

ABOVE ALL

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So many things vie for our attention each day: some of them frivolous; others, crucial.

“What shall we wear?” would be listed as frivolous, unless the weather had turned bitterly cold and you had to leave the house, but had no coat to wear.

“What shall we drink?” asked at a restaurant or a bar, may seem frivolous, too. But how different it would seem if the land where you live were suffering a drought, and yesterday you could find no water at all for your family.

So you see, even simple things can become precious and critical, depending on the circumstances.

Matthew 6:31 (NIV) “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.³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

What Do You Need?

Some of Jesus’ hearers, undoubtedly, had more than enough to eat and drink and wear. Equally certain, some of them did not. All kinds of people gave their attention to Jesus and His words, even as it is today. People in all kinds of situations. People with a wide variety of needs and interests.

One thing all of those people (and all of us, too) shared in common: whether they (or we) have enough, or more than enough, or not nearly enough—the things of this world that make up our daily life’s needs, call to us without ceasing.

“Do I have what I need for dinner tonight?”

“Did I bring water with me?”

“What shall I wear to the picnic?”

These three topics consume a disproportionate amount of our time—thinking about them, planning for them, shopping for them, talking about them, photographing them and posting the pictures on Facebook for others to see and share.

I cannot count the number of times I have sat in a restaurant to eat, and with the food in front of me, talked with family or friends about the food from a previous memorable meal, or a future anticipated meal. Food is just that important and pleasant to me.

Jesus summed it up this way: *“The pagans run after all these things.”* There’s no condemnation there. That’s just the way it is. It’s a matter of fact.

Most of us have been taught from childhood, “If you want something, you have to go after it. If you want to see change, you have to make it happen.” Therefore, it seems entirely appropriate to center our lives around acquiring what we need.

But Jesus added: *“Your heavenly Father knows that you need them.”* And this was a novel and distinctively Christian idea.

It is normal, even natural, for people everywhere to spend a great deal of their time thinking, planning, shopping, sharing, and talking about such things as food, drink, and clothing. Because they *are* important to us.

Jesus didn’t scold such behavior, nor did He forbid it. But He did suggest an alternate way to live.

Who’s Your Daddy?

What if you had a servant, who spent his or her days only to discover what you need or want, and then find it, prepare it, and present it to you each day? What if you didn’t have to give it a thought, except to mention it, to identify your need, and it would be taken care of? That would be good, wouldn’t it?

But what if you had, not merely a servant, but a patron, who not only knew what you would need, but both *provided* for your needs *and* had them presented to you? That would be *great*, wouldn’t it?

And what if your patron spelled His title with a capital “P”?

You see, you have a Heavenly Father (with a capital “F”)! He cares for you.

He cares so much for all that He has created, that not even one little sparrow falls to the ground without His divine notice. Of how much greater value to Him are *you* than any bird?

While the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea, and even the trees and the hills praise God their Maker, they do so by nature—just by being themselves.

But human beings, having been singularly made in the image of God, are capable of self-reflection, reason, and decision. We can choose to please ourselves, or we can choose to please others, or we can choose to please God. We weigh the options and make decisions. Every day.

We live a higher kind of life than mere animals. Animals spend every day pursuing what they should eat and drink. People who think and act like mere animals will do much the same, and for conscience's sake (or vanity's), will also worry about what they wear.

Read verse 32 again: *“The pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.”*

The Hebrew people saw all the world as just two kinds of people—Jews and non-Jews (Gentiles, which is the word used in Matthew 6:32). And this is the way that religious Jews commonly thought of all non-Jews, especially the religious ones: their religious practices were concerned primarily with pursuing and obtaining what they needed for daily living. Their gods were either providers or protectors, and all of their religious thinking and rituals were aimed at taking care of themselves. Thus, the translators of the NIV substituted the word “pagans” for the Greek word that means “Gentiles.”

Now, for Christians today (who often see the world as two kinds of people—Christ-followers and the unconverted), a valid translation would be “unconverted people,” as in the NET Bible.

In summary, Jesus teaches that people who do not know the Living God, and have not submitted their lives to His purpose, spend their lives living for themselves. Their time, their energies, their skills, and their treasures are concentrated on providing for themselves.

Jesus Christ proposes something *radically different* for those who have chosen to follow Him.

Have you chosen to follow Jesus? If so, then you'll want to pay close attention to His next thought and see how your life aligns with it. Here's what He said:

“But [you] (distinct from the unconverted) seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:33)

Again, Jesus didn't forbid our concerns for what we'll eat or drink or wear, but He commands something else *first*, something above all the other things we concern ourselves with, both in value and in purpose. And what is that? It's God's Kingdom and His righteousness.

His Kingdom

God's Kingdom is a major theme of Jesus' teaching. It is not a geographical location, but the entire realm in which Jesus rules and to which all those who trust and follow Jesus belong.

