



Matthew 6:16-34
What If Jesus Was Serious?
(A Series on The Sermon On The Mount)
“Freedom From Fear”

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“Fear” is a powerful motivator. And frequently, fear masks itself – no pun intended in light of the last 14 months. Fear masks itself and hides beneath the surface behind some other feeling or emotion, making it difficult to realize that fear is there.

For example, just this last week, a few of us in our family watched the Netflix movie called “Operation: Varsity Blues.” They call it a documentary, which it is in part, but it’s also partly a re-enactment of true events based on FBI wiretaps of conversations they listened in on that ultimately led to busting open the college entrance scandal from a couple years ago. And it’s a pretty engaging and fascinating movie (even though you know the outcome), as you watch people who had more than enough money – CEO’s of companies, movie stars, and others who have plenty of money, multiple large homes – you see these people cheating to get their kids into elite colleges.

And as I watched it, I found myself asking: Why would they do this? These are families that have more than enough...and yet to them, it *wasn't* enough. I think in some cases, it was just plain greed: Even though all that they have is more than what 99.9% of Americans have, it still wasn't enough, and they just wanted more.

But in many cases, “fear” really is the underlying problem. They fear that their kids won't get a college degree from the “right” university; they fear that their kids won't be “successful”; they fear that they won't be keeping up with the neighbors or their friends; they fear that their kids won't keep up with other kids; they fear that their kids won't be able to have the same lifestyle that they've grown up with. When you're at the top of the economic ladder (and these people are), and when that position is what you value: then everyone else is a threat. Probably many of us have had those kinds of fears for ourselves or our kids. Maybe some of us this morning have that fear right now.

2,000 years ago, Jesus taught some things that speak to the heart of this matter. And if you're just joining us today for the first time, we're in the middle of a series going through Jesus' teaching that is usually called "The Sermon on The Mount." So, we're continuing in that today, and there are a couple things Jesus says in this passage we read that have huge implications about fear and what controls and leads us to do the things what we do.

First, Jesus talks about fasting and how a person appears to others in public when fasting. This is continuing the theme of righteousness that we've seen throughout the Sermon on the Mount. In their day, fasting was esteemed as a valuable spiritual discipline. So, for them, the temptation when fasting was to kind of make it obvious, so as to impress others with their dedication to their faith. Underneath, perhaps, is a fear of not being accepted by others, which leads them to try and impress others with their righteousness.

Sometimes we fall to the same fear. Like those in Jesus' day who fasted and made it obvious for all to see, many Christians sometimes wear their faith on the rear of their car in the form of bumper stickers or license-plate holders. Their faith is prominently displayed on the exterior of their car, often worded in a rather sharp-tongued way that is probably thought to be a witty display of their spirituality but really just puts down anyone who thinks differently. It's quite a bit like the example Jesus gives here: people who flaunt their dedication to their faith – perhaps in a not very helpful way of winning people to Jesus, but more likely to impress their Christian brothers and sisters, to be accepted by them, with an underlying fear of not being accepted beneath it all.

I use that example a bit hesitantly because I have a couple of Christian-themed things on my car. My license plate holder says, "God is Awesome!" and I have a sticker on the rear window that is one of those "HE > i" stickers ("He is greater than I"). But I honestly believe things like that are not what Jesus is talking about here, because those things aren't proclaiming how great my faith is – because it's not – and they're not belittling of other people. They simply lift up God. I don't think there's anything wrong with that – though I'm open to your input if you think I'm violating Jesus' teaching.

So, Jesus is emphasizing that righteousness is about our relationship with God, not about pleasing others and letting our fear of acceptance by them drive how we practice our faith.

Then Jesus turns to the topic of money and materialism. His teaching is to store up treasure in heaven, and not on earth. Christians have often interpreted this to mean that we shouldn't enjoy life – as if we wait for a reward in heaven while we suffer through this life. I don't think that's what Jesus intends. In fact, as you'll remember, just before this he taught us to pray “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” That's praying for heaven to be our experience *here and now*, not delaying it for some time later.

And heaven – whether it's “here and now” or “there and later” – is centered around the presence of God. (“Now and Later” candy: Spiritual reminder about heaven...so, eat them up!) Rather than seeking money and other earthly treasures as our source of security and joy and more, we find all of that in the presence of God. It's our relationship with God that matters most. That's the treasure we seek, and that's a treasure that then extends into eternity. Your money and your stuff isn't going with you. But your relationship with God will.

Our attitude about these things impacts how we view the world and how we treat others. That's what Jesus is getting at when he then talks about the eye being the lamp of the body. It feels a little out of place to us when he talks about money before this, and then serving two masters (God and money) after it. Those two pieces fit together nicely, but this lamp and eye stuff feels like it's dropped in, and out of place. And the part about the eye being the lamp of the body seems weird – like light is shining out through our eyes?

