

Devotion

Easter Sunday
Matthew 6:19-24
April 21, 2019

Please Read Matthew 6:19-24 before reading any further.

As a church, we've spent the last few months learning from one of Jesus' most famous sermons, the Sermon on the Mount. Today we come to a point in that sermon, where Jesus causes each one of us to reflect on, one of the most significant questions that we could ask ourselves this morning:

What am I devoted to? Just about everyone respects and admires devotion. Whether it's someone's devotion to their family, devotion to their country, or devotion to some other worthy cause.¹ Devotion is a big deal for us as people. Sometimes, however, we devote ourselves to the wrong things. Or at least to things that don't deserve the level of devotion that we give them. For example, sometimes we become so devoted to our work and our career, that we place our work before our family. We are so driven to succeed and make more money and get that job promotion, that our commitment to our marriage and our kids often suffers. Or, if we're single, our devotion to our career is all we ever think about and all we ever spend our time on. And our work success results in a hollow and empty personal life. A life devoid of real friends, or meaningful companionship, or any other meaningful pursuit in life. These kinds of realities, should make us pause this morning, to take a time out and ask ourselves this important question: **What am I devoted to?**

Jesus begins with a warning for us in Matthew 6:19,² "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal." In other words, don't devote yourself to things that won't last. In today's world, we might fool ourselves into thinking that our earthly treasures are secure. Only to find that even the best pension plan or 401K or stock market investment isn't totally secure after all. We may find that the most secure investment that we could imagine has some weakness or flaw that we just couldn't have predicted. No matter how air tight we might think our money is against theft, computer hacking and identity theft and other scams leave us wondering how secure our wealthy really is. Jesus urges us not to store up treasure on earth, because it is subject to the risk of not lasting. Jesus then goes on to give us some unique investment advice in Matthew 6:20, "But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal." (Where computer hackers can't access your data and no one can steal your identity.)

Verses 19 and 20 are in direct contrast with each other. We receive quite a different kind of advice from today's economists. You don't have to look very hard to find someone who will tell you how to store up your earthly treasures. One of the most popular pieces of advice is to invest in mutual funds. This spreads out our risk and helps us to invest in the market more broadly. Some money management experts will recommend that we invest in gold or in land or in property or in something else that is supposedly "bullet proof." In various ways, we are urged to diversify our portfolio. All of this, as a means to protect us from losing our earthly treasures. Don't get me wrong, there is wisdom

¹ In fact, when someone shows their lack of devotion, we have a hard time liking them. That lack of commitment and dedication makes us all wish that that person wasn't on our team, that they didn't work for our company, or that we didn't get stuck with them in our group. Have you ever been given a group assignment, only then to realize that someone in your group wasn't committed to carrying their share of the responsibility? You suddenly realize that they are not nearly as devoted to the project, as everyone else in the group is. And it's in that moment, that you realize that your devotion, will now mean that you are going to make up for their shortfall. You just can't bear to watch the assignment fail. You're just too committed to it; you are devoted even though others are not.

² In this text, Jesus is warning His followers not to devote themselves to worldly wealth that doesn't last. Let's keep in mind, that Jesus says this, as He is devoting Himself to an earthly ministry, that would lead directly to His own death on the cross, just a couple of years later. When Jesus speaks about devotion, He knows what He's talking about.

to this advice. We should practice careful financial planning and we should invest for our future needs while we are here on this earth!

But, we should also be mindful, that there are more important things to devote ourselves to than worldly wealth. If we are serious about devoting ourselves to following Christ, then we need to embrace a radically different investment strategy for what we devote our lives to. Let me suggest a crazy investment strategy for your life. This is one that no good financial advisor would risk their reputation on: put ALL your eggs in one basket.³ When our family lived north of town, we owned about 10 acres of land and had enough space to raise chickens. It was really fun to do this when our kids were little. There is nothing quite like that little “peep, peep, peep” noise that baby chicks make. And, once you feed them for a while they get a little smelly but they begin to lay eggs. There is nothing quite like going out to the chicken coop and finding fresh eggs for breakfast. But once in a while, in our hurry to pick the eggs and bring them back in the house, one of us would spill the basket of eggs. Kids, we’re having cereal today! Thus, the saying, “don’t put all your eggs in one basket.”

And yet, consider Jesus’ heavenly investment strategy later on in Matthew 13:44-46, “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.” Liquidate all your assets and devote them to buying one particular field, one particular pearl. In other words, put all your eggs in one basket. This is an investor’s greatest nightmare. To a wise financial planner, this strategy seems at best VERY foolish. But Jesus is not calling us to be foolish; He’s calling us to be devoted. Jesus calls His followers, to be so fully devoted to Him, that they choose to be “all in” for His Kingdom. NOT to hedge their bets, NOT to diversify their portfolio.⁴

Back in Matthew 6, Jesus then goes on to explain in Matthew 6:24 that,⁵ “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” It’s impossible. You see...

