

**A Better Life: 2. Investing in Heaven**  
**Matthew 6:19-24**  
**March 8, 2020**  
**Pastor Steve Richards**

A few years ago, Amanda and I began a practice whenever we get on an airplane. Before sitting in our seats, we take out a packet of wet wipes and wipe the seat, the seat belt, the tray table and any other surface we might touch during the course of the flight. We began doing this after a flight in which the tray table was especially dirty and there were items in the seat back pocket that we wished we had not touched. And then we learned that planes can go an entire month without a thorough cleaning. So now we do what we can to minimize our risk of picking up some virus as a result of where we are seated. It was interesting that when we did this on our flight a week ago to Phoenix other people seated around us asked if we would share the wet wipes so they could do the same thing. That had never happened before. What had changed? Coronavirus.

Have you been paying attention to the news? How could you not be? It's like this inescapable cloud of germs is slowly spreading around the earth. At first the coronavirus was something "over there," and the effects were over there. Not anymore. It's now spread to this country, and though the number infected are small, we are told to expect widespread infections. Most will be mild, but for some – the weak and the vulnerable, it could be severe. Some businesses have suspended international travel. Airlines have cancelled flights to certain destinations. Already there are supply chain delays. Combine that with the panic buying by some and there are stores with shelves left empty. And if you are monitoring the stock market or your own 401k, what you are seeing is fear of the unknown. There is something called the Volatility index that represents the market's expectation, providing a measure of market risk and investors' sentiments. And in the past two weeks. It is sometimes called the **Fear Index**. What we see in the past two weeks is the fastest spike in fear ever. Why? Because nobody knows. The impact of this virus could be what we are told to expect or it could be better than that or it could be worse.

Nobody knows. Before we turn to today's scripture and what I think will give us direction, I saw this news report. In the midst of the coronavirus scare, the worst tornado in six years hit the east side of Nashville Tennessee – no warning – in the middle of the night, tornado sirens went off just seconds before the tornado destroyed whole neighborhoods. Take a look. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHZTtdfhGuk>) Two things stand out for me in that story. In a moment of fear, what did a mother hang on to? Her children. It's what mattered most. And the second thing is that within hours, hundreds of people arrived to help. I think that's what God's kingdom looks like.

There is much in this world that we cannot control – and that could lead us to fear. Fear is an emotion. It is real. But how will we respond in the face of all we cannot control? In this Lenten season, we have invited you to step into Matthew's Gospel. It was written a few years after the destruction of Jerusalem. In the years leading up to 70 AD, Rome decided to put an end to the rebellious Jewish state of Israel once and for all time, and the Roman army descended on Jerusalem, holding the city captive, eventually destroying the Temple and in the process it is estimated that one million Jews were killed. Matthew was writing to Jewish Christians who lived through a genocide. Many of them hearing Jesus' words for the first time, calling them to a new way, God's way of living, called the Kingdom of God. They were living at a time of tremendous uncertainty, and uncertainty breeds fear – because nobody knows. But into that world comes the message of Jesus and what can be – not off in some distant future, but right now. God's Kingdom is here right now for those who are ready to step from uncertainty to certainty.

In this morning's scripture, Jesus was and is talking about priorities – where will we place our focus - and the central focus/priority is God. None of us would question that and none of the disciples gathered on that hillside in Galilee would question that. But here's the challenge: Because God is loving and full of grace and wants us to choose to love and serve him freely rather than to be forced into it, it often seems, even to committed Christians that there are so many distractions. And the distractions can take over. Jesus came into the world to invite humanity back to humanity's original purpose – like restoring the original operating system on your computer. Why am I here?

Last week, I remembered the Lenten season of 2003 when we focused on what was then the best-selling book by Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*. We asked the question which is now the new title of this book: **What on earth am I here for?** It's a question that resonated with a lot of people – and still does. What on earth am I here for? And the answer to that question – embracing and claiming the answer can take us from uncertainty to certainty. In 2003, we had hundreds of people meeting in small groups and even inviting their friends and neighbors into their homes to seek the answer. But just having the answer was not enough. Do you remember the answer? It is the same answer Jesus offered in his Sermon on the Mount. What on earth am I here for?

**Collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don't eat them and where thieves don't break in and steal them** (or where a Stock Market crash could reduce your portfolio to nothing). **Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.** What's the treasure? It's learning to love and serve God – and not so we can be recognized for it or gain some earthly or even heavenly reward. Are we focused on God? Or on someone else (me)? What on earth am I here for?