But all of Jesus' message here in the sermon on the mount – and really, in all of his teaching, period – is about inner transformation being the key to a right relationship with God and a right relationship with other people. And so, **Jesus is saying here with this eye and light metaphor is that: what's on the inside of you is what matters.** Skye Jethani puts it well in his book,

when he writes, “We know the eye is an organ allowing light to pass into our bodies, making sight possible, but in the ancient world it was thought sight was a process where light passed out of the body through the eyes. Jesus is referencing this common idea to say the way we see the world is an indication of what is inside of us. We either see the world from a righteous perspective (light) or a wicked perspective (darkness).”

So, those who store up treasures on earth and don’t seek the treasure of their heavenly father and of his kingdom, are filled with darkness. Those who do seek his Kingdom first and store up treasure in heaven, are filled with light. And that has serious ramifications for how we view and treat others.

Jesus then transitions into verse 24 where he says that we can’t serve two masters. **We can’t serve both God and money.** This is really where the rubber meets the road, and the point that Jesus is driving at. It may be that for you, money isn’t the issue. Maybe it’s something else – power, how you spend your free time, etc. But we live in a very “moneyed” part of the world which can deceive us into thinking “money’s not my master” because so many people around us have even more and focus on it so much more. But that doesn’t mean money isn’t seeking mastery in your life. Or, maybe it genuinely isn’t a problem for you. But whatever “it” is, it can have a lot of control over you, and be your master, and you can end up fearing it, instead of fearing God. You start making decisions based on that thing – whatever it is – rather than based on your relationship with God.

That’s exactly what happened to these parents who paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to get their kids into certain universities. Money, and other facets of life associated with money such as fame and power...probably power especially...these kinds of things were their master. And because money was their master, they feared life without it for their kids. They feared the prospect of their children not having as much as they do, of not having the lifestyle that comes with it, the relationships that come with it, the spheres of influence that come with it, of not being able to keep up with others. And so they gave into that fear. I don’t think there’s any other explanation: they gave into their fears. Why? Because money was their master.

And it's not like most of them did it blindly or without recognizing the potential lack of ethics in it. It's like an angel was on one shoulder and the devil on the other. And so a lot of them questioned Rick Singer, the guy who organized it all. They'd ask about him the ethics of it. Sometimes it was rooted in their own selfishness and their potential shame, so they had questions about "could this come back to haunt us?" "What if it gets out in the public?" They asked those kinds of questions, which indicates – even if from a selfish perspective of not wanting bad publicity – they recognized this may not be completely ethical. But money was their master, so they gave in.

After we finished watching the movie, there were a couple of things that happened. First, I immediately knew I needed to change plans for how I was going to get my kids into college. 😊 Just kidding...actually, we all chatted a little about it and what we learned from it. And one of my daughters made a statement that I'm paraphrasing because I wasn't trying to get a quote for a sermon...but essentially she said, **"The scary thing is that this really could be anyone, even us."**

And maybe not just in that exact situation, because not anyone has several hundred thousand dollars sitting around to do what these parents did; I'm sure my kids know *we* can't afford that...but if we had the means...or in other situations we find ourselves in we all face a very similar temptation: a job application, a test at school, a project for work, even just in conversation with people about how you're doing and how life is going...in any of these kinds of situations, "fear" can drive us to make ourselves look better than we actually are: by cheating on a test, using someone else's work and claiming it as our own, making ourselves look more "put together" or successful than we are, and so forth. When we do those kinds of things, something else besides God has become our master and there's an associated underlying fear of scarcity: about lacking something, about not having enough money/power/status/position, about wanting to be accepted by others...and that fear...that master is powerful.

So, I want to pause for a moment and ask you: **What's your fear?** What has a hold on you and is your "master"? Do you fear money and whether or not you'll have enough? Do you fear losing your place in the socio-economic

landscape as people move here from other places? Do you fear people who look differently than you? Or who vote differently than you? Or who think differently than you, or who have different theology than you? Do you fear the future – perhaps your own future or the future of younger generations? What do you fear? **What does that fear say about who/what might be seeking mastery in your life?**

