

Matthew 6:33  
Message #4 in the series "Whose Verse is it Anyway?"

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Good morning. I'm John Marcott, the pastor of Care and Connections here at St Paul's Church. It's my privilege to serve you in that capacity. This past week somebody asked me, So what's the secret to extemporaneous preaching? And I said, you know, I haven't done it yet, so I really don't know what the secret is besides praying they don't give me a verse from Obadiah or one of the prophets that are hard to single out. But actually, I said, you know, I do. Here's my secret to what makes great preaching. And part of it, I think, was illustrated really well when I went to Nashville probably about 20 years ago. One of the parts of my vacation to Nashville was going to the Grand Ole Opry. The Grand Ole Opry, known as the Carnegie Hall of the South. If you go on the right night, they actually film and record radio programs and I think they also show up on TV too. Every half hour you're seeing another show, a variety show of a number of different acts. And one act that night really stood out to me was Mike Snyder and his bluegrass band. I was never a fan of bluegrass before going to Nashville, and I do know I liked Mike Snyder. When they sang the song "If My Nose Was Running Money, Honey, I'd Blow It All On You." But besides that, it seemed to me that this bluegrass band, as each song was played, each member of the band, the banjo player, the guitar player, the fiddle player; each would take a turn and one was a better musician than the next. And it wasn't so much a competition, but just the joy of their playing and outdoing one another on their instrument. And Mike Snyder said something that I think is not only true of great music but is true of great preaching. He said, "Look, when you're in Nashville, everybody's trying to get discovered. Everybody wants you to write a song or perform a song that you will love. And by their popularity that will attract them onto a life of fame and fortune," he says. 'But we do things a little differently in our band. We're going to invite you to listen to songs that we love.' And he said 'Some of them are old traditional standards, but we love them and we're going to play our darndest to make them sound great. And by you watching, we hope you sense our love for this music, and it becomes infectious.'

So that reminds me of a statement that Jesus made where he said, 'The mouth speaks of the overflow of the heart.' So, if you apply that logic to preaching, what the preacher is really doing is gushing about what he has studied in private when he speaks in public and what he is studying will shine a big light on Jesus. The reason being is that when we study the Bible, we're actually looking to have an encounter with Jesus. And that's based on something Jesus said kind of in a debate with the religious authorities of the time. He said to them, 'You search the scriptures because in them you think you'll find life. But it's those very scriptures that bear witness to me. Yet you refused to come to me to have life.'

So what Jesus is saying to the religious leaders at the time, some of them who were great Bible scholars, is you guys do well by studying the scriptures. But you can study the scriptures and spend an awful lot of time in them, even memorizing them for the wrong purpose. You can spend your time studying the Bible to find rules for living, wisdom for living, guidance for living, ethical code to live by. But he says, actually, the intent of Scripture is not only to provide that, but to point ahead to me. And if you use the Bible as a vehicle to do what it's supposed to do, point to me, then you'll find the life, the abundant life that I've come to give. So, in a real sense, when usually when we're given a passage beforehand and we spend our time studying that passage, we're praying that God encounters us in that text and we see Jesus in a clearer way, so much so that we desire to follow and love and worship him all the more. Preaching is nothing more than coming to the pulpit a week after studying that way

and then explaining to you or sharing with you, gushing, about the Jesus whom we have found in the text.

We used to use this as kind of a test in a previous church that I served where we would look about how successful we were in our sermon by saying, okay, did we present Jesus? Did we present the text in a way that highlighted how much we need Jesus? And did we show by the text how much Jesus more than meets our need? And so, in that sense, I'm going to try to apply that to the passage that I was given today.

So, this passage is from Matthew 6 versus 33. Just to take a little step back. We said that the Bible bears witness to Jesus, when Jesus made that statement, you study the Scriptures so that you might have life. He's actually talking about the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible. That was in Jesus's time, accepted as God's word. And he's saying the Old Testament looks ahead to me. Matthew is in the New Testament that has yet to be written, but it is very clearly all about the life of Jesus. And then the letters that follow are all about the implications of Jesus for our lives in the church. But Jesus is saying the Old Testament also bore witness to him. St Augustine long ago said that Jesus Christ is explicit in the new but implicit in the old. He's hidden, concealed in the old and revealed in the new. So, we're looking at one of the Gospels and the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, all take a different vantage point in looking at the life of Christ.