There are two types of treasure. Heavenly treasure is not referring to the hereafter. Heaven is where God is right now and where, if you learn to love and serve God right now, you will have treasure that can never be taken from you. Be careful because some would turn this into the prosperity gospel. Years ago, someone told me how he was in a financial crisis, and so he prayed to God before walking into a convenience store to buy a lottery ticket. And he won – not megamillions but he won something. He thought it was a God-thing, but I was not convinced. When Jesus mentions treasure, it not about a standard of living but a way of living. Learning to live in the presence of God. Learning to do everything for God and God alone.

**The eye is the lamp of the body. Therefore, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light.** In other words, make sure your lamp is shedding light, not darkness. What's it mean to say your eye is the lamp of your body? Keep your eye on God – not literally, because we can't literally see God. Instead, it's like what I experienced in high school. Whenever I was in a band concert or in a basketball game, the first thing I did was look into the crowd for my mom and dad – because I wanted to make them proud. And when I became a parent what I learned was the importance of showing up. It matters. God is always showing up and is waiting for you and me to notice – and just seeing God makes God proud, regardless of your performance. Did anyone else learn this song as a child? *Be careful little eyes what you see? Be careful little eyes what you see? For the Father up above is looking down in love, so be careful little eyes what you see?* What are your eyes drawn to? What is it that catches your attention? Are you in control of your eyes and ears and mouth or do they take control of you?

What's it mean to say your eye is the lamp of your body? It's like the headlights on your car. Imagine driving down a dark road and you turn on the headlights and nothing happens! You

suddenly realize how dark it really is. That's uncertainty. That's fear. It's what it is like, Jesus is saying, if your eyes are not on God and instead focus on any eye-catching distraction that gets your attention. What on earth are you here for? Are your eyes leading you in the right direction and showing you the road ahead?

So we wash our hands. We cover our mouths when we sneeze. We use hand sanitizer whenever we see it. We stay at home when we are sick – not for our benefit, but because we are concerned for the most vulnerable among us. Last week someone told me about being in a store and watching as someone filled her cart with all of toilet paper that was left on the shelf. I think that's fear speaking – I'm going to take care of me. What on earth are we here for? How will we love and serve God? Back in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the black plague spread across Europe killing as many as 200 million people. It was also one of the greatest moments in history for Christians – not because they didn't die, but because as people ran in fear from communities inundated with the disease, Christians stayed in those same communities to serve those who were sick. People were amazed. See how the Christians loved and served. They are not even afraid to die. What on earth are we here for? Learning to love and serve God in **everything** we do.

### **Grow Pray, Study for the Week of March 8, 2020**

**Weekly Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I have wrestled this week with the ways you want me to live. Forgive me for the ways I've fallen short. Change my heart and set me on your path, even if that way leads to the cross. Remind me in the midst of plenty that there are many around me in urgent need of basic needs. Help me to learn how to care deeply. Show me ways to respond as Jesus would and bless me as I serve others in Jesus' name. Amen.

### **Monday, March 9**

#### **Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11**

Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him. After Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was starving. The tempter came to him and said, "Since you are God's Son, command these stones to become bread." Jesus replied, "It's written, *People won't live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God.*" After that the devil brought him into the holy city and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, "Since you are God's Son, throw yourself down; for it is written, *I will command my angels concerning you, and they will take you up in their hands so that you won't hit your foot on a stone.*" Jesus replied, "Again it's written, *Don't test the Lord your God.*" Then the devil brought him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. He said, "I'll give you all these if you bow down and worship me." Jesus responded, "Go away, Satan, because it's written, *You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him.*" The devil left him, and angels came and took care of him.

**Observation:** Following his baptism, Jesus entered the wilderness, physically and spiritually. The temptations help us to understand the kind of Messiah he was to be. He would not accomplish his mission by using his supernatural power for his own needs, by using his power to win a large following by miracles, or by compromising with Satan. Jesus had no inward desire or inclination to sin, but he was "tempted in every way that we are, except without sin." (Hebrews 4:15).

**Application:** What are the temptations that you face? When you are living a kind of "wilderness" experience, where are your greatest struggles? The temptations that you face may

be very different from those of Jesus, but they have the same point. They are trying to distract us, to turn us aside from the path to which God has called us through our baptism.