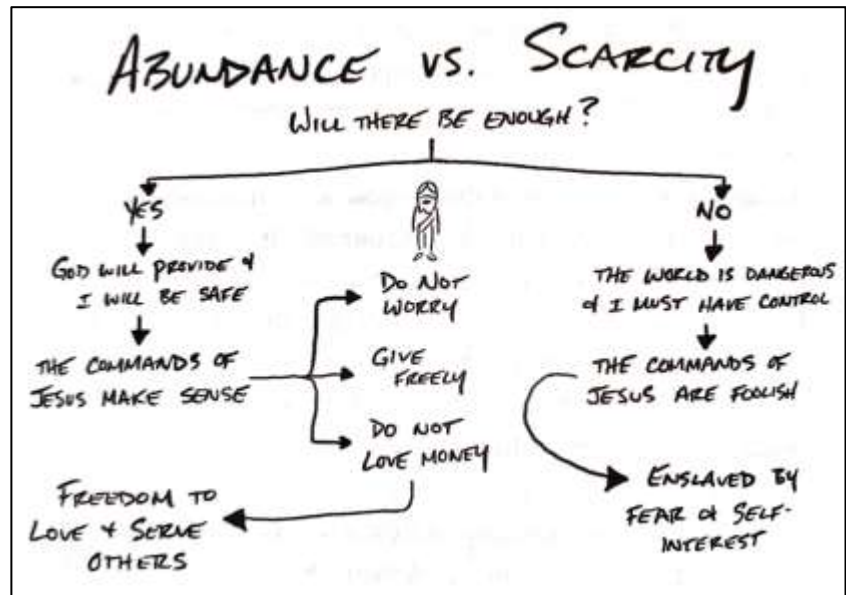
Fortunately, Jesus doesn't leave us in this place of fear, and he shows us who ought to be the master of our lives rather than money or anything else like that. He continues on, "Therefore, do not be anxious about your life..." Don't let your fears of these things get the best of you. They will have mastery over you if you do; they will be the darkness that lives inside of you; they will have you seeking your treasure in the things of this world, not the things of heaven; they will cause you to present a false and prideful picture of yourself to the world like one who makes their fasting obvious.

Instead, Jesus says, draw near to God, and trust in His provision. He's taken care of the birds, the flowers, and the grass of the fields. They are fed, clothed, and have all that they need. No worries, no fears. There is plenty to go around. Fear of scarcity need not take root in our lives, in our homes, or in our church. God's got this, and Jesus invites us to be centered on God and His Kingdom. In fact, that's how Jesus wraps up this section, and you'll notice that once again it comes back to righteousness. **"But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. So don't worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own"** (Matthew 6:33-34).

When we seek God and his kingdom first, then the other things don't have mastery over us. Our fears of scarcity and acceptance – whether that's about money or power or position in society or at work or our peers in the community – when God is King rather than these other things, then fear of them isn't an issue, because God's got it all. He's the God of abundance!

Skye Jethani puts it well in his book, “What If Jesus Was Serious?” with one of his little drawings:

Abundance vs. Scarcity: Will There Be Enough? If we say “yes” and trust that God will provide, then Jesus’ commands make sense: do not worry, give generously, do not love money...and this gives us freedom to love and serve



others. But if we say “No, there isn’t enough,” (whether that’s not enough money, love, friendship, power, etc.) then we see the world as dangerous and the people around us as threats; then the commands of Jesus don’t make sense and are foolish (for instance: why would we help and give to people who are threats?) and we are enslaved by fear and self-interest. You see, your relationship with God, and your understanding of who God is (whether or not he will take care of you and provide for you) has huge ramifications on how you view and treat others.

Jesus is imploring us to trust God...to recognize him as the God of abundance and not of scarcity, to live in freedom from fears and freedom to love God, love our neighbor and serve the people around us. **But more importantly than what we do, Jesus is helping us to see that God accepts us as we are. God’s love is not scarce.** There’s plenty of God to go around. He will not fail you. He will not forsake you. He will not abandon you. He accepts you as you are. He wants to transform you and help you live more fully and rightly as his image-bearer, but you need not fear God’s acceptance of you. He does accept you and love you. That is at the heart of what Jesus is saying here.

For some of us this morning, this might be a whole new approach to God and to the world. Maybe you’ve been serving another master that has a grip on your life and has caused you to have a mentality of fear and of scarcity. **Jesus**

is telling you that God is enough, his provision is enough, and there is an abundance of Him. There's more than enough to go around. God's grace is sufficient and abundant, so allow Jesus to be the Lord of your life, and be the one who fills you up and sets you free, because anything else will only leave you in fear and wanting more.

For others of us who have already put our trust in Jesus, we know this in our heads and maybe even in our hearts...it's not a brand-new message. But there's still probably a struggle. So, I'll ask again: What fear do you have? I want to invite you to: **Lay that fear at the foot of the cross.** Acknowledge that there's something that's seeking to be lord of your life in place of Jesus, and lay down the associated fear that comes with it, and instead trust God and his amazing and abundant provision. He's got this. He's got you. Whatever you're facing, whatever your fear, He's got you in the palms of His hands, and He longs to provide for you and take care of you today, tomorrow and into eternity. Let's pray...Amen.