

Matthew 6

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[0 : 0 0] I wonder if you are planning to stay up late on Thursday night as the results come in following the general election. For myself, what usually happens is that roughly at this point in the week if somebody asks me, are you planning to stay up late, they'll say, oh no, no, no, I won't be doing that. No, no, no, I'll just go to bed. That's what I say on Sunday and Monday and Tuesday, but once we get to Thursday, I'm thinking, oh, well, I'll maybe just stay up for the first couple of results. You know, we're always told which constituency will be announcing first, and you think, well, I'll just get one or two of the results and get an idea of how the wind is blowing, and then I'll go to bed. And then, of course, I do that, and then I think, well, it'd be quite good to get one or two of the Scottish results, just get a flavor of what's happening in Scotland. Of course, they're usually a little bit later, so, well, it'll be another half hour, another hour will pass by. And I'm always taken in by that teaser that you get on the election results program, where we're told that an announcement is due any minute now. You know, the returning officer, he's looking as if he's just about to climb onto the stage any minute now, and it's usually from some constituency where there's particular interest, maybe a big name is threatened with being dethroned and losing their seat, and you think, well, we'll just wait to hear that one result more. Well, eventually, of course,

I do trudge off to bed wondering why I didn't do the sensible thing three hours earlier, another poor choice of many that one makes. But, of course, in the course of that day of Thursday, there will be a more significant choice to be made earlier in the day as we vote. I wonder, have you decided, have you made your choice? Whatever choice you make, I trust that it will be an informed choice, informed by a worldview that is grounded in God's Word and God's priorities. Now, it can be an informed choice that has those characteristics, and it may lead to different people to come to different conclusions as to who they will vote for, and that is entirely legitimate. Jesus was unremittingly insistent in the demand that those who would bear his name make big choices. The Sermon on the Mount, from which we have read, a portion, has sometimes been described as a Christian manifesto. It outlines and describes the surpassing righteousness that Jesus demands of and expects from his followers. But the Sermon hinges on on repeated calls to decision to make big choices. In the course of the Sermon, indeed, in the verses that we've read, the question is posed. It's directed to those who would bear the name of Jesus. What is the treasure you seek? You have to choose if your treasure is to be a corruptible one, one that will be lost in due time, or if your treasure is an incorruptible one, one that will endure even into eternity.

We're challenged with the choice of living in the light or living in the darkness. We're challenged with the call to determine who will be our master. Will it be God, or will it be money? A very stark, but a very real choice that Jesus presents to those claiming to be his disciples.

But another feature of the Sermon is the manner in which Jesus makes very clear that these decisions or choices are not to be understood only as one-off life-defining decisions, decisions and choices that we make every day as believers. I think that's important to understand.

Jesus is not saying that it's simply a case that at some point in your life you have to make this choice. Who will be my master? God or money? Now, it may be true that for some of us there will be that defining moment when we have to decide. But what Jesus is saying is that that decision needs to be continually made. The choice will continually be presented to us. Who will you choose? Who will you serve? To take the example of choosing a master, God or money. Then in verse 24, no one can serve two masters. And then the verse continues, you cannot serve both God and money. There's a choice. Who will be your master? But in the context of challenging his disciples with this choice, Jesus then goes on to say, in a sense by practically applying the consequences of that, he says, do not be anxious.

[5 : 24] Do not worry about food or drink or clothing. And of course, that's something that we have to face. The challenge not to worry about these things is a daily challenge. So even those of us who at some point by grace have been able to say and perhaps can honestly say, well, no, I've made that choice.

