

Some Things Are Too Important to Worry About

Dr. Justo L. González

Dr. Catherine G. González



A Bible Study

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Matthew 6:19-33 (NRSV)

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

The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, 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!

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.

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? 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? And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 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? Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" For it is the gentiles who seek all these things, and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Justo: For our Bible study today, we would like to begin with a phrase that appears towards the end of the passage to be studied. This may seem strange, to begin at the end. But then, when we look at the text itself, we see that in some ways the text does the same thing: "strive first for the reign of God." The reign of God, what in more traditional language is called the "kingdom of God," is the goal of all creation; it is the end for which we hope. And yet, this text tells us that it

is precisely that reign, which is the end of all things, must be the very first thing for which we strive. In other words, we are being told to begin at the end!

Once you stop to think about it, this is not so strange, for quite often in life we begin at the end. When I leave my driveway, what determines whether I turn right or left is not my whim, nor the weather at the time, but where I intend to go. My goal, the end of my journey, determines every turn. Thus, there is a sense in which the end is first. I consider the end first, and then make the proper turns.

This is what we are being told here. If the reign of God is really our end, our goal, it cannot be simply something which we expect in the future. It cannot be something that we do not take into consideration until it happens. On the contrary, it must be the starting point of all we do and all we seek: "strive first for the reign of God;" or, as another version says, "seek ye first the kingdom of God."

What we seek, where we intend to go, determines the steps that we take and the turns that we make along the journey. And conversely, the steps that we take, and the turns that we make, confirm or deny our commitment to a particular goal.

If when I leave Toronto I am bound for Vancouver, I will seek a westward bound highway as soon as possible. And conversely, if I say to you that as I leave here I am heading for Vancouver, and

then you see me taking the highway going East, you will begin to doubt my resolve.

Or let me give you a different example. Suppose I were to tell you that as soon as I am able to retire I plan to move to Japan. There is no country in the world as interesting or as beautiful as Japan. Japan is my dream and my goal. I can hardly wait till I retire! Then you ask me, what are you doing in the meantime? And I say I am studying Italian! Laughable, isn't it? Ridiculous! If I tell you that my future is in Japan, but that meanwhile, instead of Japanese, I am studying Italian, you will not believe what I say about the beauty of Japan, no matter how eloquent I may be in describing it.

If I really intend to move to Japan someday, and I am as enthusiastic as I claim, I will begin to practice now for that expected future. I will begin to study Japanese. I will learn about the customs of the country, and become comfortable with them. I will take every opportunity to eat Japanese food, to gather with others to join in that journey. If I do not practice now for the future which I expect, when that future comes I'll not be comfortable in it.

So often in the church we talk about the coming reign of God, we say that we yearn for that reign. But, do we practice reignese? Do we seek to live as a community that really looks to a new day, to a new heaven and a new earth? If we do not, we have no reason to complain when people do not find our testimony credible, when our evangelistic efforts bring scarce results. If we say that we look forward to the coming reign of God, we must begin practicing now for life

in that new order. The new order may not be fully here. But we can begin to learn the language, to taste the food, to join with other travelers along the same route, to invite others to join us in the journey. If we do not practice now for the coming rule of God, when that rule comes we shall not be comfortable in it.

It is for this reason that we must begin at the end, and from the end look back at our present situation and what is required of us. Our first commitment must be, as our text says, to strive for the goal which God has set for creation: "Strive first for the reign of God."

Catherine: When we begin at the end, the earlier part of this text from Matthew—verses 19-24—is easier to understand and provides three examples:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; 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!

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.

These verses speak of knowing where your treasure is, of not being able to see clearly, and of serving two masters. But put them in the context of a journey toward a goal. What would happen if we started out on a journey and did not know what our goal was—if we did not know

where is our treasure? What would happen if we set out on a journey but could not see our way? What would happen if we began a journey and did not decide which of two destinations we were aiming for? At every crossroads we would have to choose which of the destinations governed this decision. We might assume both goals are in relatively the same direction, but the longer we postpone really committing ourselves to one or the other, the greater the risk of getting off the track. In fact, we may see the destinations as much more in the same direction than they really are, precisely because we don't want to have to decide. I do not know whether I really want to go to Vancouver or to New Mexico, and therefore set out in a generally westward direction hoping to postpone my decision. But the fact is that most of the time, the closer I get to New Mexico, the further away I shall be from Vancouver. That is like serving two masters at the same time, having two ultimate loyalties governing our lives, and trying to convince ourselves that they both require exactly the same thing of us. It will not work.

