

How Then Shall We Live? : The Jesus Ethic
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 145:8-19, Colossians 1:9-20, Matthew 6:24-34

The final Scripture reading this morning comes from Matthew 6:24-34. Listen now to God's Word. "[Jesus said,] "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

When I was in college and were pulling all-nighters, we drove to a greasy spoon a half-hour from campus called Café 37. (When you go to school in a cornfield, you have to get creative.) Some evenings, we'd study. Other times we'd talk about anything from the young women we intended to date to theology...what you'd expect from guys in college figuring out what God had in store for them.

One night, the conversation was awesome, and on the way back, each of us prayed aloud thanking God for what He'd been showing us. I was driving. Once everybody else in the car finished praying, I started praying myself. Everybody else's heads were down, but I could tell suddenly there was obvious tension. Had I missed a turn? Was I going in the wrong direction? I wasn't sure.

I kept praying for a minute or two, and then closed with an "Amen." The guys in the car looked up, white as sheets. They were sure they were going to die – how could I be praying without my head bowed and eyes closed? All of a sudden we burst out laughing. I had totally destroyed a paradigm they had always known. We all realized in that moment that you don't have to have a particular posture to worship God or pray to Him – you just have to have a willing heart. But until they experienced it, they didn't realize it. It was amazing – and eye-opening.

As we finish our series on the morals and ethics of Scripture, we're going to focus on the big picture of what godly morality is about. I call it "the Jesus ethic." It characterized His whole life, and it can be the same for us. But if somebody doesn't burst our bubble, if we don't have a paradigm shift, we might just miss it. Jesus is pointing us to a radically different way of living, where everything is centered around seeking the Kingdom of God.

Before we can understand what it means to seek the Kingdom of God like Jesus did, we need to understand the idea of Kingdom. None of us has ever lived in a kingdom, as far as I know; maybe you've traveled to England, but even that's a system where the royalty are merely figureheads. There are very few true kingdoms left in this world. That concept means little to us. So let's look at what it meant to Jesus' contemporaries and what He was saying to them.

The people of Israel understood kingship. God taught the Israelites that even when they had earthly leaders and rulers, He was their divine king, the One to be obeyed above all. For roughly 400 years, Israel had an earthly king. But in the time leading up to Christ, the Jewish people were under an unfriendly reign. They were the subjects of Caesar, and the signs of his rule were everywhere. The soldiers that dotted the landscape, the edicts bearing Caesar's seal, the procurators like Pontius Pilate and the pseudo-kings like the Herods...they were proof that the Jews were not a free people. They lived at the mercy of Caesar's hand.

When Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount as we heard from Matthew today, He took the concept of Kingdom, something that all His hearers were very familiar with, and He gave it a new spin. Everybody knew the king was Caesar. But God's Kingdom...that's something different, something unique. And Jesus begins to describe what that Kingdom looks like. It's the ultimate Kingdom, the Kingdom where God is sovereign, where He alone is worthy of honor and glory and praise. God plans to spread His rule far and wide until it expands to every corner of the globe, so that all people might hear of His works and believe in His Son, Jesus, whom He sent. He is creating a people for Himself who He makes holy and blameless in His sight. Just like the garrisons and legions of soldiers stood for Caesar, so too would faithful believers be ambassadors for God. When a believer acts in righteousness and love, spreading word that Jesus Christ has come to forgive sin, he's like the town crier coming into the city with good news. But God's Kingdom isn't about the things of this world; it isn't about ruling land with an iron fist. God's Kingdom is about people coming to know Him in spirit and truth and worshipping Him for His mighty salvation.

Just as the Jews of Jesus day chafed at someone ruling over them, we struggle with anyone telling us what to do or how to do it. We are fiercely independent, and we like to think we are self-sufficient. But God teaches us that self-sufficiency is actually a self-delusion. God is sovereign whether or not you acknowledge Him. Everything you have is not of your own doing but by the grace of God. As it turns out, in the spiritual realm, we have two choices: to embrace God as the ruler of our lives and seek His will, or to reject His authority over us. Sometimes we even deceive ourselves; we play at being believers, but we fall away when things get tough and faith means real sacrifice or struggle or heartache. But if we acknowledge His Kingdom and seek it out, rather than fighting it – then we are on the right track to genuine joy.