Matthew, the first of the Gospels in our New Testament basically looks at Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, the awaited anticipated Messiah, who is the awaited King of Israel. All through the history of Israel we had one king after the next, and none of them fulfilled the hopes to lead in righteousness and in mercy and in grace and to show God's character and then to encourage the nation to follow. But Jesus is the one that they had long waited for, and his whole gospel points to that fact.

Mark's gospel, much shorter than Matthew's kind of pictures. Jesus as the servant of God who is really active. I mean, he's almost like a superhero in Mark, because it's bam, bam, bam, one fast miracle after the next. It's a real action-packed gospel.

The Gospel of Luke presents Jesus as the savior of the world. He has not just come for Israel. He has come for everyone. And Luke will go into all different parts of society. And a lot of times those who are on the fringe are marginalized Jesus has come for them too. He is the savior of the world.

And in John's gospel, Jesus is the Heavenly Teacher who has come down and is revealing things that we would never know with our perspective under the sun. He actually has been in heaven, comes down and reveals to us truths that we couldn't know ourselves.

But our passage is from the Book of Matthew. And these Gospels, as I said, are specifically about the character of Jesus. But once we accept the character of Jesus, they all become discipleship handbooks in a sense. They're not just about who Jesus is, they're also about okay now as followers of Jesus. What are the implications of this God man who lived as one of us, died on the cross and then rose from the dead? How do we live in light of what Jesus accomplished while on earth and now ascended to heaven?

One of the ways of looking at Matthew's gospel is that Jesus is presented not only as the long-awaited Messiah, the King, who fulfilled all of the prophecies in the Old Testament of the perfect king. But he also is the one who is better than all that the Old Testament looked to. So, when Jesus says that the

Scriptures bear witness to him, here are some of the ways that the Old Testament looked forward and Jesus says this explicitly in Matthew. That one greater than Solomon is here in your midst. So, Solomon, the one who brought Israel to the wealthiest, broadest, most powerful time, the golden age of Israel, Jesus is greater, better than that Solomon. The Temple, which was the meeting place between God and man, where man's sin that had separated him from God was taken care of with the sacrificial system. Jesus at one point says, I am the new temple. I'm better than that temple because now in my body will be where man and God are reconciled. What the temple did in the Old Testament, it only pointed ahead to what I do now for all nations. Over and over again he is the better example of a person, institution or event that happened in the Old Testament. And so, in the Book of Matthew, some people think that Jesus is being presented as the better Moses. And here's how they argue that.