In terms of the Christian life, this passage seems to be saying that many of us confess that God is our ultimate loyalty, and God's reign is our intended destination, but that we try hard to combine this ultimate goal with daily decisions that seek to improve our security here and now. We act as though these were quite compatible with our service to God. This passage is clearly pointing out that such behavior is mistaken. We either serve our need for security here or we serve God. The two goals are not in the same direction.

When we try to combine goals, we are really deciding—and probably deciding—for the one that

is not our public confession. In a sense, we are fooling ourselves, thinking that our goal is still God's future, but making our day by day decisions on a very different basis. When we come to the end of the road, we may discover that the decisions at the various crossroads have indeed decided the final goal even when we did not admit it.

Perhaps in a perfect world, with perfect people, other goals would be neat way-stations on the road to God's future. But we are not in that kind of world. It is God's world, indeed, but it is also a world that has fallen under the power of sin. To live by God's values and by the values of this world are two very different choices. God and this world are two very different masters, and we cannot serve both. It is a sign of our sinfulness that we try--that we pretend to ourselves and to others that we can choose for security here while serving God. The cross stands as a clear witness against such thinking.

The early nineteenth century Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard spoke eloquently of becoming pure of heart, of the dangers to singlemindedness in the service of God. He pointed out the manifold ways in which sinful human beings try to avoid total loyalty to God by mixing our own goals with God's purposes. In every case, it is our own goals, our own desires, that ultimately determine what we do. Discipleship takes a back seat, even if great lip-service is paid to the service of God.

What Kierkegaard also points out is that only clear self-searching, repentance, throughout one's

whole life, can keep discipleship on track. Faithfulness is not a matter of a decision once made and thereafter easily kept. Faithfulness depends on constant vigilance against serving two masters, against dimming our ability to see what God demands. Sinful human beings do not easily give up their own plans in true subjection to the will of God.

Justo: That is precisely the problem. We live in a fallen world, whose order does not correspond to the ultimate purposes of God. How, then, in this fallen world, are we to seek first the reign of God?

The text from Matthew gives us a hint: "Strive first for the reign of God and its righteousness." One of the essential marks of the reign of God is what the NRSV calls "righteousness." So, by seeking and practicing this "righteousness" we are seeking the rule of God and practicing for its eventual coming. What is this "righteousness" which we are to seek? For most of us, the word "righteousness" does not have a very specific content. Actually, in its most common usage it tends to imply rigid moralism, as in "self-righteous."

For that reason, it is important to point out that the word that the NRSV translates here as "righteousness" is the same word that is also translated as "justice." Actually, just about anywhere in the Bible where you find the word "righteousness," you can substitute "justice," for that is what the original also means.

The choice of one word or another, of "righteousness" or "justice," in order to translate the Greek *dikaiosyne*, is interesting. Several modern European languages do have two distinct words, corresponding to the English "justice" and "righteousness." A few years ago, I did a quick survey of a number of translations into those languages. The result was interesting. In the majority of cases, those translations produced by churches or individuals experiencing persecution or another form of oppression tend to translate the word as "justice." In contrast, those translations produced by order of kings and those produced by affluent churches tend to translate it as "righteousness." I suspect that this is more than a mere coincidence.

In any case, back to the text in Matthew, what we are to seek first of all is the reign of God, and that reign is characterized by justice: "Seek ye first the reign of God and its justice." It is not purely a matter of personal, moral righteousness; it is also a matter of justice.