Rejecting God as king is our starting point, though. All of us begin our lives in rebellion against God, and worry is the natural consequence. Jesus describes the pagan world as running after food and drink and clothing, being obsessed with it. But Jesus was talking to a Jewish audience, not a pagan audience. He was saying, "You may think that you're godly because you follow the law or because you were born into a Jewish family. But your actions tell the truth, and if you act like a pagan, guess what? You are a pagan!"

Worry is the natural consequence of rejecting God because our sustenance depends on us, what we do, how hard we work. We judge other people based on how well they do. What's the first question we ask people? "Where do you work?" We immediately begin to form an opinion of someone based on how they earn a living. We go into someone's house and we see how many rooms they have, the state of affairs, how big the TV is, what they can afford.

When I was young, I didn't think these verses applied to me because I got wrapped up in the literal language of it. I didn't care about clothes. I never owned a designer brand intentionally in all my life, so I thought I wasn't in the crosshairs. And while I *cared* about what I ate, I didn't *worry* about it; I had preferences but no worries. But Jesus was speaking to people who had very real reasons to be worried. 80% were farmers and most were way under what we think of as the poverty line. Many did day labor on other peoples' farms; whether or not they got food and clothing depended on if they could get somebody to hire them. There were no food pantries, no shelters to go to. If things got bad, relatives might help, but they were too poor to do much either. There was genuine reason to worry that their clothes might wear out before they could afford another pair or that they might go without food if times got tight.

We don't have those worries, not much, not really. We do suffer from time to time. Folks who use the food pantry have occasionally been living out of their cars. There are folks in genuinely awful situations. But starvation in America is almost impossible unless you don't know who to call. The vast majority of people own a week's worth of clothes or far more. Even in desperate times, we have missions, the Salvation Army, Goodwill, food pantries. And most of us never even come close to living in genuine poverty.

But we still worry about so many things, don't we? We worry about keeping the car and the boat and the house and the camping trailer in a recession. We worry about what others think of what we have or how we raise our kids or if our lawn looks good enough. We worry that our 401Ks will hold out. We are so worried that we worry about *possibilities* that have virtually no chance of happening! And worries get us into so many other problems. We worry that we'll never find the right mate, so we compromise our integrity in dating. We worry we won't have enough money, so we compromise our ethics on our taxes or our tips. We worry that others won't accept us, so we compromise our witness in order that others might not reject us for our faith. Most sin springs from an initial doubt, an initial worry, that turns into sin when we do something unethical to make the worry go away.

Worry is an unconscious means of unbelief. No matter what you think you believe, worry underlines a deep-seated fear that God either is not there or cannot come through. Even worry about what other people think of you is a form of it – because if God loves you and cares for you, if He would give His life for you on the cross, does it really matter what anybody else thinks of you? True fear of God, true belief and deep respect for Him, drives out all other fear.

We need not have any doubts about God's ability to provide for us. Listen again to our passage from Colossians: "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

Listen to Paul from Romans 8: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” There is nothing to fear; there is nothing to worry about. God loves you! God cares for you! He has made plans for you! Nothing can separate us from Him! We are conquerors in Christ, overcoming everything this world and the devil can throw at us! It’s like that old song by Bobby McFerrin; “Don’t worry; be happy!” We as Christians have something to truly be happy about! The God of the universe is on our side!

So what do we do? How do we practice the Jesus ethic of seeking first the Kingdom of God? It’s a radical shift in paradigm; it’s a shift from self-reliance to self-abandonment. It’s a shift from self-entitlement to self as servant. It’s a shift from “I can do it” to “God has already done it.” It’s a shift that will eventually show itself in every aspect of our lives.

If this kind of change in viewpoint is so all-encompassing, then the choice we have to make is to commit wholeheartedly to seeking the Kingdom of God at all costs. If we want to have a full-bodied belief in God, one that drives out fear and anxiety and worry, we’ve got to devote ourselves to it. It would be easy for me to talk about the folks who come once or twice a month to church and say that *they’re* the ones who aren’t showing commitment...but they aren’t here anyway. I would love to wrap you all up in a big hug and say, “You’re here, so you must get it.” But I can’t do that. I’m your pastor, and as your pastor, my first responsibility is to God.

