

New Year's Eve
December 31, 2017

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Theme: First things first
Text: **Matthew 6:25-34**

²⁵“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? ²⁶Look 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? ²⁷Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

²⁸“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰If 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? ³¹So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³²For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

The Word of God we'll consider this evening is the Gospel from Matthew chapter 6. We pray:

All that for my soul is needful, Lord you with loving care provide, Nor of that are you Lord unheedful Which my body needs besides. When my strength cannot avail me, When my pow'rs can do no more, Then, O God, your strength outpour; In my need you shall not fail me. And, when this brief life is o'er, I'll praise and love you evermore. Amen.

(Christian Worship hymn 253 vs. 3 and 4 alt.)

Tomorrow is a day where many of us will resolve to not only start the new year fresh but to keep our slate clean as we improve on the things we didn't quite get right this year. But no matter what your New Year's Resolutions might be, I think you'd all agree that when it comes to them it would be important to put first things first... For example, I want to lose some weight in the new year... but if I went out and bought some nice workout clothes, and put together a great music list to listen to while I exercised... but then never got a gym membership... or actually went out for a walk... I'd be missing the most important thing! Maybe that's where I went wrong this past year... hmmm... But you get my point, right?

Author C.S. Lewis once wrote: *Put first things first and we get second things thrown in: put second things first and we lose both first and second things.* (Letter to Dom Bede Griffiths April 23, 1951). This seems like common sense. And yet I think we would admit it is not as common in our own lives as we'd like it to be. A glance back at the year gone by and we find so many important things in our lives pushed to the side for the sake of the little things that in the big picture really don't mean a whole lot...

Tonight though, as we approach not only a new day tomorrow, but a new year, we get to hear our Lord Jesus come to us in his Word... and with some simple illustrations... and some pointed encouragement... remind us to put first things first.

He begins by making a couple of arguments from the greater thing to the lesser... He says: **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? (Matthew 6:24-25).** What's his point? Well simply this: If God gave you your body and life... don't you suppose he can manage to provide you with the things needed to keep your body and life here on earth? Things like food... drink... clothing... shoes... house... home... land... property... etc... etc...? The answer is so obvious we feel silly that Jesus even has to point it out, don't we?

But the Lord is not done making us look silly just yet... Next he uses two arguments... the time arguing from the lesser to the greater to make the point again: **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.... 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. (Matthew 6:26; 28-29).** And again, what's his point? Well this time he spells it out plainly for us: **Are you not much more valuable than they... will he not much more clothe you? (Matthew 6:26; 30).**

Martin Luther once wrote about our Savior's teaching here saying: *You see, He is making the birds our schoolmasters and teachers. It is a great and abiding disgrace to us that in the Gospel a helpless sparrow should become a theologian and a preacher to the wisest of men... Or the little flowers in the field, which cattle trample and eat, are to become our theologians and masters and to embarrass us still further. (Luther's Works Vol. 21)*

And it is embarrassing isn't it? When you think about how often and how much we fixate on the things of this life as if they were more important than life itself... or how we set our hearts on fleeting things like food, and drink, and clothes, and wealth, and health, and family, and... well... the list is endless... But it's more than embarrassing to tell the truth. It's downright sinful.

Now let's be clear here... God is not condemning us every time we show concern for the people and responsibilities he has placed into our lives. He expects us to care for all that he has entrusted to us, and to be busy considering how best to do that in a way that honors him. That is not the kind of concern Jesus is condemning here... he is calling us out instead for the worry that trusts not in God to provide, but somehow thinks it is all up to me to get through the day and to bring success or blessing tomorrow. When we fail to trust God's providence but instead set our hearts anxiously on the temporal things of this life, we need to be reminded as Jesus said: **Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? (Matthew 6:27).** And we deserve to be called: **O you of little faith. (Matthew 6:30).**

So what then is our antidote for the worry and anxiety in this life? How is it that our confidence in God's care can be strengthened? What should we do when our sinful flesh tries to preoccupy our minds in the coming year with the momentary things of life in the kingdom of this world?

Jesus tells us: **Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:33).**

The kingdom of God is simply another way to describe believing in Jesus. Jesus once said: **The kingdom of God is within you. (Luke 17:21).** Through faith in the Savior our God comes and reigns in us, he makes his kingdom in our heart... his kingdom which is divine and imperishable and which gives me forgiveness and eternal life. And so what does it mean to seek his kingdom then?

Well it means simply to believe in Christ and to apply the gospel to our hearts and lives. And to do that, Christians seek the only place where the gospel is found: Christ's Word and Sacraments. We awake each day remembering we live as baptized children of God, washed clean from sin and given the name of Christ. We seek the gospel too in the Word, listening to it as it is read, preached, and sung here each week. Meditating on it daily in our homes. Reading it with family and friends at the dinner table or over a cup of coffee. And we seek God's kingdom as we approach the table of his Son where we are given food and drink from heaven, the very body and blood which our Savior gave up and shed upon the cross for our forgiveness.

And when we seek first God's kingdom in this way we will find the righteousness of God that Jesus calls on us to seek as well... Because here in the gospel we find Jesus, our righteousness... Jesus, who clothes us in his holiness and feeds us with his grace and mercy. We find a Savior who decided that putting first things first meant putting you and your salvation first... placing your rescue ahead of his own comfort and peace... laying down his life so you could be given the gift of eternal life. And in doing so all the rest was added to him as well... resurrection, glory, honor, dominion, and eternal praise.

Dear friends, see in Jesus tonight, not just a lesson on putting first things first, or a lesson on worry... but see in Jesus your kingdom and your righteousness... and let his love compel you to put him first all throughout the year ahead. And when Satan tempts you to worry, simply remember what God has done, and what God has promised you: **He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:32).**

Yes, tomorrow will bring a new year... with new worries, new cares, new concerns... but let tomorrow worry about itself. First things first... In this new year set your heart on what is most important: Jesus. And as you do, you can trust that Jesus will continue to set his heart on and care for what is most dear to him: you. Amen.

Brothers and sisters: **Be content... because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid."** You can go into the new year knowing that **Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. (See Hebrews 13:5-8).**