I've determined who my master will be. I will serve God. Yet, for us also, day by day, there is the call and the challenge to continue choosing and to choosing well. And that will be illustrated, for example, in the matter of anxiety and worry. Do we worry about these things? But if we do, that will be evidence that we're not choosing well in this matter. To choose God as your master is a daily choice. You need to go on choosing. The life of choosing well, of living as those who seek incorruptible treasure, who walk in the light, who serve God as their master, is summarized and encapsulated in memorable words that Jesus directs to his disciples in the context of this call not to be anxious, not to worry. In verse 33, that's where we're going to direct our attention this morning. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well. And as I say, it is to these words that I want us to turn our attention. This is a big choice that confronts you this morning and every morning. Will you seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness? Now, what I'm going to do as we consider this choice that is presented to us, what I'm going to do is to go through the verse almost word by word. And as we go through the verse, try and establish what it is that Jesus is calling us to do. We need to make an informed choice on this matter. If we're going to decide, if we're going to seek God's kingdom and God's righteousness, it's a serious choice, a serious decision. If we're going to make it, then we need to know what that involves.

And so my purpose this morning is to help us understand what that involves. And once we understand, well, then the challenge remains. What are we going to do? Are we going to do what Jesus calls us to do?

So let's go through the verse just as we find it before us there in the passage. The first word already brings something significant and illustrates an important truth. The first word is but, but seek first. And this first word but points to a better way. This expression, a better way, implies a contrast between two alternatives. And that is precisely what the word but at the very beginning of the verse highlights. There are two alternatives for us. We can seek after personal security and comfort.

But if we go down that route of focusing our energies and our attention on seeking after personal security, personal comfort, then we need to be aware that we will also endure all the accompanying anxiety that that that will bring. You see, if our life revolves around what we eat and what we drink and what we wear, what we own and the homes that we live in and the cars that we drive, well, that's fine.

[9 : 15] That's your choice. But be aware that with that choice will come all the worry and all the anxiety that accompanies such a choice. That's one way. The alternative is to seek after God, to seek God's kingdom and God's righteousness. And as we do, implicit in what is said here is the assurance, the promise that accompanying such a life, such a seeking, there will be peace and contentment for us.

In essence, the choice that is laid before us is a choice between a self-centered life and a God-centered life. It's one or the other that we need to select, that we need to choose. Jesus gives no suggestion, gives no room for imagining that there's some middle ground in this matter, that somehow we can do both. We can seek after these things, the phrase that kind of an umbrella phrase for speaking of all the things that he's been speaking about in the passage, that we can do that. And we can also seek God's kingdom. There's no suggestion that it's possible to do both. And that's important to realize because many of us, I would say most people, it's not true of all people, but I think most people are drawn to the middle ground. We're wary of and shy away from what appear to be extreme positions or radical choices. I was struck by that as just a couple of days ago I saw for the first time, indeed the only time I've seen it, it was a party political broadcast by the Scottish Liberal Democrats.

Now, I've just seen it once, so it may well be that many of you haven't seen this particular broadcast, or maybe it began and you quickly changed the channel, as we tend to do when party political broadcasts come on the screen. But I saw this particular one through to the end, and Charles Kennedy is the narrator, and it plays on the fear of extremes or what we might perceive to be extremes.

And if I can just more or less relate what the story is, and you'll recognize it if you've seen it yourselves. Basically what we have is we have a pedestrian who's about to cross the road in semi-darkness, and she steps out onto the road, and from her right a car appears and very nearly knocks the poor lass into eternity, and she jumps back as a result. But she needs to cross the road, and so she steps out again, and on the second occasion when she steps out, a car from the left appears with similarly fatal intentions of knocking the poor girl over. Well, what's the moral of the tale? Well, the moral of the tale and the slogan that comes up at the end is, look right, look left, and then cross the wee box of the liberal Democrats. The safe middle ground. That's the idea. This is the safe middle ground. Don't go to one extreme, and don't go to the other extreme. Let's just stay in the middle where it's safe. Now, I'm making no commentary, no political commentary on that party or any other, but that's the message that is being portrayed. It's quite a clever way of getting across the message that they want to get across, but I don't think it's going to save poor Danny Alexander or maybe others of his colleagues either. In contrast, in contrast, Jesus presents to those who listen to him, to those who hear the choices that he puts before us, he presents a clear choice. He's not suggesting some comfortable middle ground for us.

