

AN EXEGESIS OF MATTHEW 6.25-34

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By

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I. GRASPING THE TEXT IN THEIR TOWN

Matthew 6.25-34 is in the immediate context of Jesus delivering words to His disciples and a crowd (Mt. 5.1) commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount. The brilliant use of parabolic imagery in illustrating the main points of the passage conforms to Jesus' use of parables elsewhere in the Gospel tradition and thus lends confidence to the conclusion that these are words of the historical Jesus.¹ Some scholars suggest that Matthew was written in Phoenicia or Syria as early as A.D. 60 to Jews.² Matthew is the Gospel of the King tracing the genealogy of Jesus back to David. There can be little to no doubt that the author of this Gospel deliberately presents Jesus as the King.³

There is a subtle transition from greed in Matthew 6.19-24 to anxiety in 6.25-34. The verses begin with three general prohibitions against worrying about life.⁴ "For this reason," or "therefore," connects this paragraph to the preceding because it is impossible to be a slave to both God and mammon.⁵ This connection helps in understanding the relationship between a kingdom servant and the King. In 6.19-24 the King expounded on His demand for unreserved

¹ Donald Hagner, *Matthew*, WBC, Vol. 1 (Dallas, TX: Word, 1995), 163.

² Oscar Brooks, "Gospel of Matthew," in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, eds. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England (Nashville, TN: Holman 1998), 1091-1093

³ Walter W. Wessel, "Gospel of Matthew," in *New International Bible Dictionary*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1987), 632.

⁴ David L. Turner, *Matthew*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 198.

⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 157.

devotion followed by an elaboration saying, “Now when you enter into this kind of total commitment to Me, I am going to take care of you. Do not worry.”⁶

“I say to you” denotes emphatic assertion as already in 4.9, but with an additional note from the echo of the frequent occurrences of “[Amen, truly] I (ἐγώ) say to you” earlier in the Sermon on the Mount.⁷ This unique and often used phrase echoes the authority of Jesus found, for example, in the antitheses of 5.32-48.⁸ Jesus, now having established his authority, gives a command to “not be anxious.” “Do not be anxious” (μὴ μεμνᾶτε) is emphatic in this context.⁹ The cognate noun μέριμνα here means, “to be anxious” but in the sense of being fearful. In the present passage, the vitally important items define the meaning in view. To be anxious for such things as the passage enumerates is to be anxious about survival itself.¹⁰

Jesus is speaking on an issue pertaining to this earthy life. Though the use of ψυχή is flexible with a wide range of meaning, it is clear enough that Jesus is referring to the physical.¹¹ The following references to clothing, the body, birds, and fields give warrant to ψυχή meaning this earthy physical life.

Three rhetorical questions underline the prohibition against worrying. The first in verse 25 queries whether life is more than food and clothing. The implication is that the God who

⁶ Stu Weber, *Matthew*, HNTC (Nashville, TN: Holman, 2000), 86-87.

⁷ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 308.

⁸ Hagner, *Matthew*, 163.

⁹ “Do not be anxious” occurs six times in these verses and the only other occurrence in Matthew is in 10.19. Ibid., 162.

¹⁰ Ibid., 163.

¹¹ Ψυχή can mean “life force,” earthy life,” “living creature,” “the inner person/the self,” “that in the inner person which has the capacity to transcend the earthly” (ftn). Ibid.

gives life can easily supply the means to sustain it (cf. 4.4; Prov. 30.8-9).¹² Through this statement, Jesus explicates the idea that existence is more than food and clothing, though important and necessary, it is not more important than the former. The question presents a hierarchical model of importance and provision. Another way of asking the question is, “Will not God, who created and gave life and existence, also provide the secondary needs like food and clothing?” Jesus fashioned His words in such a way that give emphasis on life having greater importance.

