

“A Christian’s Ambition”

Sermon Series on the Sermon on the Mount

Rev. Dr. Peter B. Barnes

First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC

November 7, 2021

(Mt. 6:19-34)

Introduction.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” It’s a question every child is asked when they are young. When I was a kid, there were two things I wanted to do when I grew up. 1) I wanted to play football for Bear Bryant at the University of Alabama, and 2) I wanted to be a clown in the circus like Emmet Kelly. At the time Bear Bryant was the king of college football, and Emmet Kelly was the most famous clown in the world with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus. I saw him when the circus came to Atlanta when I was growing up.

Well, I ended up going to the University of Georgia, not Alabama, and I didn’t play football there, although I did try to walk on my junior year. And while I was a class clown in school growing up, I never ran off to join the circus. Instead, I became a pastor. (No jokes from any of you about pastors being clowns!)

What was your ambition when you were growing up? The question of ambition is an interesting one for a follower of Jesus. All of us want to do well in life, and we want to be known for what we accomplish. And that’s true whether you’re a child or an adult, and whether you’re a Christian or not. It’s natural to want to be the best, to improve your lot in life, and to earn a good living for your family. And there are certain things each of us hopes to achieve in the time God gives us to live on this earth. The problem comes when our identity and our security get all wrapped up with our ambition. We begin to make an idol of our desire to leave our mark on the world, or we think we can secure our lives by the work of our hands. Whether it’s through the job we perform, the children we raise, the family we have, or the life we lead, ambition can get you into trouble if you’re not careful. Jesus knew that, and He talks about it in the Sermon on the Mount.

How is a Christian supposed to deal with ambition? And what are the keys to having the right kind of ambition as a follower of Christ? That’s what I want to talk about this morning.

I. A Question of Treasure.

In the first half of Matthew 6 Jesus describes the *private* life of piety for a Christian as it relates to generosity, prayer, and fasting, and He urged His followers not to be like the hypocrites of His day who were like actors on a stage in a play doing it for show. Then in the second half of this chapter Christ is concerned with the *public* life of His followers, and He takes up matters related to money and possessions, food and clothing, and the whole issue of ambition. In both spheres in life, private and public, Jesus gives the same insistent command – be different from the rest of the world around you. Be different from the hypocrisy of religious people who do it for show in order to be noticed, but also be different from irreligious people in their obsession with materialism and ambition.

Jesus begins His message about these matters by contrasting two treasures. *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Mt. 6:19-21).*

Notice what Jesus says about the durability of the two treasures. Treasures on earth are temporary, insecure, and they are easily destroyed or stolen. By contrast treasures in heaven are permanent, secure, and they are incorruptible. And no one can take them away.

What is a treasure? A treasure is something we seek to hold onto because of the value we place on it, and we see this every day in little children. Kids will treasure a stuffed animal or a ratty, old blanket, and their little souls gets wrapped around these things. And if it’s ever lost, you’ve got a real crisis on your hands, don’t you? (Can I get an amen?!) I think all of us are like children with our “blankeys.” We become too attached to material things, and Jesus warned us about doing that.

Time will eventually destroy just about every material possession in the world, and it only takes a downturn in the economy or a dip in the stock market to show how fleeting and elusive earthly wealth can really be. All the stuff you currently own is going to end up in a junkyard one day, and the only difference between the merchandise at Nordstrom, Best Buy, or BMW and the merchandise in a junkyard is simply time. Earthly treasure is junk waiting to happen. Not so with treasures in heaven.

You and I need to remember that, like my friend John Ortberg says about playing the game of Monopoly, when the game is over, it all goes back in the box. All the property, all the houses, all the hotels, and all the money – it all goes back in the box at the end of the game. And that includes all the titles, and degrees, and houses, and cars, and even our children and spouses. It will all go back in the box on day. So we need to view life from an eternal perspective and make sure we’re laying up treasures in heaven, not just on the earth.

II. A Question of Vision.

Next Jesus turns from the comparative durability of the two treasures to a contrast between a person who is blind and one who can see. It's a question of vision. Jesus says, "*The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!*" (Mt. 6:22-23).

