

Matthew 6:19-34  
March 12, 2023  
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The Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes, glorious pronouncements of God's future that is breaking into the present. Then, Jesus teaches us about the Law—inviting us to comic civil disobedience in the face of unjust laws, but also demanding our obedience to the “higher law” that shapes us in our true purpose. Chapter 6, which we read on Ash Wednesday, talks about the spiritual integrity in the three “private” practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Here, at the end of chapter 6, Matthew collects some of Jesus' sayings about... well... about what?

<sup>19</sup> “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, <sup>20</sup> but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

<sup>22</sup> “The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, <sup>23</sup> but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If, then, the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

<sup>24</sup> “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.

<sup>25</sup> “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? <sup>26</sup> Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet God feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? <sup>27</sup> And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life? <sup>28</sup> And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, <sup>29</sup> yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. <sup>30</sup> But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will God not much more clothe you—you of little faith? <sup>31</sup> Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ <sup>32</sup> For it is the gentiles who seek all these things, and indeed God knows that you need all these things. <sup>33</sup> But seek first the kin-dom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

<sup>34</sup> “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

These sayings mostly focus on your relationship to your material possessions. Jesus is asking you about your stuff. Reading these sayings is like Jesus has knocked on your door and you open it and before you can say anything he politely walks past you into your house. And now, he's kind of moving around looking at your things—that lamp, the bookcase, the living room rug; now Jesus is randomly opening your drawers and then he asks out loud. “What are you keeping all these things for, exactly?” Then he looks over to the table, and he sees that you've got your financial paperwork out because you're doing your taxes. He walks over and begins looking at your pay stubs—and his eyebrows lift. And he picks up your bank statement... and your IRA statement. And you want to say, “Jesus, I didn't even invite you in... that stuff is not your business.” But you can't say that to Jesus. Finally, he puts them down, and Jesus looks all

around again and then he looks you in the eye, and he says to you, “you know, you can’t serve God and wealth.”

He waits for a few seconds while he lets those words sink in. And then he asks, “what, exactly, are you so worried about? Are you afraid that if you didn’t have all of this, you wouldn’t be OK?

Maybe...,” Jesus says, “if you didn’t have all of this... you’d be even better off.”

I don’t know if you’ve ever imagined Jesus walking around your house and rifling through your cabinets and staring at your financial records. But 2000 years have gone by since Jesus said these words to those who follow him and they’ve never stopped being slightly too aggressive. We want to be materially comfortable. And we worry—a lot—about our material well-being.

Whenever preachers start talking about money, folks in the pews get nervous. I have pastoral colleagues who are afraid to even *read* this passage in church, let alone talk about what it means. The idea that wealth is categorically good and that human beings should pursue it without shame or self-consciousness is essential to American culture. The pursuit of wealth is part of capitalism and capitalism is the religion of the United States. American has told Jesus to butt out of our finances. In fact, an entirely new religion called the Prosperity Gospel has grown up in America so that Jesus and wealth acquisition might look like friends. In almost every church, we water down Jesus and try to relativize what he’s saying. We say, “it’s OK to pursue wealth, so long as you’re ‘right’ with Jesus.” I’ve never been able to square myself with that. Everything that I know about the kingdom of heaven says that putting it first in your life most certainly puts you at odds with capitalism and the acquisition of wealth. Most Christians know this, deep down. But when push comes to shove, we yield to the culture, and we seek ye first the kingdom of more.

We have to keep reading these passages. We have to keep opening the door just enough to let Jesus in. What Jesus is saying is that all material things are spiritual. One of the great tricks of American Christianity is convincing us that we can put matter over here and call it “secular” and it can be bought and sold and traded according to economic principles and that there’s we can put spiritual stuff over there—including our “heart” or our “soul”—and it’s only the spiritual stuff that Jesus is really concerned about. What bunch of bunk that is. The overarching message of the Bible is that *the earth and everything in it are God’s*. The cloud formations, and the mountain ranges, and the newts and the fungi and the people—yes, all “natural” things are spiritual and belong to God. *But manmade things are spiritual, too*. Human beings are brilliant creators—brilliant imitators of God’s creativity. And the things we make are holy. I think Jesus would say, “there is no such thing as ‘stuff.’” Everything that’s made must be made for the glory of God, to honor the creation, and to help human beings toward love and freedom.

