

“What If We Seek God’s Kingdom First”

Matthew 6:25-34

Third in Series: “What If”

Pastor Andy Kinsey

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“Seek first God’s kingdom...and his righteousness...”

Matthew 6:25

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, help us to seek your kingdom first, above all else, and to lay aside whatever worry is keeping us from you: In Christ’s name we pray: Amen.

Sermon Message

In his book *The Power of If*, the Reverend Mark Batterson of National Community Church in Washington DC provides all kinds of lessons about the power of this little word, especially when combined with other words like “What if”, or “If only,” or “Even if.”

The conditional nature of the word “if” sets the reader and the listener in a new posture, says Batterson, and asks us how we might respond to a particular situation. For example, “what if” you pulled a holly prank on someone by making that someone smile or laugh? What if you do it? Or “what if” you set aside an entire day to search your soul, and probe your motives, and confess your sin? What if you were to act in that way? Or what would happen “if” you committed your life to a long obedience in the same direction? What if you took the long view on maturity and not the quick-fix approach? How would you act differently? Batterson ask these questions to get us to think.

More to the point: “What if” you and I were to seek God’s kingdom first, above all else? Above political party? Above family commitments? Above employment? “What if” we pursued God’s kingdom first? Not as you and I define God’s kingdom, mind you, but as Jesus defines God’s kingdom – where the hungry are blessed and the pure in heart see God, where those who are poor in spirit are lifted up (Matthew 5:1-12)? That kingdom! *What would happen “if” we as*

followers of Jesus would actually practice what Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount?

It is an incredibly odd question, isn't it? We would think that "if" we are following Jesus we would be doing what Jesus said. And yet, we know from empirical evidence, if not church history itself, that many Christians don't. Sadly, we realize that Christian behavior is not too dissimilar from those who don't profess faith at all.

Indeed, there are times, for example, when as Christians we fall prey to the same kind of situational ethics as anyone else, where the end justifies the means. In other words, we, like others, can act in any fashion we want to act as long as we get what we are aiming to get! And if that means cancelling you out or delegitimizing you in the process – then so be it! And it works on all sides of the political and religious spectrum!

But what if we as Christians were to carry out a different struggle, where we realize that Jesus is both the means and the end, and that how we strive to reach that End is just as important, as it tells us the kind of people we are.

Such is the power of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus is not simply the Messenger, but the Message: a reminder that how we act in reaching our goals says a great deal about the persons we claim to be. Since the church's history is spotty at this point, there is every reason to reconsider what Jesus is teaching.

Perhaps as Christians we more generally might want to adopt the wisdom of the Amish, the Mennonites, and the Quakers whose modest proposal for peace is a call to arms – not fire arms, but God's arms, which are located on the side of our bodies and which we can extend to and embrace others: ***Let the Christians of the world agree not to kill each other.***

Yes, it's a modest proposal, but given how divided Christians are today in the United States, it might serve as sound counsel. It ranks up there, of course, with Jesus' own words to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:42-43).

That is Jesus' way of saying *that "if" we are going to follow him* we had better be prepared to stretch ourselves toward God first; and we had better be prepared to move in that direction and not toward the kind of attitudes and actions of so-called "pagans," who forget Who the Beginning and the End of this

kingdom-enterprise is (Matthew 5:43). Jesus is teaching about the way our **kingdom-commitment** is to shape our **kingdom-action**.

Me...Worry?

And yet, I worry that too many of us as Jesus' followers are not following what Jesus taught. Did you hear me say worry? Wasn't it Alfred E. Newman of Mad Magazine who asked, "What me, worry?"

Well, already I am at odds with Jesus! Here I am building up means and ends, and ethics, and the kingdom of God – and I am failing to note already that Jesus says not to worry. But I worry. Do you worry? I think there is a great deal of worrying going on, don't you?

Indeed, I was listening to the news the other day and I heard a woman share that she was worried. She didn't have enough money to pay her rent, and she had just been laid off. She was worried. She was trying to figure out what she was going to do. She has never been in this kind of a situation. I wonder how many more people are worried like her?

I bet that "if" we were to make a list of our worries, we would fill the side of the wall and then some! Name the topic, and there is worry: Elections. Pandemic. Unrest. Health. Children in school. Young people on campus. Economy. The Climate. People are worried. And it's showing.

In fact, this week was one of those weeks as pastors where we felt the burdens of worry (not that we don't on other weeks) but that this particular week the volume of worry went up; the burdens, the fears, the uncertainties of people in the church and community, and our own – went up.

And "if" there is something I worry about, it is the worry I have about not being able to respond to the worry of others! How's that for worry! Top that worry warts! Because like you, we – the staff, the pastors – we are tired too. We are weary. We watch the news. We listen to what people say. And we worry.