The Book of Matthew, unlike the other Gospels, has five big teaching sections. The first one where our passage is taken from is from the Sermon on the Mount, which is in Matthew five through seven. The second big discourse that Jesus gives in Him is in Matthew ten, where Jesus sends out the disciples to share about the coming kingdom. And so, it shows in Matthew 5-7 that the kingdom that the new king is bringing is an ethical kingdom, one that calls for the very character of God in its followers. Chapter ten shows that it also calls those to share that face with others. It's for all. In Chapter 13, Jesus tells all his parables. Matthew puts these all together, and the parables show how this is a surprising, sometimes secretive kingdom, just like the surprise of planting a small seed, which results in a huge tree. That's what the kingdoms like. And that's very much against the expectations of first century Judaism. They wanted God to come back, but they wanted him to come in a big way and to bulldoze his enemies. And Jesus says, actually, the kingdom comes almost surreptitiously, like someone sowing seeds, and you have to wait for the harvest. And the way that that's Hebrews is mysterious and invisible to the eye very often. The next chapter of teaching is in Chapter 18, which shows the kingdom that Jesus brings is a community. It's not just aimed at individuals, but a community. And it's a community unlike the Society of Men. You think about it when Jesus says in Chapter 18 that you are to forgive. Peter asks, 'How many times are we supposed to forgive? Seven times? Which is very generous. I would have said, Jesus, what do you expect me to forgive three times? I mean, that's a lot that really tries your patience. Okay. Peter says seven times, as if Jesus is going to go. No, no, no. Seven is too much. No. Jesus explodes that concept. No, it's seventy times seven. That phrase, 70 times seven. Is heard once before in the Bible. Where? In Chapter four, when kind of an alternative race of evil men are growing, Lamech kills a young man. Who harmed him? It wasn't tit for tat. It wasn't the punishment fit the crime. He injured him, so he killed him. And then, Lamech boasts, you know, if Cain will be avenged seven times, well, Lamech will be defended 70 times. Seven times 70 will be the punishment that comes on someone who takes it out on me. Jesus says, unlike the rule of man, which just becomes more and more violent, and violence is heaped up on violence. He says the church will be the place where forgiveness is heaped up upon forgiveness. We will be characterized by being a loving, forgiving, accepting community. Quite a call. But then the fifth main talk in the book of Matthew is chapters 24-25, when he says, look, this kingdom that I'm building has a bright future. It's not just for this earth. It's for eternity. Now, in so doing this, it kind of presents Jesus as the new Moses. Moses wrote five books of the law. Genesis. Exodus. Leviticus. Numbers and Deuteronomy. Jesus gives five books of teaching. So, in a sense, even though it doesn't come out and say he's the new or better Moses, Matthew seems to be portraying that Jesus as the new teacher who would be like Moses. Moses had promised in Deuteronomy that there would be a leader like me among you who would be the ideal king. Jesus fulfills that.

So, Matthew 6:33 reads. "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. And all of these things will be given to you as well." So first of all, that shows my prayer was answered nothing from Obadiah. This

is at the end of Matthew six, part of the Sermon on the Mount and part of, as we said, this is the first main discourse in Matthew, and it's all about the character of the follower in Jesus's kingdom. Jesus begins with the Beatitudes, the blessings. Blessed of the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are those who are meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. That's kind of the general character of those who are in the kingdom. He takes the Ten Commandments next in Chapter five. And he says, by the way, though you might read through the Ten Commandments and say, look, I'm a good person. I haven't killed anybody. Never committed adultery. Never stole. Those laws really apply deeper into your attitudes. So much so that you may have never killed someone. But have you ever wished inside that someone just could be punished fully or, you know, you wish them dead? And again, we're not being literal when we say things like that inside, but Jesus is saying that's what the law is addressing, not just your outward behaviors, but your very heart. So much so that nobody reading through Matthew five, six or seven, if they understand it fully, should ever get to the end of those chapters and go, I'm good by Jesus. No. Everyone should go, oh, I need a new heart. I need a new conscience. I need a new standard of living. That's what Jesus is trying to accomplish in those chapters by saying, oh my goodness, none of us measure up.

Therefore, we need a savior. And in the same way this passage, you know, at first when I saw with passage it was, I wrote down 'EASY' exclamation point. And then I thought to myself, yeah. But what Jesus is calling for here is nothing less than the first priority of our hearts. Seek first the kingdom and his righteousness. And all these things will be given to you as well.

Now, as you can imagine, this this line starts off with the word 'but' so he's contrasting it to what has happened before. And what he's talking about before is he says, don't worry about anything. You know, everybody in this world worries about where's the next paycheck coming from? Where are they going to get enough money for food and for clothing and for shelter? And he says people in Jesus's kingdom don't need to be sidetracked or obsessed with such worries. Now, okay, if you're a parent, you might go, Hey, Jesus, let's be a little practical here. I need to provide for my kids. I want to provide a safe home for them. You know, one of the prayers that I've taught my kids to pray since we were they were young. I was young, too, back when they were young is thank you for a house that keeps us safe, warm and dry. And then we would pray for the homeless, those who don't have those very basic, sometimes assumed, sometimes taken for granted- privileges. Jesus is saying. Don't be so obsessed and occupied and worry about your bare necessity needs. And he points out Jesus has eyes to see things in nature. He says: Look at the birds, the birds don't spend all their time worrying and fretting and biting their fingernails. I don't think birds have fingernails, but they don't worry about being taken care of. God feeds them. Look at the flowers. The flowers don't fret they're days away thinking that they're not going to look nice enough. God dresses them in beautiful arrays. And, you know, if you are one to have an eye for this, you see how God provides in the world around us. He sees examples and illustrations in the world around as we should. And so what is his solution to worry and anxiety? Is to have our priorities firmly set on what matters most. Which is God's kingdom, what God is doing and what God has called us to do. When you said those things as your first priority, life will take care of itself.