It might seem like Jesus has changed the subject here, as he shifts from the heart that desires material treasures to the eyes that see. But in Scripture the terms *heart* and *eyes* can both refer to the inner soul of a person and how they affect one's direction in life. The idea here is that in order to live well and to fully live in God's kingdom, you need to be able to see clearly with the eyes of your heart.

That means you need to see the true worth of something accurately and be able to identify greed, consumerism, chronic discontentment, and the reasons for a lack of generosity in your life. Instead of looking at what I have and being grateful, we tend to look at others who have more than we do, and we compare and become envious. And Jesus says that's going to lead you into darkness, and it's going to block your vision.

Henry Ford once asked one of his associates, D.W. Flint, "What is your chief ambition in life?" Flint thought about it for a moment and then replied, "To make a million dollars and take life easy. My big objective in life is dollars and more dollars."

A few days later, Ford walked into Flint's office and laid a package on his desk and said, "This is for you. Open it." The package contained a pair of rimmed eyeglasses, only the lenses had been removed and two round silver dollars had been substituted. "Put them on." Mr. Ford said. "Now, what do you see?"

Flint replied, "I don't see anything. How can I? The silver dollars get in the way." Henry Ford said, "That's right. Make dollars your objective, you'll see nothing but money, and the dollars will get in your way. But if you forget about the money and focus on the things that really matter in life, the dollars will take care of themselves."

III. A Question of Allegiance.

Jesus now explains that behind the choice of two treasures, and where we lay them up, and behind the two visions, and what we fix our eyes on, lies the still more basic choice between two masters. It's a choice between God and mammon. Mammon is the translation of the Aramaic word for wealth. We either choose to serve the Creator of the universe as our master, or we choose to serve some other object of our own creation, what we might call money or wealth. And Jesus says you cannot serve both of them.

The word *mammon* literally means “a thing in which you put your trust.” The word is appropriate in this context because all of us are prone to put our trust in our bank accounts to provide what we need instead of looking to God. And we tend to form our sense of identity and measure how well we’re doing in life compared to others by the house we live in, the car we drive, the clothes we wear, and the trips we take. Jesus forces a choice. Will we store up treasures on earth or in heaven? Will our eyes be generous or envious? And will we serve God, or will we be enslaved to mammon?

In his sermon on this passage, D. Martin Lloyd Jones told the story of a farmer who one day reported to his wife with great joy that his best cow had given birth to twin calves. And he went on to say that he had been led to dedicate one of calves to the Lord. And when the time came for him to sell the animals, he would give the proceeds from the sale of the Lord’s calf to the church. As the story goes, several months later one of the calves died, and the farmer said to his wife, “I have some very bad news. The Lord’s calf died.”

It’s always the Lord’s calf that dies. Unless we are clear about who the Lord of our lives really is and who it is we are ultimately serving, we usually end up short-changing the Lord. But you can’t serve two masters. Either you will be devoted to the one, or you’ll be devoted to the other. Who is your master, and how have are you serving Him today?

IV. A Question of Worry.

Jesus knew that worry is not our friend. It tries to get us to live in a future we cannot control and miss the present where we could be experiencing joy and gratitude. Worry plays on our fears, and it says, “There won’t be enough. You’re not going to make it. The bubble is going to burst” These are things we say to ourselves sometimes. But worry is unproductive, it's unnecessary, and ultimately, it’s incompatible with the Christian faith.

Jesus said, *"Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear.... Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap..., 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."*

The birds of the air and the lilies of the field all witness to an order in the kingdom of God which speaks of the way that the Lord makes provision for His creatures. God provides for us according to our needs, just as He does for the plants and the animals in the world.

Of this passage Martin Luther once wrote, "You see, God 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 better theologian and preacher than the wisest of men.... Whenever you listen to a nightingale, therefore, you are listening to an excellent preacher.... It is as if he were saying, 'I prefer to be in the Lord's kitchen. He has made heaven and earth, and He Himself is the cook and the host.'"¹

Perhaps you have heard the familiar poem:

Said the robin to the sparrow:
'I should really like to know
Why these anxious human beings
Rush about and worry so.'

Said the sparrow to the robin:
'Friend, I think that it must be
That they have no heavenly Father,
Such as cares for you and me.'