Call it stress, tension, anxiety. Not the end of the world, to be sure, but we have weddings. We have teenage boys and young children. We have concerns about staying healthy; we have worries about figuring out "if" our own people are paying attention to what we are saying and doing and staying engaged!

Indeed, we are racking our brains about finding creative ways of being connected and we are wondering “if” people are with us! And yet, the irony is that we are probably doing as much ministry now than ever before! Go figure!

O ye of little faith!

But let me give you a concrete example of what I mean about worry: on August 2nd, we recorded 311 hits streaming the service. On August 30th, we recorded about 181 units. To be sure, we know that not everyone clicks the attendance tab. And we also know that people view and watch the services in other places, at other times. No problem. I get it. There are different ways we can count!

From the standpoint of a pastor, I worry. Did we say something? What was happening that day? And it can become an endless cycle.

I share that knowing full well what many experts in psychology have documented about worry: that 60% of our worries are unwarranted; 20% of our worries are completely out of our control; 10% are of our worries so petty that they don't make a difference; and of the remaining 10%, only 5% of those worries are justifiable, and of that 5% we can't do anything about them, which means that only 2% of our worries are real. But that two-percent!

What is the old saying? Worry is the interest we pay in advance today for the trouble that may never come tomorrow. But we still worry, don't we? I have in my study the following sign: “*Worry is a waste of the imagination.*”

Personal Experience

I speak, of course, from personal experience. As I said, I worry. In fact, did you know I attend WA meetings? Worriers Anonymous! When I attend, I meet with me, myself, and I. And the three of us go through all kinds of lists on worry!

And one of these things about Worriers Anonymous is that it has little place for God and God's kingdom, or faith, because the focus is on me, myself and I! Not God! And sometimes the meetings are just horrible: in fact, we get nowhere with me, myself, and I. It's a great deal like rocking in a chair: the worry gives you something to do, but it doesn't get you anywhere! Worriers Anonymous.

But let's note something, and let's remember how worry works because what Jesus is preaching goes to the heart of our faith. Remember that three times he tells those who are listening: “Do not worry. Do not worry. Do not worry!”

Now, if Jesus says something once, okay. Twice, sit up! But three times, put it on your forehead! This is important.

And so, to understand the importance of what Jesus is saying, we have to remember where he said back in verse 24, because in that verse Jesus says that we cannot serve two masters: “You cannot serve God and mammon” (6:24). In other words, Jesus is reiterating the first commandment in Exodus: “You shall have no other gods before me.” So far, so good.

Now let’s go to verse 33: “Seek God’s kingdom first and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

What is to come first? You as god or God as God? Your kingdom or God’s kingdom? Because you cannot have two masters.

This is where worry comes in! What worry does is divide us between God and everything else that stands in place of God. Worry, if allowed, divides and conquers the soul. After all, that’s what the word “worry” literally means – to split or divide. It actually comes from an ancient English word which means to strangle or tear apart. Worry divides us against ourselves (and God) and fragments our emotions, leaving us drained, if not defeated.

And what Jesus is teaching us is that, if we allow it, worry will track us down and strangle us; if we allow it, worry will be our master. And when that happens we cut ourselves off from God, from the Source of our well-being. Remember, no one can serve two masters (Matthew 5:24).

That’s not how God created us! God did not create us to have two masters, but one! God created us to worship only one God (Exodus 20:3).

Yes, the birds have value; they are part of God’s creation. Yes, clothing is important. But look at you! And you! You are created in God’s own image! God values you! God made you, and God did not make you to worry, to be split apart!

But that’s what worry does – it strips away the good, leaving us bogged down, burdened.

What If?

Hence, the importance of those little words we have been sharing: what if? What if we strive to seek God first? What if our main objective is to take part in the kind of mission Jesus did? What if we were so consumed with kingdom-work

rather than busy-work – with helping the weak or caring for the poor? With comforting the sick or feeding the hungry? With praying for our enemies or walking the second-mile? With seeking reconciliation or working for peace? What if that comes first?

Because what Jesus is communicating is not that we will arrive at a totally worry-free life; that's not it. We will still have our worries, about our children, or about our life circumstance. We cannot listen to the news today without some sense of uneasiness about what is taking place. Yes, there is worry.

What Jesus wants us to get is that *in our mission to seek God we remember that we are not God* and that in our seeking God, we act in ways that differentiate us from 'pagans,' or from people whose actions and attitudes are not kingdom-based. Remember that what worry does is take us away from the kingdom: dividing us in two, between God's kingdom and our own.

Hence, the question: What if we seek God's kingdom first? What if we realize that there is really only One Master, One Messenger, One Lord, One God – Jesus himself – the Alpha and the Omega. The beginning and the end. The first and the last. What if that is the whole point in the first place?

Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteous and find out what God can do! Amen.