1. Devotion to wealth hinders our devotion to God. This is precisely what Jesus warned the Rich Young Ruler about.⁶ There’s a famous story recorded in Matthew 19 about a wealthy young man who came up to Jesus one day and asked Him this question: “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?” He and Jesus then get into a discussion about obeying God’s commandments. The young man claims that he has obeyed all of the commandments, but he’s wondering what he still lacks. Jesus then urges him to sell his possessions and give to the poor and then he’ll have treasure in heaven. Upon hearing this spiritual advice, the rich young man decides NOT to follow Jesus. Matthew 19:22 tells us, “When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.” You see, despite this young man’s desire to get eternal life, despite his claim to keeping God’s commandments and living a good life, something was holding him back. His wealth was hindering his devotion to God and keeping him from following Jesus. Let’s contrast this rich young man with another man, the man who hung on the cross next to Jesus on Good Friday. You may remember that Jesus was on the cross between 2 other crosses, between 2 thieves, 2 men who had rebelled against the law.⁷ Jesus says something incredible to one of those thieves right before they die together on Good Friday...



³ This illustration seems especially appropriate on the day when many of us give out Easter baskets to our kids. Not that I am suggesting that the Easter Bunny should get credit for the real meaning of Easter.

⁴ If this kind of devotion still feels foolish to us, then perhaps we need to consider whether we’ve truly counted the cost of committing our lives to Jesus. See Luke 14:25-35.

⁵ I didn’t have time in this particular sermon to address Matthew 6:22-23. These verses are basically talking about eyes that are healthy, i.e. generous (v. 22) and eyes that are unhealthy, i.e. greedy or stingy (v. 23). There are several helpful notes on this in *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1603.

⁶ Read the full account in Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-31, or Luke 18:18-30.

⁷ See Matthew 27:38 and footnote on Mark 15:27 on p. 1692 of *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011.

A ministry called “The Skit Guys” have a video called “Last Words of Christ: The Rich Young Ruler.” It’s a hypothetical scenario where the rich young man considers the contrast between Jesus’ words to him and Jesus’ words to the thief hanging next to him. The rich young man is frustrated that Jesus would ask him to give up everything he had while the thief didn’t have to give up anything because he had nothing to give. The Rich Young Ruler wasn’t looking for a handout. He’s frustrated by the fact that this thief had nothing to offer but Jesus showed him mercy anyhow. He states his belief that his wealth is a clear indication of the favor that rests upon him from God. He’s angry that a disgusting thief gets to go with Jesus to paradise, while he, a person of wealth and good character and good works, does not.⁸

Devotion to wealth hinders our devotion to God. It blinds us. It becomes an idol, that takes a firm grip on our hearts. We are willing to do any amount of good works and good behaviors, as long as we can keep our devotion to our earthly wealth. But Jesus teaches us that we can’t serve two masters. Salvation is a free gift from God.⁹ It’s not something we earn by doing one more good thing. We do not earn heaven by our own merit or by having enough good character. Or even by giving all of our money to charity. Salvation is a free gift from God. This is the message of the gospel. It’s why we call it the Good News. But, at the same time, we shouldn’t confuse this free gift from God with something cheap. This free gift was bought at a costly price: the precious blood of Jesus. Easter Sunday is a very special day of the year. And yet, it’s a day that hinges on the realities of another very special day of the year, Good Friday. Calling it “good” seems awfully strange from one point of view, since a man had to die that day. But, this was a very special man, Jesus Christ who was fully man AND fully God. Jesus’ death on the cross, demonstrated in a vibrant and powerful way, a key thing that we need to understand about Jesus: He is devoted to us. He dedicated Himself to a radical plan for our rescue.

2. Jesus demonstrated His devotion to us by going to the cross. Many have defined the word “devotion” something like this: love, loyalty, or enthusiasm for a person, activity, or cause. Against what seems rational, the God of the universe devoted Himself to lovingly, and loyally pursuing the human race that He had created. He displays His enthusiasm for people as He dedicates Himself to a particular activity (redeeming mankind). He devoted Himself to a particular cause (saving the human race). One of the wonderful verses in the Bible that talks about devotion is Romans 5:8, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” This demonstration of God’s love is a demonstration of devotion. Even while we were living our own way and ignoring God, even disrespecting God, He sent Jesus on a rescue mission. If you read the Bible from start to finish, you will find that this redemptive theme is what holds the entire book together. This crazy, ambitious, seemingly reckless loving pursuit by a Holy God, who is chasing after a disobedient and stubborn people.¹⁰