No, he's saying it's God or money. It's his kingdom or your castle. It's to seek after these things or seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. What will you choose? What do you choose? In this past week, you have made those choices, often subconsciously, but you've made those choices. What have those choices been? So, at the very beginning of the verse, even in this word, but, we have presented to us a better way. There are two ways, but one is a better way. But then the verse continues. It says, but seek first.

[13 : 55] And these next two words, seek first, point to what we might call a permanent challenge, a permanent challenge. Now, I'm conscious that by going through the verse in the manner that we're doing, it's a little artificial, to consider these words, seek first, detached from the objects of the seeking, namely God's kingdom and righteousness. But bear with me as we'll come to that, the heart of the matter in many ways in a moment. But for the moment, we're just going to think about these next two words, seek first.

And we'll start with the first one, to seek. The form of the verb here, the form of the verb to seek is a present imperative. Now, what that means is that Jesus is commanding his disciples to engage in an activity, in this case seeking, that is permanent and ongoing. We've already suggested that a few moments ago, but here it's very clear that that is what Jesus is calling on us. Not a one-off decision, but that permanently, in an ongoing way, we would engage in this activity of seeking first, God's kingdom and God's righteousness. We are to be continually seeking, and let me stress, continually finding. And this isn't a fruitless search for a spiritual El Dorado, ever seeking and never finding, by no means. Seek and find, seek and find. Choose rightly and discover what the consequences are.

But notice also, as we think about this verb, to seek, not only the form of the verb and what that implies, but also the meaning of the verb. In the sense, the word that is used, very helpfully and rightfully translated to seek, but it carries the sense, or it can also be understood, and these are very related meanings, as actively desiring, or of setting our hearts on a particular object. In this case, God's kingdom and God's righteousness. Desire God's kingdom. Desire God's righteousness. Set your heart on God's kingdom. Set your heart on God's righteousness. This is what Jesus is challenging us to do.

So we are to set our hearts on. But Jesus goes further. He says we are to do that first, but seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. What does that mean? What does it add to what Jesus is saying?

Are we to understand it a bit like a to-do list, where the number one task on the list is to seek God's kingdom? And then having sorted that, having done that, we can move on to the other stuff.

[16 : 47] Securing food and clothing and shelter and toys and whatever it is that we want to secure. Is that what's being suggested? So yes, you need to do this first, but then you can get on with the other stuff.

I don't think that's what's being suggested at all. We're not to understand first in the sense of order or time, but in the sense of that which should enjoy ultimate priority. Seek as of first importance, principally seek God's kingdom and God's righteousness. The idea is not to seek only before all else, but above all else. Indeed, the promise that follows, which we'll come to, suggest that if we seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness, we won't have the time or the need or the inclination to seek after other things. Rather, these things, important in their place, will simply be given or added to us by God himself. This then is our present and permanent challenge to seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness. To return to the illustration of a to-do list. To seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness will impact on our to-do list in two crucial ways. It will determine what gets onto our to-do list, and it will inform or mold the manner in which we do that which is on the list, including those necessary tasks that may seem to us quite mundane and inconsequential. Even in the doing of these things, it will be in the light of this greater priority of seeking first God's kingdom and God's righteousness.

The manner in which we will do these things, it may seem very inconsequential or very temporary or passing. Nonetheless, they too will be impacted by this decision to seek first God's kingdom and righteousness.

But we need to move on to the heart of the matter, what we could call a kingdom life. Precisely this matter of seeking first God's kingdom and God's righteousness. Now, what does this mean?

What is being spoken of? What is being referred to when Jesus speaks of God's kingdom and God's righteousness? Are these two distinct matters that we need to think of separately?

[19 : 25] What Paul says when he engages with or comments on this matter in chapter 14 of his epistle in verse 17, what he says there would suggest that we should be careful about distinguishing between God's kingdom and God's righteousness as very separate or distinct matters. Listen to what he says as he writes to the believers in Rome.