Now, I'm not so sure that this means, like some people take it that, look- make God your first priority and you are going to be the wealthiest, richest. You know, you don't have to worry about possessions or clothes because God's going to just bless you. Now, honestly, as a teenager, I was taken in by a church like that. I can remember that the pastor preaching, if you are a Christian, you should have the biggest, the shiniest, the reddest Cadillac on the block. Now, I had a beat up on Green Fury 3. And if you remember Furies, they had like a marine green color, you know, so they just it was old. It had close to 200,000 miles on it. And I thought to myself, gee, even as a young Christian who had just started

reading his Bible, I don't sense that that's what Jesus is talking about when he talks about being victorious or being prosperous. But I have what I need. Now, there are some that God entrusts with riches. But I don't think that that's what he's promising here. He's promising He gives us what we need.

Now, there are some Christians who their priority was Jesus and have died for their faith. Does that mean Jesus is not meeting this promise? Not necessarily. Again, as Christians, we have a long view of life because all that we see on this earth is not all that matters in life. Your relationship with Christ, which secures you here on Earth, you are loved more than you could ever imagine, extends beyond the grave, too. I mean, otherwise, every time we prayed for someone to be healed we would be having people who are 100, 200, 300 years old in our congregation because, wow, if we put Jesus first, we'll get everything. We do get everything because we get Jesus, as the psalmist say. And actually it's Psalm 73, which is a great verse, obviously, if I could find it in time. Assaf looks at those who are wealthy among him and he says, God, you know, I look at people who are prospering, who could care less about you. I actually put a lot of effort into serving you and what do I have to show for it? But then he comes to worship which puts everything in perspective. And he says: When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant. I was like a beast towards you. He's almost like describing what happened to Nebuchadnezzar. When Nebuchadnezzar thought he was God himself, all of a sudden he turned into a beast. But he says, nevertheless, I'm continually with you, you hold my right hand, you guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me into glory. So now he's seeing things in internal perspective and he says, Whom have I in heaven but you? And beside you I desire nothing on earth. My flesh in my heart may fail me, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. See, no matter whatever happens to us in this world, we never lose that portion in God. God has given Himself to us. We have Him fully in this earth, in this life, and in the life to come.

So, Jesus' message is not to be anxious about anything. Okay, here's why this is so hard. Think about the world that we live in today. How many of us are worried about inflation? How much of us are worried about our money not stretching as far as it used to? How much of us so worried about our retirement plans? We are living right now in financially stressed times. This message is for us. Seek first the kingdom of God seek first God's priority and his righteousness. Don't cut corners because now we're in stressful times. Now I need to take a different tact. No, he says. Keep God as your priority and you have everything you need. Including me. That makes this a really, really difficult call at this time.

Let's pray, Lord God, we thank you that you speak to us, even as Jesus said in your word we find life. But we find that life because we find you. Knowing you means that we see in your face the love of God for us which is better than we could have ever imagined. That God himself would die to win me and give me life. And that God welcomes me into His presence now and for forever. Lord Jesus, we pray, give us hearts to hear that. And even in our frustrations and our worries right now that we might hear you beckoning us to you and therefore pursue you first and foremost. To know that love to know the sureness and rock solid love that we can't be separated from that we have in Jesus Christ and bring that stability to all of our lives, no matter what assails us. What stands up against us give us the grace to seek first your kingdom and your righteousness, and to accept what you provide in Christ's name, we pray. Amen.