Catherine: There is something about the nature of justice in Scripture that has to do with the relationship of strong and weak. In terms of human relationships, injustice occurs when the weak are made weaker by those who are stronger. Justice is served when the strong use their strength to protect the weak. Think of the parable of the sheep and the goats to which we referred yesterday. There the judgment is based on how the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned, the naked are treated. Justice is a matter of how we treat the weak.

The great model for us is the way in which God treats us. All creatures are weakness itself in the

face of the Creator. Yet God seeks to strengthen the creation, to assist and nurture it, to mend it. Since the human creatures were distorted and destroyed by sin, God went to great lengths—the incarnation and the cross—to redeem humanity and give it a new beginning. That is God's justice--God's righteousness. That is our model of justice.

It is not just a matter of sin. There would be weak and strong in this world even if there were no sin. The fact that we are born as helpless infants means that we begin life in extreme weakness dependent upon stronger human beings, usually parents, but ultimately all of society, to protect and nurture us. In terms of the wider creation, we as human beings are stronger than many other creatures. Justice means that we live as those who use their strength to help the weak. Justice is the opposite of the dictum that "might makes right." The strong are not to use their strength to harm the weak, but rather to care for them.

But this is hardly the way of the world in which we live. All we have to do is read the newspaper to see the increase in reported cases of child abuse, of the abuse of the elderly, of strong nations plundering weaker ones. The law of this world seems to be take what you can, build your own security whatever the cost to others.

There will be judgment. What we actually live for will become clear—to us as well as to God. In that judgment the last will be first, the weak will be strong, and the first will be last. In the words of Mary's song—The Magnificat—the mighty will be put down from their thrones and the

rich will be sent empty away. The lowly will be lifted up and the hungry will be filled with good things. We lose track of justice when our search for security in this world blinds us to the life that is based on God's reign.

Justo: Security is important. Yet in a world in which some are relatively secure and others are not, those who are more secure, the strong, often use their greater strength to increase their security, even at the expense of the weak. The problem with this search for security is that there is never enough.

You remember that Jesus, at the end of the Sermon on the Mount from which our text is taken, spoke of two houses, one built on sand and the other on a solid foundation. Those who do not follow these teachings, he says, are like those who build on sand. If your house is built on sand you will never be secure. You may build a bigger house with thicker walls and heavier beams, you may amass building materials for your own house even at the expense of leaving many others homeless, but you will still have to fear the wind, and the rain, and the floods.

Catherine: Security is a basic human need. God knows that. In fact, what the passage stresses is that God provides our ultimate security. When we seek security in all the wrong places it will never be enough and it will fail us in the end. What the text says clearly is that when our security is with God, it will not fail. God is the source of all that we need. When humanity turns away from that source, then some have too much and others have not enough. The text reads:

"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? 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?"

Worry, anxiety about what we will eat or drink or wear as the primary motivation for our actions is the result of sin. It leads to greed and unconcern about others. We are to seek first God's justice. Our actions are to be based on that. Then what we need will be given to us as well.

We started today's study by looking at the end of the Biblical text. Now let's look at the very beginning: (6:16-18) "Do not store up for yourselves on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

This does set the stage for the whole consideration of being singleminded. But it also points to true and false paths to security. Ultimate security cannot be based on what is easily lost. All earthly treasures are subject to loss, no matter how overwhelming our security systems are. Ultimate security can only be based on treasures beyond all earthly dangers. Ultimate security rests with God alone. The call for singlemindedness in our discipleship is God's way of ensuring

our real security. In our attempts to guarantee our security by subverting God's designs to our own desires, we forfeit rather than gain that security. God's demand for our undivided loyalty is for our sake. It is not antithetical to our highest good. This is the message of the beginning of the text. It is repeated at the end.

Justo: When we look at the conclusion of the passage from this perspective, we realize that its meaning is very different than we may have thought. Quite often we have been told that we ought not to worry about our body, what we shall eat or what we shall drink, or what we shall wear, because after all these things are not as important as spiritual matters. But that is not what the text says. What the text actually says, strange as it may seem to us, is that these things are so important that God provides them, and therefore we ought not to worry about them. They are so important that God gives them even to the lilies of the fields and the birds of the air, even though they do nothing to earn them. The reason why we ought not to strive for these things is not that they are unimportant, but rather that they are so important that our heavenly Parent knows that we need them. To strive after them, to be anxious about them, is a sign of lack of faith. According to Jesus, that is precisely what the Gentiles do; but his followers are to do otherwise: they are to seek first the kingdom of God and its justice.