He says this, For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. There, Paul would seem to be saying that this is a description of God's kingdom. This is what it is. It is righteousness, peace, and joy. This is what characterizes God's kingdom. It is what characterizes kingdom life.

And so, I think in the light of that, we do need to be a little bit careful about not drawing too clear a line between these two aspects, God's kingdom and God's righteousness.

That said, I think we can make some distinction while recognizing that they are very much intertwined. Let me suggest this as a definition of what is involved in seeking God's kingdom and seeking God's righteousness.

Seeking God's kingdom will involve an ever more rigorous subjection to the king. So, this is the first part of what we are to do. Seeking God's kingdom involving an ever more rigorous subjection to the king.

[21 : 00] And seeking God's righteousness will result in an ever more striking resemblance to the king. They come together. We're not separating.

Nonetheless, we're distinguishing them in a measure by describing what is involved in this way. And we're going to develop this. But let me just repeat that in one sentence. Seeking God's kingdom will involve an ever more rigorous subjection to the king.

And seeking God's righteousness will result in an ever more striking resemblance to the king. Let's start with seeking God's kingdom. Seeking God's kingdom or this ever more rigorous subjection to the king.

Seeking God's kingdom is used in the New Testament. Not so much in the sense of realm as in the sense of rule.

We're not to identify the kingdom geographically. It's not a place that we need to discover. We're not to imagine that we can identify or even extend the borders of this kingdom.

[22 : 07] Rather, God's kingdom is all about God's rule and our glad subjection to his rule. To seek God's kingdom then is to increasingly, and in every area of our lives and activity, submit to God's gracious rule.

Now this has a personal aspect for each of us as believers. It has a community aspect for the church and for individual congregations such as our own.

It has a broader global aspect as we long for and work towards the visible and undisputed reign of King Jesus overall. And let's think of these three aspects, beginning with the personal aspect.

At the personal level, each of us as believers is to continually seek to be subject to the will of the king. Now what does that look like? Well, it's about deliberately and consciously seeking to know God's will.

If we don't know what his will is, then it's going to be very difficult to be subject to it. How can we discover his will? Well, it's not rocket science. There's nothing very amazing that I'm going to say that you don't know already.

[23 : 23] We're going to find his will as it's revealed to us in his word, the Bible. So we seek to discover what his will is. We then, having discovered what it is, we proceed to do God's will, to obey his commands.

The Sermon on the Mount, from where we're drawing our text this morning, is replete with such practical challenges as to how we are to be subject to the king.

The Sermon speaks of the need for rigorous obedience to the commandments, not only in the external, but in our very hearts. And we are to obey God's commandments, even when, and especially when, this might seem to prejudice our own interests, may seem to prejudice our capacity to secure all the material things that we long to secure, or the status that we long to have, or the power that we would enjoy in having.

Now, subjecting ourselves to God's law may sometimes prejudice that. And God says, well, that's much more important. Maybe at work, telling the truth will, for some of you, mean losing out on a promotion.

It might mean losing out on that contract that would rescue the company from imminent disaster. Just bending the rules a little bit.

[24 : 48] Just avoiding being honest in your dealings. And Jesus says, well, there's a choice you have to make. Who is your master?

Is it God or is it money? Who will determine the choice that you make? As we would seek to increasingly be subject to the king, because that's what seeking God's kingdom is about.

Well, it involves obedience to his commands. As I say, as we find them presented to us even here in the sermon. The Sermon on the Mount also speaks of the challenge that God presents to us of loving our enemies, of giving to the needy.

We have the opportunity to do so. We've heard of the terrible tragedy that has struck Nepal. Well, one of the ways as Christians that we respond is listening to what Jesus says. And within this sermon, as in other places, there is this call for us to give to those who are in need.

There's a call to pray. There's a call to fast. And we could go on. This is what is involved in us at a personal level, seeking God's kingdom, submitting ourselves to his rule.

