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## Seek Ye First....

Matthew 6:24-34 24 No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. 25 Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 28 And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31 Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' 32 For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But seek ye first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

Sometimes things can be absolutely clear, and yet difficult to understand. I think that might well describe our scripture today, a portion of what is known as Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount." And these teachings, which stand at the very center of Jesus' sermon that day, are indeed **clear** aren't they: "*No one can serve two masters.*" "*Do not worry*" (He says that five times in these few verses!) "*Seek ye first the kingdom of God.*" But the fact that something is **clear** doesn't mean that it's easy or obvious. I bought a flashlight a few weeks ago. It came in one of those hard-shell, plastic shrink-wrapped packages. The flashlight laying inside this little cellulite cocoon was absolutely clear and obvious, but it was a 15 minute task to free it from its packaging, and it wasn't clear at all how to do so! And even though Jesus' words here are indeed clear, nonetheless it may not be clear how we are supposed to understand them, what we should do about them. So that leaves the preacher with some choices, several possibilities.

One possibility would be to preach a rather predicable sermon that scolds you for worrying about stuff. However, I've never found it very effective to be **ordered** not to worry, have you? Another possibility might be to preach a sermon that chastises you for serving two masters; but I suspect you could preach that sermon yourself and the obvious candidates for the things that vie for our loyalty and attention are ones we could all name – consumerism, an inordinate love of money, obsessions with sports or job or success or whatever. But that would seem sort of like preaching to the choir, as the saying goes, wouldn't it? For you who are here this morning are the very ones who in fact DO want to serve but One master, and so predicable and trite warnings against your serving two masters just aren't very helpful. But nonetheless, here is what I am struck with about Jesus' words about you and I not being able to serve two masters: he is not really saying it as a **warning**. It's not meant to be **scolding**. It's not **chastisement**. It's not **finger-wagging**. No, *it's simply a statement of fact*. For it IS sometimes exceedingly hard to truly give your heart, your attention, your mind to two things at the same time. Now, our modern era thinks otherwise. There's even a word for it: multi-tasking, and those who can do it are supposedly to be admired. But Jesus is right and His words ring true even in life's mundane things: For example, if I try to talk with someone on the phone while I am also browsing the internet, it is not only rude but I won't do either task very well! *"No one can serve two masters."* And on those occasions when I would confess that I talk on my cell phone while driving, it's just impossible not to admit that my concentration on my driving isn't as sharp as it is when I'm not talking on the phone and my conversation not as focused either. *"No one can serve two masters."*

So what's the preacher to do? There is so very much that we could preach about today; this text is so rich, so full, even so troubling that it could occasion weeks of

sermons. But this morning, I simply want to concentrate on the thing that has most struck me about this passage this week: it's the last two verses of this passage, where Jesus says: "*But **seek ye first** for the kingdom of God and [God's] righteousness....*"

"Seek ye first." **Seek ye first.** In the face of

- a world that pulls us in a hundred different directions every day
- a world which almost demands that we "multi-task" and seemingly rewards those who do
- in a world that relishes conspiracy theories and attributes the worst motives to people rather than the best
- in the face of a world that, as my wife Barbara puts it so well, lies to you about what it is that will make you truly happy
- in the face of a world that encourages you in a hundred different ways to judge people by things that don't matter one whit to God
- in the face of maybe your own inner demons that tell you that you're not good enough, or smart enough, or worthy enough.....

In the face of all of these temptations to live a life that is less than it could be, that is less than God wants for you, Jesus' advice is this: "*Seek **first**, seek **first**.*"

What does he mean by that? What does "first" mean here? Well, I think Jesus means that sometimes our job as Christians is to strive **first** to be the best people we can be – in the next five minutes, the next hour, the rest of the day. Alcoholics Anonymous and other Twelve Step groups have a lot of wisdom when they speak of not deciding once and for all to *never again* drink, but deciding hundreds of times, sometimes deciding hour by hour, that you will not drink in that next hour. *Seek ye first, seek ye first.* Writer and poet Maya Angelou makes this wonderful observation: In my life, she says, "*I'm **trying** to be a Christian. I'm **working at it**, and I'm amazed when people walk up to me and say, I'm a Christian.' I think, 'Already? Wow!'" *Seek ye**

**first**, seek ye **first**... Some days are the kind of days where you and I will indeed need to **try** to be Christian, to **work at** being Christian – for the next five minutes, the next hour, just this day. So what I think Jesus is saying is this: although our commitment to Christ is indeed a lifetime one and one that we make with utter sincerity, **the reality is that that commitment actually gets lived out every day in the decisions that we make about the next five minutes, the next hour, the rest of the day, the coming week.** And Jesus' counsel in those moments, those hours, those weeks is this: *Seek ye first; "try to do what **I** would do in the next five minutes, the next hour, the coming week."*

And then, you might well ask, "Well, what **would** Jesus do?" And that's exactly right. What **would** Jesus do in those next five minutes, that next hour, the rest of the day, in the coming week? But be aware, before you answer, the Jesus whose example you seek to follow needs to be the **real** Jesus. For when you ask, "What would Jesus do?" they answer cannot be from the Jesus of the Aryan Church that claims that Jesus hates people who aren't white. It cannot be the Jesus of those who would picket soldiers' funerals gleefully screaming "Jesus hates fags.". It cannot be the Jesus of too much talk-radio that would claim that Jesus only really loves those who have the "correct" positions on certain social issues. It cannot be the Jesus of those who would claim that He was only interested in "spiritual" matters and not really concerned about the real-life realities of injustice and hunger and homelessness. No, when you ask yourself "*What would Jesus do in the next five minutes, the next hour, the rest of the day?*" your answer needs to reflect the Jesus who revealed to you and me a God of absolutely unconditional love. Your answer needs to reflect a God whom the prophet Isaiah describes, as we heard in our Call to Worship today printed in your bulletin, as a mother who could never ever forget, ignore, or stop loving her child. And when you have **that** Jesus in mind, **then** you are indeed in a position to fruitfully ask the question

“*What would Jesus do*” in the next five minutes, the next hour, the coming week?

