needs.

It was through a friend in seminary who had moved to the United States from Africa that I learned the precious promises of Matthew 6:33. My friend had spent the early part of his life struggling for sustenance and the basic necessities of life. He had learned to cling to Jesus' promises. When I opened up about some of my fears, he encouraged me to trust the Lord and he cited the Lord's words from the Sermon on the

Mount. My prayer for you is that your life will resound with a spirit of generosity that is built upon a firm conviction that the Lord will always give you what you need in life.