And you know what? Worship attendance alone is not the chief sign of commitment to seeking the Kingdom of God. It’s an hour a week. There are 167 other hours in the week! Sleep 8 hours a night, and that’s still 111 hours! Less than 1% commitment of time is virtually no commitment at all! But even if we were to add a Bible study to that and a fellowship event and a service committee every week, that’s still what, maybe 6 hours total. Not bad, but still only 7%. We are never going to get to total commitment through church attendance or church programs. They are excellent and can spur us on to total commitment, but we are never going to achieve what Jesus was talking about, we’re not going to truly be seeking the Kingdom of God, if we compartmentalize our time at the church building and let our faith just stay here.

So if worship isn’t enough, if attendance at church functions isn’t enough, how can we possibly seek the Kingdom? Keep in mind that Jesus preached these words to an audience of mostly peasants, folks who worked 60-80% of the time just to survive. Most of us don’t have near that kind of workload. So I don’t think He was calling the majority to spend every waking hour in the synagogue.

He’s calling for a new way of life, a new way of seeing things, a new approach. He’s calling for us to become His disciples. Jesus is asking us to discard our old viewpoint of sin and to put on the spiritual lenses of the Kingdom of God. He wants us to start discerning the signposts of the Kingdom along the way. Just as the signs of Caesar’s kingdom were all around Jesus, the signs of God’s Kingdom are all around us. There’s a hint there, a sign over there, a blessing, a healing, a growth in faith. God is asking us to start believing in His Kingdom based on the proof that it’s already here, making headroads in our midst.

God asks us to start acting like His Kingdom is here in our daily lives. What would show that we are following the Jesus ethic, seeking the Kingdom? What would it mean to truly be a disciple of Jesus in more than name only? If we go back to this passage and take it seriously, we see that seeking after the Kingdom is not *first* a choice not to worry. The elimination of anxiety comes from seeking the Kingdom, not the other way around. So instead of worrying about if we're worried, let's set our gaze on Christ. Let's do what He did. So what did He do? He was in constant connection with the Father through prayer. He was well-versed in the Scriptures. He never let anyone slide because of their religiosity but challenged everyone to put God first. He preached good news. He was patient with those who didn't get it. He confronted those in power when they were wrong. But above all, no matter what He was doing or saying, He was devoted to the Father's business, doing exactly what the Father desired.

When Paul was helping the Corinthian believers figure out how best to witness in complicated situations, he summed up the Jesus ethic this way: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." (1 Corinthians 10:31) He didn't say "give glory to God." He wasn't talking about saying a prayer for the food. He said "eat for the glory of God." "Drink for the glory of God." "Do whatever it is you do for the glory of God." The glorification of God happens not as a result of our words but as a result of what we do and how we do it.

If this seems hard and difficult and nebulous, if it sounds tricky to live this out, it is...but it doesn't have to be. We're going to be moving into a new series in the fall called **Discipleship 101**. Many of us have been together long enough to have heard the story of Scripture, we've heard the words of Jesus preached, we've learned more of the ethics and morality of Christ...now it's time to get serious about being dedicated followers of Jesus.

But the very first step, the step I'm asking you to take today, is to commit to genuinely following Christ – being willing to get on the path and walk the walk with Him as His disciples did when they left their old ways of life behind to learn from Him. You may have made a decision to believe in Jesus a long time ago, or maybe you're ready to make that decision. That's awesome. But mental agreement is not enough. We've got to become disciples. We've got to seek the Kingdom if we are to ever experience the life that God desires, one not only free from worry and regret but from sin and death and hell.

What do we do beyond simple commitment? How do we become real disciples? Well, I don't think I've ever done it before, but I'm going to leave it as a cliffhanger. We're going to be talking about it all fall. So move everything off your calendar to be here. It will be worth your while. And in the meantime, start counting the cost. Start looking at what true dedication to Jesus is going to take and commit to it. That way, when the going looks rough, you'll have already made the decision to do what it takes to be practicing the Jesus ethic and seeking the Kingdom no matter what. And if you seek the Kingdom of God first above everything else, then all the morals and ethics we've talked about this summer will fall into place.