Verse 26 is Jesus’ first reference to nature. The question posed here is based on a command to observe the birds and calls on the disciples to reflect on God’s providential care for birds, which do not work to grow their food, let alone grow anxious over it (cf. Job 38.41; Ps. 104.27-30, 147.9). The use of the verb ἐμβλέρω, in the NASB as “look,” may be understood to mean *consider*. Jesus was inviting the disciples and the crowd to give attention to God’s creatures. It is unlikely that an open-air preacher pointed to birds flying.¹³ Jesus’ examples of provisions to the natural world focus on God as sovereign Creator and serve to concretize the presence of God.¹⁴

The argument is known as *a minori ad maius*, from the lesser to the greater, a common pattern in rabbinic texts, where it is called *qal wahomer* (light and heavy). Rabbinic tradition ties the formulation of this method of legal reasoning to Rabbi Hillel, who flourished just before the time of Jesus. Hillel’s seven exegetical rules begin with קל ומרובה, *qal wahomer*, that is, what

¹² W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 648.

¹³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 158.

¹⁴ PHEME PERKINS, “God in the New Testament: Preliminary Soundings,” *Theology Today* 43 (1985): 334.

applies in a less important case will certainly apply in a more important case.¹⁵ Jesus reveals an ontological distinction in the difference between man and animals. His use of rhetoric demonstrates an assumption that the disciples should already understand that man possesses more value than the birds and if God providentially cares for the birds, which are of lesser value, God would also providentially care for man, that of greater value.

Verse 27 is Jesus' next question, though without illustration. Τίς ἐξ ὑμῶν (“which of you”) on the lips of Jesus always invites a negative answer, and the negative affirmation thus established is applied by means of a comparison, implicit or explicit.¹⁶ The difficulty with this verse is translating the meaning of ἡλικίαν (*length of life or physical stature*) and πηχυον (*cubit or something like hour*).¹⁷ In the context, it makes the best sense to take ἡλικίαν as a length of life and then to take πηχυον as a fraction of time. The Hebraic use of a spatial measure for a portion of time can be seen in Psalm 39.5. The likelihood of these two words having the advocated meaning is supported by the earlier reference to the command *to not be anxious* (μὴ μεμνᾶτε) in a *fearful* manner of survival. The question's power lies in its absurdity—of course worry cannot add an hour to one's life.¹⁸

Progressing on to Jesus' next natural reference, He speaks of the lilies of the field in verse 28. Jesus is probably referring to lilies as *flowers of the field*, that is, in contrast to those flowers, which have had the benefit of human cultivation.¹⁹ The plants are not always like that;

¹⁵ Turner, *Matthew*, 199.

¹⁶ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 311.

¹⁷ Hagner, *Matthew*, 164.

¹⁸ Turner, *Matthew*, 199.

¹⁹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 159.

they change from being unadorned to being splendidly attractive and aesthetically pleasing.²⁰ His purpose in specifying *of the field* was to provide a generalizing effect, and in any case many beautiful flowers were to be seen in the Galilean fields. The reference to growth invites the hearer to attend to the development process that produces the beautiful flowers. Οὐδὲ νήθουσιν (*nor do they spin*) means they do not do the labor of drawing out some fiber and twisting it together to make thread—labor necessary for the making of clothes.²¹

Jesus then compares the lilies of the field to Solomon's splendor and glory (cf. 1 Kin. 3.13; 10.14-27; 2 Chron. 9.13-28). *But I tell you* is a contrast to the lilies and a solemn introduction to the words that follow and an indication that they are important. Matthew speaks of Solomon five times, which is more than any other New Testament book; here the point is that the king was proverbial for magnificence.²² The rhetorical question in 6.30 leads the disciples to reflect on God's wonderful providence. If God so clearly cares for plants, which have such a short life span (cf. Ps. 37.2; 90.5-6; 102.11; 103.15-16; Isa. 40.6-8; Jas. 1.10-11; 1 Pt. 1.24-25), will God not care much more for the disciples of His beloved Son?²³ Grass was then, as even today in the Middle East, common fuel for ovens.²⁴ Jesus deliberately stresses the paradox between the glorious beauty of the flowers and their final insignificance. Today, the beauty of the flowers stuns the observer; tomorrow, they are thrown into the oven as fuel. If the heavenly

²⁰ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 312.

²¹ Hagner, *Matthew*, 165-165.

²² Ibid., 165. Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 159.

²³ Turner, *Matthew*, 200.

²⁴ Hagner, *Matthew*, 165.