One of the most moving photo essays of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century was by the photographer Peter Menzel. In the early 1990s, Menzel traveled around the world. In country after country, he identified an “average” family according to income and wealth. He asked that family to gather

all of their belongings and arrange them outside, in front of their home. As the family posed for the camera, he took their picture.

(start showing images)

All of a sudden, everything we own became visible. The stuff of our lives is laid out for all to see. What we see, in the wealthy world, is a world teeming with gadgets and devices—and large houses in which to store it all. In the pictures of families in the developing world, there is a stack of clothes, pots and utensils, and not much else. Menzel's photographs reflect our lives back to us. The experience of looking closely at them can be deeply moving. There are people in every photograph—families, elders, children. But what are these “things” that we've gathered around us? What are they for? Why do we have them? What does our stuff “mean?”

Could you do an inventory of your own belongings? A little “Marie Kondo—does this spark joy” process? Except ask of your belongings: is does this thing deepen my humanity? Does it help me be a better person, be a kind person, does it support my integrity or deepen my compassion?

I don't know what you will do with these particular teachings of Jesus after this morning. Maybe, like the rest of American Christianity, you will tuck them away in a plastic box in the attic or garage, and forget, like the rest of your stuff, that you even have them.

Or maybe you will take these sayings home and put them on the counter, where you put your keys. And maybe you will pick them up every day and take them with you in your pocket where your credit cards live. And maybe you will let these teachings of Jesus shape how you engage the material world.

I commend this to you because you should know that we are in a time of crisis. I don't use that word lightly. Our news media manipulate our feeling of being in crisis to keep our eyeballs on our screens. But we are in a crisis, as a culture. And the crisis is that we have become entirely blind to the spiritual reality of material things. We are so accustomed to cheap, disposable things that it no longer registers to us that our hunger for these things creates gigantic floating islands of plastic in the ocean; or causes trains carrying plastic-making chemicals to derail and poison an entire ecosystem in Ohio.

Our young people feel this crisis. And one reason they want nothing to do with us and our so-called religion is that we have not made the essential connection that Jesus tells us to make between matter and spirit. But our children understand. They get that owning things is vacuous. Wealth is narcissistic at best, oppressive at worst. And economic growth is ecological suicide. The God of liberal progress—of a job, a family, and a two-car garage—is a false God.

This is not the first time human beings have gone through a profound crisis of meaning. In an essay I read not long ago,<sup>1</sup> the author told two stories about other moments in history when the stories that the culture tells ourselves about what life is and what makes for a good life no longer work. The first was a story about the Crow people, whose land is in what is now called Montana. In the late 1800s, European Americans slaughtered 60 million buffalo, under the creed “every buffalo dead is an Indian gone.” When the buffalo were finally gone, a Crow leader said of life that it was as though “nothing happens any longer.” Without this essential connection to the natural world through buffalo, life had no meaning.

Our own parents and grandparents had a similar moral reckoning in the face of the Holocaust; that unspeakable moment when one group of human beings slaughtered another so mercilessly, so matter-of-factly. We human beings are constantly engaged in an attempt to make the world and other persons intelligible. The Holocaust made us wonder whether there were moral limits at all; what is life, if human beings can treat other human beings like this?

The author of this essay says that there has only ever been one way for human beings to address these moments of deep crisis. We must retreat. We must leave the nonsense of culture long enough to go somewhere where we can retrieve the deep sympathy between our moral order and natural order. We must learn nature’s truths. We must reacquaint ourselves with the visionaries, prophets, artists, and philosophers who before us have wandered away from the social world and sat themselves in creation, to see what can only be seen when you stop demanding that nature echo back the creeds of your community. Thoreau, Whitman, and Emerson; Mary Oliver and Wendell Berry; Elijah, John the Baptist, or Jesus.

God’s creation is true. And the closer we get to that truth, the clearer it becomes that everything that is material is spiritual.

If our present crisis is ever to resolve, it will be because followers of Jesus let him in to our homes. And we stop treating things like stuff. Because we carry his teachings in our pockets.

Look at the birds of the air:  
Consider the lilies of the field,  
You cannot serve God and wealth.  
Seek first the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and everything—everything else—will fall into place.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/hope-itself/articles/deep-down-things-in-a-time-of-panic>