

# Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – August 11, 2019

## Matthew 6:22-34

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on biblegateway.com.)

*Note: This is NOT one of the assigned texts for this week's lectionary, but was chosen thematically for our worship*

### Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

### Commentary on Matthew 6:22-34

(From *Homiletics*, “A Sustainable Life”, February 27, 2011)

This section of the Sermon on the Mount opens with a reminder about the competing pulls we often feel in life: “No one can serve two masters” (v. 24). Although in its context, this statement is clearly offered about a different subject, it’s nonetheless an appropriate description of the place where preachers can find themselves when trying to interpret this passage for their congregations. Understood as a harsh critique of not simply materialistic wealth but of even the very notion of property, this text can be perceived as a master whose demands of us — particularly we who live in the affluence of modern Western societies — we both hate and despise. Understood as a call to balance and contentment with what is sufficient for those enslaved to the endless pursuit of not just the Joneses but the Trumps, Gates and Buffets, this text can be heard as a liberating master whom we can love and toward whom we can redirect our devotion. For preachers with a commitment to faithfulness to the gospel message, the question is: Which of these understandings of the text is our true master?

The crux at the intersection of these two competing interpretations of the passage is found in the second declaration in verse 24: “You cannot serve God and mammon” (NASB). The word *mammon* appears in both the Greek original and this English translation as a loan word from either Hebrew or, more likely, Aramaic. There is wide agreement among lexicographers that the word literally denotes “property” or “wealth.” There are examples of its use with those meanings in both the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Mishnaic Hebrew of later rabbis. The disagreement arises regarding its connotations. Are condemnations of “property” and “wealth” as evil implicit in this particular word that are lacking from other Hebrew and Aramaic words used to refer to “property” and “wealth”? Some dictionaries point out that there are much later uses of the word in figures of speech employing personification (as may be the case here in the conjoining of “God and mammon”) where it becomes a proper name for the demon “Mammon.” In those contexts, “mammon” is clearly condemned in and of itself. Other dictionaries, however, question whether such a negative association applies already in its use in the first century.

The only other occurrences of the word in the New Testament are in Luke, where it appears a total of three times. Luke 16:13 is an exact parallel of Mathew 6:24, but the word has already been used twice in preceding verses (Luke 16:9 and 11) with the modifier “dishonest,” or perhaps “unjust” or “unrighteous” (αδικία). Clearly, then, in the passage from Luke the word *mammon* has strongly negative connotations. But it could be argued that Luke has to form those strongly negative connotations by twice using expressions meaning “dishonest wealth” because the word “mammon” in itself was more neutral. What indications are there here in Matthew that would suggest what connotations the word has within the Sermon on the Mount?

The concerns raised in Matthew 6:25 are those related to basic necessities of human “life” (ψυχή), namely food and water (“what you will eat or ... drink”) and clothing (“what you will wear”). None of these basic necessities, however, is associated here with the vices or related to their excesses. There is no condemnation of gluttony or drunkenness. Even when the opulence of wealth displayed in elaborate attire is raised, it isn’t condemned. “Solomon in all his glory was not clothed” in such a way as to be able to compete with the splendor of “the lilies of the field” (vv. 28-29), but there is no explicit indictment of the beauty displayed in Solomon’s glory and certainly not of the way God adorns the lilies or even “the grass of the field” (v. 30).

Throughout the passage, the problem isn’t with the “mammon” itself — the “property” or “wealth” of having food and drink to nourish the body or clothing to cover it — but with the idea that the necessities of life are to be identified with life itself. That point is made clearly and directly early on: “Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing” (v. 25b). Yet people who mistakenly confuse these necessities of human life with the purposes of life are consumed with “worry” (vv. 25a, 27, 28 and 31). Such worry indicates a deficit of trust (“you of little faith,” v. 30) that God cares for humanity, just as he cares for the rest of creation — from the “birds of the air” (v. 26) to the “lilies” and “grass of the field” (vv. 28-30).

So are human beings to adopt the patterns of “the birds of the air” and no longer “sow nor reap nor gather into barns” and let God feed us like animals who survive on what they find within their environment? Are we to “neither toil nor spin” to have clothing and instead adopt the mindlessly natural state of plants in the field? Of course not. Life is about striving, about working toward something. The issue, in the end, is: To what are we devoting our efforts? Are we, like those still not reconciled with God (the “Gentiles”), striving for these material things as if they were the sole purpose of life? (v. 32). Or are we striving “for the kingdom of God and his righteousness,” a realm of justice in which not only we ourselves but all of God’s creation is nurtured and sustained? If we take care of all people and all of creation, “all these things will be given to [us] as well” (v. 33).

There’s a hyperbolic character to all these comparisons, underscoring that in the end, there are limits to what we can control in our lives — no matter how much “worry” and effort we devote to overcoming them (v. 27). The passage even acknowledges that there’s an inescapable quality to worry in this life. We don’t have to “worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own” (v. 34). What we can do is recognize that God, not property or wealth, is our master. God is a master whose care and provision warrant our love and devotion, rather than hatred and disdain. Faith as trust in God won’t call forth life’s necessities out of thin air, but it will direct us toward a just vision of life in which we have what we need rather than are being enslaved to needing what others have.

## Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift and search for this text!
- Check out other commentaries available for this text (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](http://WorkingPreacher.org).

## Reflection Questions on Matthew 6:22-34

- 1.** *“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light”* (v. 22). What on earth does this really mean? Is it a metaphor? A cultural idiom that is lost on us today? A perhaps obscure but nonetheless meaningful articulation of a deep human reality? How are we to put these words together with what comes before and after? (If these seem like impossible questions to answer, it may of note that vv. 22 & 23 are not included in the revised common lectionary at all!)
- 2.** Richard Beaton, *workingpreacher.org* (May 25, 2008) offers this food for thought: *“As Ulrich Luz has put it, when interpreted in a superficial manner, this statement could only have been written by a single guy living a carefree life on the beach in sunny Galilee. The implication of Jesus' message here is that much of what matters to us today, the material aspects of our lives, ought not to be taken seriously and can be completely entrusted to a God who cares for us....that one does not need to work or prepare for the future at all; we can simply relax knowing that God will take care of our needs. But as most of us know, this does not seem to match what we know of life on this planet.... does this mean that the pursuit of wealth through hard work and investment is wrong? Or that people should not enjoy the fruit of their labor? One would be forgiven for thinking that this is a passage for the truly devoted disciples, the original twelve who followed Jesus, or for missionaries in today's world, but not for those of us in the real world.”* So how shall we live in regards to this text? Is it something aspirational? A challenge for the spiritually elite? A mandate for all disciples? Are those of us who choose to live and work and raise our families in the “real world” in necessary opposition to the kingdom of God?
- 3.** A repeat question from last week: What does this scripture, and Jesus’ parable, have to say to those of us who have enough wealth to consider savings, investments, retirement planning, etc? In other words, what is the good news for those who don’t need to worry about our material or financial security because of our affluence?
- 4.** Saying that we should not worry and actually letting go of the anxieties and fears that so often dominate our daily living are two very different things. So the real question is more likely not whether or not we should worry or even whether we will worry, but rather *how* we shall navigate our way beyond these worries to the trust in God and letting go of our felt need to control the fulfillment of our needs and desires that Jesus advocates? What are some strategies or practices that can help us nurture and develop our capacity to have faith to live beyond our worries?

**What questions do you have?**

**What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?**