[26 : 00] It's also about seeking to apply the principles of God's word to our every decision and action. It's about subjugating our own personal ambitions to a greater end and good, namely to be part of bringing to fruition God's ambitions for our lives, our communities, and our world.

It is also about a humble acceptance of God's will, even when it brings us pain, and when we struggle to understand what God is doing or not doing, as the case may be.

All of these things are involved in each of us personally seeking God's kingdom, submitting ourselves to his rule. At the community level, thinking of ourselves as a congregation of God's people, we also need to seek God's kingdom, to be increasingly subject to his will.

What does that mean for us? Well, it involves being subject to his revealed will in the Bible, in the matter of the content of our preaching and teaching, rightly administering the sacraments, governing and exercising discipline in the church.

We are to do all of these things subject to what God instructs us in the Bible. All that is important. But it's more than that. Seeking God's kingdom is seeking to discern and discover and do what God the King would have us do.

[27 : 23] In mission and service. What is the King's agenda for Bon Accord? What is it that he would have us do? We need to discover that, to discern that, and to do that.

That is, for us as a congregation, to seek God's kingdom, to be subject to his will and to act and to live according to his agenda.

At the global level, seeking God's kingdom is about mission. It's about going into the world and telling the good news about our servant King who calls all to loving submission to himself.

As men and women and boys and girls are enabled to respond to the call of the King, so the kingdom grows and expands. We are to seek God's kingdom.

But also we are to seek God's righteousness. I've already suggested that we have to be careful about distinguishing these two things in too artificial a way.

[28 : 23] But I have suggested that seeking God's righteousness involves an ever more striking resemblance to the King. But to get there, we need to ask a question. What does it mean to seek God's righteousness?

Or perhaps even more fundamentally, of what righteousness is Jesus speaking of here? Is Jesus speaking of a righteousness that is given to us as a central plank of our salvation?

Christ's righteousness given or imputed to us so that we might become righteous in God's sight? Is this the righteousness that Jesus is referring to?

Or is he rather referring to the righteous acts or righteous life? His disciples are called to live, reflecting God's righteousness. I think we can see there's a distinction there.

I don't think we need to choose between the two. Though I think we can argue and contend that the principal emphasis on this occasion is on the call to and the requirement of a righteous life for those who are followers of Jesus.

[29 : 31] How is it that this works? Will we become members of the kingdom? Subjects and sons of the King by faith in Jesus Christ. We are both forgiven and clothed with the righteousness of Christ.

This is an act of God's free and sovereign grace that we receive by faith. But having received, having been made righteous, the call is to be who we are, to live righteously.

Our right standing before God that is secure, that is given to us as we're clothed in the righteousness of Christ must be accompanied by right conduct.

Right conduct that befits servants of God. This is the order. God grants us a right standing before himself. And having granted us that, then we are called and challenged to a conduct that is befitting of who we are.

To illustrate how this can be sometimes misunderstood. I don't know how many of you stayed up late for the big fight last night or in the early hours of this morning.

[30 : 41] Now, staying up for that big fight, and no offense intended, I know some of you did, but I would humbly suggest was an act of even greater folly than staying up for the election results on Thursday.

But you can have a different opinion on that. Now, the big fight, for those of you who don't know what I'm talking about, you're living in another planet if you don't know what I'm talking about, but the fight between Mayweather and Pacquiao.

Now, in the lead-up to the fight, it was heartwarming to hear one of the boxers, Manny Pacquiao, share something very openly with the media, something of his faith in Jesus.

And I applaud him for his vocal and courageous witness. But I do wonder, as I listen to what he said, and I was very pleased, and I celebrate what he said, but nonetheless, I do wonder if his grasp of the gospel of grace is somewhat lacking.

And it ties into what we've been talking about concerning righteousness, and hence the reason for sharing it with you. In one of the interviews, Manny was stressing what a real Christian is.

[31 : 53] He was contrasting real Christians, that's his own word, with false or nominal Christians. And to be a real Christian, he stressed, involved meeting certain conditions set by God.