But there is a connection between these two--between not being anxious about our food and our clothing, and seeking the Kingdom of God and its justice. Indeed, when we are so anxious about our security that we try to build up our stores, so that no matter what, we will never lack,

we end up trespassing into what others need. Our hoarding, which is the cause of much injustice in the world, is also ultimately a lack of faith.

There is a story that illustrates this. It happened in Brazil in early colonial times, when ships came from Europe to gather the much coveted brazilwood. It is reported by a French Calvinist missionary, Jean de Léry:

An old man once asked me, "Why do you people, French and Portuguese, come from so far away to seek wood to warm you? Don't you have wood in your country?" I answered that we had plenty, but not of that quality, and that we did not burn it as he supposed but extracted a dye from it for dyeing, just as they did to their cotton cords and their feathers. The old man immediately replied: "And I suppose that you need much of it?" "Yes," I answered, "for in our country there are traders who own more cloth, knives, scissors, mirrors and other goods than you can imagine. One single trader buys all the brazilwood carried back by many loaded ships." "Ah," said the old man, "you are telling me marvels. But this very rich man you are telling me about, does he not die?" "Yes," I said, "he dies like all the rest." But savages are great debaters and generally pursue any matter to its conclusion. He therefore asked me: "When he dies what becomes of what he leaves?" "It is for his children if he has them ... or for his closest brothers and relatives." "Indeed," continued the old man, who as you can see was no fool, "I now see that you French are great madmen. You cross the sea and suffer great inconvenience, as you say when you arrive here, and work so hard to accumulate riches for your children or for those who survive you. Is the land that nourished you not sufficient to feed them too? We have fathers, mothers and children whom we love. But we are certain that after our death the land that nourished us will also feed them. We therefore rest without further cares."

Léry added:

Although this tribe may be blind in attributing to nature more than we do to the power of God's providence, yet it will rise up in judgement against the plunderers who bear the name of Christians.

Catherine: The entire passage in Matthew is addressed to the second person—to you. In

contemporary English, there is only one word, "you," which is both singular and plural. In old English, the plural used to be "ye." In Georgia, where we live, it is y'all. Unfortunately, when the Bible is translated into contemporary English, there is no way to distinguish between the singular and the plural "you," and therefore we do not know whether we are being addressed as individuals or as a community.

In the case of this passage, it is important to note that the entire passage in Greek is addressed to a plural "you," not singular. That makes a great deal of difference at this point. The text is not saying that if I, individually, seek justice, then I can rest assured that all of my physical needs will be met. Unfortunately, that is not the case, as we well know. Many who have sought justice have ended up in prison, tortured, or killed. The promise is that if we as a human community will seek justice, then there will be enough for all, for God has provided enough.

In a sinful society, however, we each act for our own interests--augmented, perhaps by the interest of our immediate loved ones. If something does not guarantee me--us--security, then it is impractical. But God's justice or righteousness is more widely, less selfishly concerned. It is that to which we are called. The lilies and the grass of the field, the birds of the air, all are cared for by their Creator.

It is also clear that we cannot separate issues of justice from issues of ecology. Preserving the planet, caring for creation, is not simply an aesthetic concern. Nor is it only a matter of

self-preservation. Fouling the water others must drink is a way of making the weak weaker, of abuse of power on the part of the stronger. It is a matter of justice.

Justice has to do with the righteous distribution of the good things that God has given us. It cannot be separated from a care and concern for the whole creation. When we order our lives by God's values, we seek to live even now in the way in which we firmly believe we shall live in the final future. We will behave as God's faithful flock, as those who have only one master, as those who truly pray daily, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Then our witness to a fallen world will be credible.