Paul explained to the church in Colosse: “[*The Father*] has enabled you to share in the inheritance that belongs to his people, who live in the light. For he has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins.” (Colossians 1:12-14)

Part of our spiritual conversion involves a new citizenship. We are no longer citizens of the kingdom of darkness. We no longer have either passport or visa to Hell and its darkness. Jesus Christ has made us citizens of Heaven, His Kingdom of light and joy and peace!

Therefore, we are to pursue wholeheartedly and primarily the things of that new Kingdom. And what things are those? Actually, they are more values than things. For instance, consider Paul’s words to the church in Corinth: “*That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. For our present troubles are small and won’t last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! So we don’t look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever.*” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

We often ascribe high values to our troubles and discomforts and difficulties. You can tell by how much you think about them and speak about them with others. “Misery loves company.” Just look at the stories that drive our news media. Think about the common methods of marketing (tell people what they *should* need and then sell them the answer).

But Paul says, don’t let those things capture your attention! The things of God that you *cannot yet see* have greater value than the things of this world that can be seen. After all, everything that we can see was made out of what we cannot see, so what we cannot see pre-existed what we can see, and is therefore of greater value and significance than all that has been made in this temporal world.

We often refer to God as “the Creator who made everything that is out of nothing at all.” But, strictly speaking, that is not so. He did not create everything from nothing; He created everything that can be seen out of what cannot be seen—He created everything from Himself, from His own heart and mind, and by His own power. Everything that is or ever was, in its pristine form and purpose, is or was an expression of who God Himself is—His character, His righteousness.

His Righteousness

So Jesus teaches us that seeking first God’s Kingdom also means seeking first God Himself, the Source of all that is right. A valid, literal translation of verse 33 might read, “Above all things, seek the Kingdom and the righteousness which are His (that is, God’s).”

God's righteousness is unique, for it (really, He) defines what "right" is. People will argue that what God calls right or good offends their sense of what is proper or best. How foolish! Do we know more than God? Do we even know as much as God? Can we see the end from the beginning? Or even from the middle?

Isaiah, the Hebrew prophet, lamented, *"What sorrow awaits those who argue with their Creator. Does a clay pot argue with its maker? Does the clay dispute with the one who shapes it, saying, 'Stop, you're doing it wrong!' Does the pot exclaim, 'How clumsy can you be?'"*

Such argument simply expresses a lack of understanding. And the answer to such misunderstanding is this: *"Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness."* For then, *"all these things will be given to you as well."*

All These Things

Which things? All those things that we naturally need—whether food or drink or clothing. All those things that once distracted us, consumed our attention, and prevented us from following Christ as we should. All those things that disappear in the use of them, so that we must seek them all over again—and again and again and again.

This is why Jesus proclaimed to the woman at the well of Jacob in Samaria, *"Anyone who drinks this water will soon become thirsty again. But those who drink the water I give will never be thirsty again. It becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within them, giving them eternal life."* (John 4:13-14)

This is why Jesus declared to the crowds who had eaten the multiplied bread and fish, *"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."* (John 6:35)

This is why He announced to the people gathered in the Temple, *"I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life."* (John 8:12)

This is why He told His friend Martha, *"I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die."* (John 11:25-26)

This is the Gospel of the Kingdom. This is the Good News about Jesus Christ, who said, *"This Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole inhabited earth as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come."* (Matthew 24:14)

The Good News we announce declares that following Jesus wholeheartedly releases God's generous providence for our lives. On the other hand, intently pursuing earthly things—even things that we genuinely need—misdirects our attention and our faith, and inhibits following Jesus Christ.

The sum of this teaching, in the words of Jesus, is this: *"Do not worry... all these things will be given to you."* Do you believe this? (Not just with your head, but in your heart.)

What are you "worried" about? What consumes your thinking? What fills your daydreams? What occupies your attention? What directs your attitude?

Apparently, it cannot be *both* God's Kingdom and the stuff you need.

If you believe this, how shall we show it?

"Run after... His Kingdom and His Righteousness." In other words, begin—and continue—to do those things which demonstrate that the-righteousness-and-Kingdom-of-God are most important in your life.

What would that be? Think with me now...

What would that be in your home, with your family, that demonstrates that God's ways are higher than yours?

What would that be on the job, with your colleagues, that illustrates your respect for others and your diligence at your work?

What would that be with your close friends, that says that Jesus means more to you than being popular?

What would that be in the church, and in your community, that exhibits your wholehearted desire to be of service and to help other people?

I'm sure you've thought of something already. Would you make at least one of those things a matter of prayer right now?

Because this transition, this shift, doesn't happen by your will alone. We all need God's help to make this happen. No one follows Jesus without help from above. So, let's pray for God's help. Now.