



First Things First

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Vienna Presbyterian Church

Matthew 6:19-33

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Today's sermon begins with an object lesson. Kids, gather 'round. What I have to say matters to you also.

Let's suppose this bowl represents your life. The water I'm pouring into it signifies little things in your life. Watching TV. Checking your phone. Surfing the internet. Visiting time-wasting sites. The sand symbolizes slightly more important, necessary things like doing what your parents ask you to do. Answering email and text messages. Returning phone calls. The pebbles correspond to essential responsibilities in your life, like doing your homework, working at your job, or making the most of your retirement years. The rocks characterize vital relationships with family and friends. This biggest rock represents your relationship with God.

Where did I go wrong with this exercise? I started by putting in all the little stuff first. I should have put in the big rocks first and let the pebbles, sand, and water fill in around them. We'll come back to this exercise later. There's another way to do this exercise. Maybe you can guess another way.

Jesus advised us, in so many words, to put in the big rocks first. Today's reading concludes with Jesus' clarifying words, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His

righteousness and all these other things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33). Today’s sermon is about *First Things First*. Put in the big rocks first.

Today’s reading is part of Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount. It’s called Sermon on a Mount because Jesus delivered this sermon on a mountain. He begins this section of his sermon, “Do not store up treasures on earth...but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Matthew 6:19-20). There’s an obvious play on words in the original Greek. Jesus uses the same word for treasure in both its noun and verbal form. So, literally the verse reads, “Do not treasure up treasures on earth, but treasure up treasures in heaven.” Treasures in heaven do not merely refer to something we receive after we die. Treasures in heaven correspond to present-day realities like experiencing Jesus’ salvation and receiving God’s peace.

Jesus summarizes with the poignant words, “Where your treasure is, there will be heart also” (Matthew 6:21). Heart follows treasure every time. Our hearts resemble the needle of a compass. They point in the direction of whatever we treasure.

This is where I planned to end this reading at the outset of this week. As I kept reading, I noticed that what Jesus

teaches about the heart correlates to what he says about the eye as the lamp of the body (Matthew 6:22-23). The eye works in tandem with the heart. What the eyes see, the heart follows. Jesus closes with the words, “You cannot serve both God and money” (Matthew 6:24). A servant indebted to two masters struggles with divided loyalties. Trying to balance allegiance to serving God and serving money will invariably split us apart.

“Maybe I’ll end the reading at this point,” I said to myself mid-week. As I continued reading, I observed that what Jesus says about money flows naturally into the next section about worry. Those of you prone to worry, listen up. What Jesus says about the universal human problem of anxiety has considerable merit.

“I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not your life more than food, and your body more than clothes?” (Matthew 6:25) Jesus instructs his disciples in this open-air sermon to take up birdwatching. Maybe he gestures to birds flying overhead. Birds don’t wait for God to drop food into their nests. They show diligence in foraging for food, caring for their young, and building their nests. Yet they don’t worry. Birds work hard yet are carefree in God’s care.

Jesus invites his listeners to consider a second nature lesson. He directs their gaze to nearby wildflowers. I appreciate Eugene Peterson's translation of verse 30 in *The Message*, "If God pays this much attention to the appearance of wildflowers—most of which are never ever seen—don't you think he'll attend to you and do his best for you?" Flowers don't worry; they just grow.

The Greek word Jesus uses for worry means to draw in different directions or to pull apart. What an apt description of what happens to us whenever we become anxious. Worry pulls us apart.

Jesus is not dismissive of people who care and show appropriate concern. He does not decry careful provision for the future. I'm reminded of Paul's words to Timothy that those who do not provide for their own families are derelict in their duty (1 Timothy 5:8). What Jesus challenges is our tendency to become overly concerned and full of care. There is a world of difference between providing for the future and worrying about it. Excess worry pulls us apart.

Jesus summarizes this section of his sermon with a clincher verse. "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be added to you as well" (Matthew 6:33). Seek God first; not second. Don't

seek God as a court of last resort, after we have exhausted every other alternative available to us. When we seek God first, the things we worry about—what we eat, drink or wear—will be given to us also.

In this last series of sermons at VPC, I'm focusing on *What Matters Most*. Seeking God first matters most. Put in the big rocks first.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? I have three applications to suggest to you this morning.

First application: Cultivate relationships with other God-first people. Seek the company of people who share your God-first focus. Don't ditch your friends who don't espouse your God-first priority. They matter also. Find a few people who will support your Christ-first approach to life.

I must forewarn you. God-first people will sometimes disappoint you. They will occasionally put themselves first. They will do things that annoy you and say things that hurt your feelings. You can pretty much count on it. Why do I say this? Because putting ourselves first is second nature to people. It's a struggle common to us all. Be patient and understanding when other God-first people disappoint you.

Second application: Invest time and money in kingdom of God priorities. The only things we have at our disposal are time and money. Invest your resources in God's kingdom work.

We need to be creative in this unique COVID moment about our use of time in serving the Lord. Invite someone to join you for an online Learning Community. We are starting a new Exploring Faith class in early March. This class will be ideal for people new to faith. Invite them to a Monday night or Tuesday morning Bible study. These groups take Sunday's biblical theme and drill down further. Our goal is to apply what we are learning about faith to real life issues. Or you can send this sermon link to someone. Share a Daily Word and Prayer with a family member or friend. We need to become more invitational in this season when no one can enter our building.

When it comes to money, I can't think of a better investment than to support the Lord's work at VPC. You heard earlier about our *Serve the Lord, Serve the People* initiative. We want to put this church in the best possible financial position as we transition to a new senior leader. It's the same ministry, folks, only with a new senior leader. Leaders come and go, but our mission remains the same—

Becoming Like Christ Together for the World. Are you with me in this endeavor? Join Chris and me as we invest in the future of what God wants to do here.

Third application: Resolve today to make first things first. Put in the big rocks first. In virtually every funeral service I conduct, I speak about the enduring value of faith, family, and friends. End of life moments are an ideal time to ask ourselves, “What matters most?” What we own, where we live, and what we drive have a different worth in death. Faith, family, and friends are those things that matter most. What we have accumulated by way of money, success, or status no longer matters. It all comes down to faith, family, and friends.

Let me return to the object lesson I used to begin this sermon. Let’s imagine this bowl represents your life. This time, we put in the big rocks first. Trust in God goes in first. Family and friends go in next. They are important rocks also. If you are out of sorts with friends or family members, attend to these relationships. Don’t let bitterness keep you apart. Let the pebbles and sand (the little stuff) fill in around it. Big rocks first. First things first!