Father lavishes in clothing field flowers that are destined to be consumed in an oven, how much more gracious will He be with humans?²⁵

A [possible] final rebuke of those anxious about clothing is found in the word that greets them as *of little faith* (ὀλιγόπιστος). Wherever this term occurs in the New Testament, it is always applied to the disciples. More might have been expected of them.²⁶ Stu Weber advocates the interpretation that ὀλιγόπιστος is a term of endearment. Perhaps in this context, Jesus' tone was not scolding, but coaxing and reasoning as if He were asking, "Do you trust your Father or not?" Jesus may not have been belittling His disciples; He may have been encouraging them upward.²⁷ Whether the term was encouraging or rebuking, Jesus' intent was to bring the disciples to an understanding of God's providence using the *qal wahomer* line of reasoning.

The *worry* which verses 31-32 forbids is here set in contrast with God's prior knowledge of His people's needs, since it is human awareness of that knowledge and that reliance on it that creates the faith which is the antithesis of worry.²⁸ The disciples must not ask what they will eat, drink, or wear, since these question are like those of pagan Gentiles, who do not realize that they have a heavenly Father (cf. 5.45, 48; 6.1, 4, 6, 8, 9, 15, 18, 26) who knows their needs (cf. 6.8; 28.1-6). The Greco-Roman deities were notorious for capricious actions. Devotees of these gods had to wonder whether their gifts and offerings had appeased the gods and rendered them

²⁵ David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1995), 83-84.

²⁶ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 160.

²⁷ Weber, *Matthew*, 87-88.

²⁸ R. T. France, *Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2007), 270.

benevolent (cf. Acts 14.8-18; 28.1-6).²⁹ This is the reason for their constant babbling in prayer, badgering a reluctant deity to take notice of them (v7).³⁰

In verse 33, the verb ζητεω (seek) echoes the stronger compound verb ἐπιζητεω, which was used for the Gentiles' anxious quest for material provisions in the previous verse. The disciples by contrast, have a higher orientation, which is a higher purpose in life.³¹ To *seek first* is not to indicate that other things are to be sought secondarily with lesser amount of attention. Πρῶτον either has the sense, "as being the most important thing of all" or it sequences in the manner of Matthew 23.26 ("first clean the inside of the cup"), with the point being that God's provision of our basic needs follows on *from* the seeking of the kingdom.³² The disciple is to be concerned with one thing, to have on priority [or orientation], namely, the kingdom of God, and all the other things will be supplied.³³ This command complements Jesus' prayer in 6.9-13 well. When this command is taken into account in the immediate context of the prayer there would seem to be very good grounds for thinking that "Give us today *the bread we need*" is a closer approximation to the thought.³⁴

In the case of seeking God's kingdom, it is best understood as resolving to live under God's direction and control, just as in 5.10 it is those who stand out for their pursuit of righteousness to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs. God's kingship means God's people

²⁹ Turner, *Matthew*, 200.

³⁰ France, *Matthew*, 270.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 270-271.

³² Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 314.

³³ Hagner, *Matthew*, 165.

³⁴ Aelred Tegels, "Prayers We Have in Common Worship," *American Theological Library Association* 47 (1973): 145.

living under God's rule.³⁵ It is likely that Jesus is referring to the present kingdom and the lordship of God rather than an eschatological kingdom due to the present imperative of ζητετε (seek).³⁶

Jesus closes His commands with an exhortation to not worry and broadens it to include anything that might make people fearful of tomorrow (cf. Prov. 27.1). As the present is fully under God's control, so also is the future.³⁷ Anxiety has no place in a disciple of Christ. Jesus has given all the reasons that prove why worrying about tomorrow is wrong and senseless.³⁸

A comparison between the New American Standard, English Standard Version, and the New Living Translation indicate a common understanding in translations. Verses 25-26 are generally the same, slight difference in word choice, but the first difference can be noticed in verse 27 in the NLT. The translation adds an answer to the rhetorical question by stating "Of course not." The NLT also seems to side on the interpretation of verse 30 that Jesus' claim referring to the disciples faith is more of a rebuke rather than an encouragement whereas the NASB and ESV seem to leave that undetermined. The following references to *Gentiles* in the NASB and the ESV are translated as *pagans* in the NLT. The word is synonymous with those who are not Jews. The three translations, when compared, present the same principles and concepts with little differences. The NASB and the ESV tend to use the same language and leave connotations open whereas the NLT will connect the connotations.