Evangelical pastor and writer Tony Campolo tells the story of a friend who is a chaplain at a college: he says that

...there was a young woman in [in the chaplain’s] office one day, crying her eyes out. She was a lesbian and she had been outed. The word was getting around the campus and she knew it was only a short period of time before the word would get back to her father who was a Baptist preacher and a very stern man. She knew that when her father found out, her father would reject her. [The chaplain] said to her, "Let me save you the trouble. Sit right there while I call your father." He picked up the phone and dialed this pastor, this minister, this Baptist preacher and said, "Your daughter is in my office. Over the last several months she has proven to be one of the loveliest, kindest, most gentle Christians on this campus. She lives out her faith." The father immediately responded with pride and said, "You're right. She's wonderful. She's glorious!" He went on and on about how wonderful his daughter was. Then my friend, the university chaplain, said, "***I'm glad we agree. In the next thirty seconds I'm going to find out whether you are worthy to be called her father.***"

Whatever you may think of homosexuality or any of all those other issues and situations that can so threaten to rend relationships, surely it is nonetheless the first job of a parent **always** to convey unconditional love. In that regard, Reverend Campolo goes on to tell us how the woman’s father responded:

“The good news is the father did prove worthy. He exercised unconditional love. He accepted his daughter.... That's what it means to be an imitator of Christ. That's God's calling. We are called to imitate Jesus and in every situation we need to do that.... If you do **day by day** what Jesus would do if Jesus were in your place, you **become** Jesus for people by showing to others the Good News—the good news

that they worship a God who extends to them unconditional love, a God who forgives, a God who believes in people.”

“*Seek ye first....*” In the next five minutes, the next hour, the coming day – or sometimes, indeed, in the next 30 seconds. That’s the choice that you and I have in every moment: will we be Jesus to other people or not? Will we show the face and hands and voice and love of the God who loves with the tenacity and fierceness with which a mother loves her child? “*Seek ye first....*”

Let me close with another story about what doing what Jesus would do, even in just the next hour, can do. A pastor by the name of Mike Yaconelli tells this story. It seems that there was a man who was a deacon in his church and who was sort of a grouch and he didn’t much want to do anything; in fact, he was grumpy enough most of the time that the pastor didn’t really think he’d be the best guy to attract people to the church. But he still wanted to give the man a chance to serve. So he said this to him:

"I have a group of young people that go to the old folks home and put on a worship service once a month. Would you drive them to the old folks home and at least do that?" The deacon agreed. The first Sunday the deacon was at the old folks home, he was in the back with his arms folded as the kids were doing their thing up front. All of a sudden, someone was tugging at his arm. He looked down and here was this old man in a wheelchair. He took hold of the old man's hand and the old man held his hand all during the service. The next month that was repeated. The man in the wheelchair came and held the hand of the deacon. The next month, the next month, and the next month. Then the old man wasn't there. The deacon inquired and he was told, "Oh, he's down the hall, right hand side, third door. He's dying. He's unconscious, but if you want to go down and pray... that's alright." The deacon went and there were tubes and wires hanging out all over the place. The deacon took the man's hand and prayed that God would receive the man, that God would

bring this man from this life into the next and give him eternal blessings. As soon as he finished the prayer, the old man squeezed the deacon's hand and the deacon knew that he had been heard. He was so moved by this that tears began to run down his cheeks. He stumbled out of the room and as he did so he bumped into a woman. She said, "He's been waiting for you. He said that he didn't want to die until he had the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time." The deacon was amazed at this. He said, "What do you mean?" She said, "Well, my father would say that once a month Jesus came to this place. 'He would take my hand and he would hold my hand for a whole hour. I don't want to die until I have the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time.'"

My friends, someone needs **your** hand in the next five minutes, the next hour, the next week. Someone needs **your** voice. Someone needs to know the face and hands and love of God; someone needs to encounter the Gentle Savior who would love each and every one of us like a mother. Someone needs to know the Jesus who showed the care and compassion and unconditional love of the one who is father to us all.

In the next five minutes, the next hour, the next week.... *Seek ye first, seek ye first.*  
Will you pray with me?

*"O gentle and wondrous God, father and mother to us all, we are so glad to bear the name Christian. And we know that you are not done with us yet. In the next five minutes, the next hour, the next week, allow us to show the voice and hands of Jesus every more nearly. And where we need to know His gentle touch that would heal what hurts us, may He break through what keeps us chained and anxious and worried. Help us indeed, in every moment, to seek you first – for we know that when we do so, all those other things that you promise will be added to our lives, now and always. Amen."*

And now let's sing about it. Our Prayer Hymn is indeed "*Seek Ye First*," #354, and I invite those who are able to stand and sing it with me.