Jesus demonstrated His devotion to us by going to the cross. Hebrews 12:2 urges us to fix our eyes on Jesus because, “For the joy set before him he endured the cross.” Jesus was devoted enough to endure the cross for us; the cross and everything leading up to the cross. He remained devoted to us even when He suffered cruel rejection by His own people. Despite the mocking, despite the crown of thorns, despite the torture and abuse, He pressed on in His devotion. Good Friday and Easter send a loud and clear message about who Jesus loves and what HE is devoted to. Jesus fully devoted Himself to us; He was 100% “all-in” to the point of giving His very life for us. And now, following Christ requires that we be fully devoted to him.¹¹ He calls us to surrender to His Lordship, to set aside everything else that we might treasure in this life more than Him. God demands our

⁸ This video can be previewed and purchases at: <https://www.worshiphousemedia.com/mini-movies/81658/last-words-of-christ-rich-young-ruler>

⁹ This criminal on the cross had nothing left to hinder his faith. He was at the end of his own life. For the 1st time, he could see clearly his need for Jesus. As opposed to the Rich Young Man, for the criminal on the cross, there was nothing left to get in his way. The thief on the cross had nothing to offer Jesus, no good works that he could go do, no great wealth that he could give to the poor. And yet, somehow, in the final moments of his life, he discovered God’s grace, he placed his faith in Jesus and he found salvation. The Rich Young Ruler illustrates for us that anytime our devotion to our wealth is greater than our devotion to God, it becomes a stumbling block to our faith. Devotion to worldly wealth hinders us from godly devotion.

¹⁰ Why would God do that? The answer perhaps makes the most sense to us when we recall that God reveals Himself to us as a Heavenly Father. He invites us to become His children, to join His family. To be adopted in no matter our background or ethnicity or gender. Despite our level of education or wealth or popularity. Parents! They do some pretty crazy stuff for their kids! Through Jesus, God provided a way for us to become His children.

¹¹ He is not going to settle for being just one of the better stocks in our mutual fund portfolio.

devotion. The Bible tells us that He is a jealous God.¹² He will have no other rival. He does not give us the option of 50% devotion or 90% devotion or even 99%; the Christian faith is an “all or nothing” kind of thing, 52 weeks of the year.

A pastor named Tim Keller asks the question: Why would Jesus leave the glory and riches of heaven? The reason is because if He'd stayed in heaven, then He wouldn't have us.¹³ He wouldn't have been able to rescue us and spend eternity with us. He gave up the riches of heaven because He loved us so much.¹⁴ Jesus teaches us in Matthew 6:21, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Jesus went to the cross because He treasures us; His heart is with us.¹⁵ And that is why we desire to treasure Him and to have our hearts with Him.¹⁶ If you would like to learn more about devoting your life to Christ, I encourage you to contact church and pick up one of our little blue and yellow booklets called, “2 Ways to Live.”¹⁷

Jesus' devotion to us comes full circle as we choose to devote ourselves to Him.¹⁸ Jesus not only died for us, but He also rose again for us! He demonstrated His devotion, by sharing with us a glorious resurrection. As we celebrate Jesus' resurrection this Easter, may it remind each one of us, that we can also be raised to new spiritual life.

Easter Sunday calls us to greater devotion: to devote ourselves to Jesus, who has fully devoted Himself to us through both His death and His resurrection!

*This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on April 21, 2019 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson*

¹² See Exodus 20:5 and 34:14.

¹³ We are reminded in 2 Corinthians 8:9, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” Jesus was devoted enough to leave the comforts of heaven and to be born on this earth. He did this so that we might become rich. Not so much financially rich as spiritually rich. Jesus came to share the inheritance of heaven which far exceeds and outlasts any earthly treasure we might imagine.

¹⁴ Check out <https://generousgiving.org/media/videos/tim-keller-the-gospel-grace-and-giving>

¹⁵ In fact, a person could argue that Jesus' approach is the opposite from yours and mine. Jesus was already in heaven, but He saw His treasure down here on earth. His heart was for all of the people down here who were spiritually lost and broken down by sin. So He came down to rescue us and to teach us about the treasures of heaven that far outweigh the wealth of this world.

¹⁶ It makes it a very easy and rational decision for me to put all my eggs in one basket. Following Jesus is the ultimate investment now and the best retirement plan in the universe.

¹⁷ Because of this, you and I now have the opportunity for a different life. The Apostle Paul explains it this way in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” When we Admit that our sins are the reason that Jesus had to die. When we Believe that Jesus was buried in the grave and rose again three days later. Then we are ready to Choose to devote our lives to our risen Lord Jesus Christ. We are rescued from sin and we are set free to live a new life.

¹⁸ This new life brings a new devotion. Colossians 3:1-4 says it this way, “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” Romans 6:4 says it this way, “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death **in order that**, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, **we too may live a new life.**”