And the central condition is obedience. And he used the illustration, and it was the illustration particularly that struck me. He used the illustration of how you get a driver's license.

And so he said to his interview, he said, you know, it's like a driver's license. If you want a driver's license, then you need to meet certain conditions. You need to present certain documents, you need to sit your medical, you need to sit your test, you need to pass your test.

And if you meet all the conditions, then you get your driver's license. That's what it's like with salvation. You need to meet the conditions. You need to obey God. And if you obey God, then God will grant you.

That's part of the deal almost. Salvation. So you've got something to bring to the table. If you bring it to the table, then God will respond and will save you. Now, I think that's the wrong way around.

[32 : 54] In fact, I'm sure it's the wrong way around. That's not the gospel of grace. The gospel of grace is that God is the one who gives you right standing before him.

He's the one who takes the initiative. He's the one who gives you by grace a righteousness that's not your own, clothes you with the righteousness of Christ as he enables you to believe in Christ.

And having granted you that right standing, then he says, my son, live as my son. Live in obedience. Live in gratitude.

In grateful obedience to me. May your right conduct demonstrate who you are. May it demonstrate what I have done for you. This is the order.

It's not right conduct that leads to right standing. It's right standing that leads to or is evidenced by right conduct. And if we come back to our text, we as disciples are to seek God's righteousness.

[33 : 54] We are to live righteous lives. We are to practice the surpassing righteousness outlined for us in the Sermon on the Mount. And as we do, we will display an ever more striking resemblance to the King.

We will become ever more like Jesus, the altogether righteous one. And as we draw things to a close, it's also true that as with seeking God's kingdom, seeking God's righteousness also has a community and a global aspect.

As a congregation, we are to be characterized and distinguished by righteousness and justice. And more broadly, as those made righteous and passionate for God's righteousness, we will ever seek to advocate for and defend God's righteousness, His righteous laws and kingdom values in the public square and in society at large.

Well, the words of Jesus in verse 33, the final words are the ones that we turn to now. And the final words constitute for us a tender promise. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness.

And then how does the verse continue? And all these things will be given to you as well. A tender promise. We are human, all of us. And we lack faith.

[35 : 17] We might be concerned. You might be concerned that if your life revolves around and is focused on seeking God's kingdom and God's righteousness, well, as a result, you might lack the basic necessities of life, not only for yourself, but maybe your greater concern is for your family.

I have dependents who depend on me. I've got to focus on that. And so you're concerned, well, if I throw in my lot with Jesus in this radical way, well, what of my family?

What of my needs? How will they be met? What happens if I tell the truth and lose my job? What then of me? I mean, you could think of maybe other concrete examples of these real choices you need to make.

Well, Jesus gives you, He gives us a tender promise. He says, if you seek first my kingdom, if you seek first my righteousness, then be assured that all these things, all these other things important in their place, all these things will be given to you as well or literally will be added to you as well.

I think added is more helpful. It's as if to say you've got the main thing. In seeking God's kingdom and His righteousness. But added to that will be all these other things. God knows that you need them and He will provide them for you.

[36 : 36] Big choices. Big choices that we need to make every day. Every day we're faced with these kind of choices. We don't realize it often. And yet we have to face these choices.

Who will we serve? Who is our master? Is it God or is it money? What will we seek after? And the challenge that Jesus presents to you this morning is this. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness.

And all these things will be given to you as well. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for the teaching of Jesus recorded for us in the passage that we've read.

And in particular the verse that we've been focusing our attention on. We pray that we would have, even now, but that we would continue to have a growing understanding of what it is that is being demanded of us.

That we would have a grasp of what it is that we are being called to. What it means to seek first Your kingdom. To seek first Your righteousness. But we pray that we would not be content only with understanding what that means.

[37 : 44] But perhaps much more importantly that having understood, we would then proceed to doing that which is challenged before us. That which is set before us as of first importance.

Help us then, we pray. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.