**Prayer:** God grant me the strength to keep my eyes on you. May I trust you in everything that I face today. Help me to be your light in this world. Amen.

## **Tuesday, March 10**

### **Scripture: Matthew 4:12-25**

Now when Jesus heard that John was arrested, he went to Galilee. He left Nazareth and settled in Capernaum, which lies alongside the sea in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali. This fulfilled what Isaiah the prophet said: *Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, alongside the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people who lived in the dark have seen a great light, and a light has come upon those who lived in the region and in shadow of death.* From that time Jesus began to announce, “Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!” As Jesus walked alongside the Galilee Sea, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew, throwing fishing nets into the sea, because they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” he said, “and I’ll show you how to fish for people.” Right away, they left their nets and followed him. Continuing on, he saw another set of brothers, James the son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with Zebedee their father repairing their nets. Jesus called them and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues. He announced the good news of the kingdom and healed every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread throughout Syria. People brought to him all those who had various kinds of diseases, those in pain, those possessed by demons, those with epilepsy, and those who were paralyzed, and he healed them. Large crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from the areas beyond the Jordan River.

**Observation:** Jesus lived in the region of Galilee which may have been considered “in darkness” because it was located so far from the religious center of Jerusalem. Throughout Matthew’s gospel, Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of heaven, not because Jesus’ focus was on heaven – rather, Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience that avoided using “God” (the name) out of reverence and respect. Jesus was saying that the kingdom of God has come near.

**Application:** “Repent!” That was Jesus’ first sermon. As God’s Messiah this was a far different message than his contemporaries who invited people to join a rebellion against the Roman occupying force. Repent means change direction or stop what you’re doing and do the opposite instead. When have you experienced repentance? What did it take to be able to change directions?

**Prayer:** Thank you that you are the God of second chances – and third and fourth chances... Help me to see who I am in your eyes and the direction that I have chosen. When I stray from that path in ways large and small, continue to call me back to your will and ways. I want the life that you offer. Amen.

## **Wednesday, March 11**

### **Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12**

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up a mountain. He sat down and his disciples came to him. He taught them, saying:

“Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

“Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad.

“Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth.

“Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full.

“Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy.

“Happy are people who have pure hearts, because they will see God.

“Happy are people who make peace, because they will be called God’s children.

“Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

“Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me. Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven. In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you.

**Observation:** Today’s reading begins the Sermon on the Mount. Some have called this Jesus’ inaugural address, explaining what he expects of members of his kingdom. The word “happy” refers to something deeper than the emotion itself. It is the ultimate wellbeing and spiritual joy of those who share in the salvation of the kingdom of God. These nine beatitudes are announcing something that is about to happen. It is good news, and not just good advice.

**Application:** When will these promises come true? When will the meek inherit the earth? When will the hungry and thirsty be filled? The answer is found in the prayer we offer each Sunday in worship. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Those who follow Jesus are to begin living by the rule found in the Sermon on the Mount. How are you doing?

**Prayer:** Dear Jesus, keep alive your vision of a better world and a better life, so that I will seek what you seek. Guide me this day so that I can see your best version of what my life could be. Amen.

**Thursday, March 12**

**Scripture: Matthew 5:13-37**

“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its saltiness, how will it become salty again? It’s good for nothing except to be thrown away and trampled under people’s feet. You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can’t be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.

“Don’t even begin to think that I have come to do away with the Law and the Prophets. I haven’t come to do away with them but to fulfill them. I say to you very seriously that as long as heaven and earth exist, neither the smallest letter nor even the smallest stroke of a pen will be erased from the Law until everything there becomes a reality. Therefore, whoever ignores one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called the lowest in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever keeps these commands and teaches people to keep them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. I say to you that unless your righteousness is greater than the righteousness of the legal experts and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

“You have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago, *Don’t commit murder*, and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment. If they say to their brother or sister, ‘You idiot,’ they will be in danger of being condemned by the governing council. And if they say, ‘You fool,’ they will be in danger of fiery hell. Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar and there

remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go. First make things right with your brother or sister and then come back and offer your gift. Be sure to make friends quickly with your opponents while you are with them on the way to court. Otherwise, they will haul you before the judge, the judge will turn you over to the officer of the court, and you will be thrown into prison. I say to you in all seriousness that you won't get out of there until you've paid the very last penny.