Ultimately our trust must not come from our confidence in the things we own, the money we save, or in our ability to make a good living. Rather, our trust must come from the confidence we have in our heavenly Father to provide what we need.

V. A Question of Ambition.

It really comes down to a question about ambition. *"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you as well" (Mt. 6:33)*. We don't use the word "kingdom" much nowadays, do we? We're a democracy, and we don't have kings and queens in America. So what is Jesus talking about here?

The fact of the matter is that everybody has a kingdom in the biblical sense of the word. Your kingdom is that little sphere in which what you say goes. Dallas Willard once wrote that "Your kingdom is the range of your effective will."³ I have a will and you have a will, and we all get to make choices in life. And wherever it is that things are the way that you want them to be, where your choice, your will, is what prevails, that's your kingdom.

We all have a kingdom, and that's why we don't like it when someone tries to boss us around and tell us what to do and impose their will, their kingdom, on us. Have you ever noticed that a two-year-old's favorite word is "No!" And their second favorite word is "Mine!" They learn early on what this whole idea of a kingdom is all about.

What Jesus is saying in this passage is that because of the loving and generous provision of our heavenly Father, we don't have to worry about building and protecting our little kingdoms. He says we should instead seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and then all those things we think we have to do to build our little kingdoms, He'll take care of them all. We don't need to worry.

In the passage we've read, Jesus urges His followers to make their highest ambition the goal of seeking the kingdom of God first. And to seek God's kingdom requires a surrendered will, and it involves spreading the reign of Jesus wherever we can. It starts with us, and it extends to every square inch of this planet. And to the extent you and I can influence the world around us, we are to bring the reign of God to bear in our lives and in the world. That's why we say in the

Lord's Prayer, "*Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*" This includes our homes, our families, our work, the athletic field, the coffee shop, our work with the poor, and the utter ends of the earth for that matter.

Friends, if you seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness, He knows what you need, and He'll take care of you. It's a promise in Scripture. So stop worrying about everything so much, and put your trust in Jesus. Make your ambition that of seeking first God's kingdom, and then look for the ways He shows up in your life.

Conclusion.

I began my message by asking you what you wanted to be when you were growing up. And I've tried to explain how this passage in the Sermon on the Mount wants to inform, guide, and direct your ambitions in life. It's all too easy to chase after the wrong things in this world and make our ambitions less than what God really has in mind for us. As C.S. Lewis once said, we settle for playing in mud puddles when God offers us a grand vacation at the beach.

I'm coming up on retirement at the end of this year, and it's got me reflecting on my life and the ambitions I've had. Sure, I've tried to serve God as a pastor, and I've attempted to seek first the kingdom of God in a lot of ways most of the time. But pastors struggle with ambition just like you do, and sometimes we suffer from what is known as "steeple envy." (You know, who's got the taller steeple, meaning who's got the bigger church?) There are times when we pastors can get off track, and we need to hear a sermon on ambition like this ourselves.

In the last few weeks, I've had the privilege of visiting some of my spiritual heroes who are now in their 80s and 90s, and I have spent time with Gordon MacDonald, Leighton Ford, and Jule Spach. (Jule was a legendary missionary of this church for many years.) In each encounter I've been impressed by the spiritual depth of these men and their maturity as well as their wisdom and humility. They are people who have walked with Jesus for a very long time, and I think they've done a pretty good job of seeking first the kingdom of God for decades despite their large ambitions in life. And it shows. It shows in the quality of their faith and the gentleness of their spirits.

At the end of each meeting with these men, I've said the same thing to them. I've said, "When I grow up, I want to be like you." It makes them smile. As I retire, that's my goal. That's my one ambition now. I want to be more like the Jesus I see in these men, and I think that's what seeking first the kingdom of God is all about. How about you? What's your ambition, and what do you want to be when you grow up? May God help each of us make our ambition to live more for Christ this week and always. Amen.

¹ Martin Luther, *The Sermon on the Mount* (1521: translated by Jaroslav Pelikan: in vol. 21 of *Luther's Words*, Concordia, 1956), 197f.

² Elizabeth Cheney.

³ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*.