³⁵ France, *Matthew*, 271.

³⁶ This is to be a constant preoccupation, not a specific aim for the future. *Ibid.*

³⁷ The "therefore" carries on the argument in the logical sequence. Since the preceding is true, it follows that there is not point in worrying about tomorrow. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 162. David Hagner, *Matthew*, 166.

³⁸ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, NTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1973), 355.

The essence of Jesus' commands is to stop worrying about what one will do in the future. If God will so providentially order the world to provide for the littlest things of the world, the birds and the flowers, He will also take care of humans. Man should have no reason to doubt that. Man's priority should be to seek God's present kingdom and lordship and all necessities will flow from that obedience, which God will providentially provide. Faith is paramount to these commands and without faith worry will creep in to one's life and worry and anxiety have no place in a disciple of Christ.

II. MEASURE THE WIDTH OF THE RIVER TO CROSS

The difference between the commands when Jesus spoke them and today are few. The covenants are different because Christ had not yet ushered in the New Covenant; however, that will play no role in the theological principles or the applicability commands. As already noted, there are geographical references to the use of grass in the oven, which was used then as well as today in the Middle East.³⁹

III. CROSS THE PRINCIPLIZING BRIDGE

Perhaps the most explicit theological principle is that all anxiety is in itself a service of mammon and not of God. Knowing that God's kingdom relieves anxiety, the believer, Jew then or Christian now, ought to seek God's kingdom and lordship, which is the second principle. There should be a submission to the commands of God. When the kingdom is sought after above all else God will provide all other needs. A third principle that is extracted from the text is that God is providentially sovereign. God so ordered the world in a manner that will bring about His will. This principle in no way speaks of determinism or fatalism, rather it is an understanding

³⁹ Hagner, *Matthew*, 165.

that God has the knowledge and capacity to order circumstances that reflect the choices of humans; primarily, in this text it is our decision to seek the kingdom of God and in doing so God promises that future needs will be taken care of.

IV. CORRELATION

There is a parallel passage in the Gospel of Luke (12.22-31). Matthew has added the reference to “what you drink” (although some MSS lack this); Luke’s question in 12.26 is lacking in Matthew and Luke specifies κόρακας (ravens) whereas Matthew is more inclusive with πετεινά (birds). Matthew alone summarizes with, “Therefore do not be anxious” in verse 31.⁴⁰ These general principles of trusting God and His provisions can be found throughout the Bible (Ps. 32.7-8; 34.4; 34.10; 91.14-16; Prov. 27.1; Is. 12.2; 41.10; 43.1-3; Jer. 29.13), but here we find Jesus’ command to seek something particular to God, that is, His kingdom. Jesus does not indicate or allude to any specific Old Testament writings in these words.

V. GRASP THE TEXT IN OUR TOWN

There are three primary theological principles and concepts that we can extract from the text and apply to our lives. The first principle that may be implemented into the Christian’s daily life is to understand that anxiety cannot be rooted in God. Jesus commanded His followers to seek the kingdom of God in faith. This may be appropriately applicable to potential missionaries seeking to enter the mission field. When entering into missions there may be worry about so many different factors like how to have an income, how to pay off debts, what to eat, where to stay, protection, and so many more. Jesus tells us to seek His kingdom in faith and do not worry about anything. What that means for the missionary is to be obedient to God’s kingship and

⁴⁰ Hagner, *Matthew*, 162.

commands and to put his faith and trust in God knowing that God sees him as a valuable child. The missionary should not exclude God from his plans and seek security and confidence in mammon as a means for survival. The missionary should trust in God's sovereign providence that He would control all that happens in this world. God will provide all that is necessary for him when the kingdom, not mammon, is sought in faith. This is contrary to the prosperity gospel often preached in American churches. God does not promise abundance of wealth or health, He promises that one's *needs* will be provided.

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