"You have heard that it was said, *Don't commit adultery*. But I say to you that every man who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart. And if your right eye causes you to fall into sin, tear it out and throw it away. It's better that you lose a part of your body than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to fall into sin, chop it off and throw it away. It's better that you lose a part of your body than that your whole body go into hell.

"It was said, 'Whoever divorces his wife must *give her a divorce certificate*.' But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife except for sexual unfaithfulness forces her to commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

"Again you have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago: *Don't make a false solemn pledge, but you should follow through on what you have pledged to the Lord*. But I say to you that you must not pledge at all. You must not pledge by heaven, because it's God's throne. You must not pledge by the earth, because it's God's footstool. You must not pledge by Jerusalem, because it's the city of the great king. And you must not pledge by your head, because you can't turn one hair white or black. Let your *yes* mean yes, and your *no* mean no. Anything more than this comes from the evil one.

**Observation:** Jesus was starting a revolt, but it was a different sort of revolt from all the other ones that were bubbling up in the first century. He had to show the Jews of his day that this movement really was the fulfillment of the covenant, and he had to show that his followers really were living by this new way.

**Application:** God had called Israel to be the salt of the earth, but that's not what Israel had become. How could God keep the world from going bad (the main function of salt in the ancient world)? We are to be the salt, which is what we also see and receive from Jesus. Where does the world need salt and light right now, and how can we, through following Jesus, provide it?

**Prayer:** Let the power of your presence shine deep within me, O Lord, so that your light will shine through me in all that I say and do. Let my life be a reflection of what you offer to all. Amen.

**Friday, March 13**

**Scripture: Matthew 5:38-48**

"You have heard that it was said, *An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*. But I say to you that you must not oppose those who want to hurt you. If people slap you on your right cheek, you must turn the left cheek to them as well. When they wish to haul you to court and take your shirt, let them have your coat too. When they force you to go one mile, go with them two. Give to those who ask, and don't refuse those who wish to borrow from you.

"You have heard that it was said, *You must love your neighbor* and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven. He makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing? Don't even the Gentiles do the same?

Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.

**Observation:** The justice found in the Old Testament was designed to prevent revenge from being carried to extremes. Better an eye for an eye than an ever escalating conflict with each side getting worse than the other. But Jesus goes to another level, reflecting the love of God. No other god encourages people to behave this way!

**Application:** What does it mean to reflect God's generous love despite the pressure and provocation, despite your own anger and frustration? What if Christians put this teaching into their lives around the world? Is it possible? The Sermon on the Mount is not just about how to behave. It is about discovering the living God in the loving, and dying, Jesus, and learning to reflect that love ourselves into the world that needs it so badly.

**Prayer:** Loving God, in the words of the song: "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine." Let your love be what motivates me in all I say and do this day. Amen.

**Saturday, March 14**

**Scripture: Matthew 6:1-15**

"Be careful that you don't practice your religion in front of people to draw their attention. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. "Whenever you give to the poor, don't blow your trumpet as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets so that they may get praise from people. I assure you, that's the only reward they'll get. But when you give to the poor, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that you may give to the poor in secret. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.

"When you pray, don't be like hypocrites. They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners so that people will see them. I assure you, that's the only reward they'll get. But when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.

"When you pray, don't pour out a flood of empty words, as the Gentiles do. They think that by saying many words they'll be heard. Don't be like them, because your Father knows what you need before you ask. Pray like this: Our Father who is in heaven, uphold the holiness of your name. Bring in your kingdom so that your will is done on earth as it's done in heaven. Give us the bread we need for today. Forgive us for the ways we have wronged you, just as we also forgive those who have wronged us. And don't lead us into temptation, but rescue us from the evil one. "If you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you don't forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your sins.

**Observation:** In chapter six, the focus is on the three things that Jews saw, and still see, as standard obligations: giving money, praying, and fasting. In each case what matters is the motive. If we are not careful, God can get squeezed out of religion and we end up doing these three things for ourselves. The center of our lives, however, ought to be God. Jesus wants us to be so eager to love and please God that we will do everything we should do for God alone.

**Application:** What the Lord's Prayer provides is a framework. What does this prayer teach us we should pray about? This is the framework that Jesus knew we would need. Your heavenly father is waiting and longing for you to use it day by day as you grow in your knowledge, love and service of him. What's stopping you from making it your own?

**Prayer:** Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us, not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and glory forever. Amen.