

The Beginning of Wisdom and a Life Well Lived

Matthew 6:19–34

February 25, 2023

Pastor Trent Eastman | New Baptist Church, Huntington, WV

Since the beginning of the year, we have been working through the Sermon on the Mount as found in Matthew 5–7. It is the longest recorded sermon we have from Jesus, and it is a message I believe he preached multiple times in multiple places. Our passage today is Matthew 6:19–34, a section I like to call the heart of wisdom.

The Outrageous Claims of Jesus

There is a very old apologetic argument regarding Christ known as the Trilemma. It was popularized by C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*, but versions of it can be found in sermons and theological writings at least two hundred years before Lewis. The argument is this: Jesus is either a lunatic, a liar, or Lord. Those are the only three options available to us given the Jesus described in Scripture. Looking at the things he said and did, he is either mentally unhinged or morally evil — a deceiver of the worst kind — or he is Lord: the Messiah, the source and giver of life, God made flesh.

I find myself returning to the Trilemma as I read the Sermon on the Mount, because what Jesus preaches here is, frankly, beyond the pale. If he is not the Lord, it is the raving of a lunatic or the cunning of a liar. Consider what he actually says.

To the people this world sees as being at the very bottom of the human condition — the poor, the persecuted, the meek, the outcast — Jesus says, *blessed are you*. To a crowd gathered on a hillside, he points to himself and declares that he is the fulfillment of the law. Who says something like that? Who claims that the entirety of the law is perfected and completed and points to *him*? Nobody says that unless they are the Messiah. And then, quoting the ancient commandments, he says, “You have heard it said” — and then adds, “But *I say to you*” — claiming an authority not merely equal to Scripture but beyond it.

Over and over again, Jesus says things that only make sense if he is truly the Lord. And the passage before us this morning may contain one of the most outrageous claims in the entire sermon: that the best life you can possibly live begins with *him*.

Not money. Not education. Not a good home or a good job or good health or even a clear and wonderful life purpose. I am not suggesting those things are unimportant — they are very

important, and that is part of what makes this claim so staggering. Jesus is saying that the ability to live life at its fullest, to flourish as a human being in God's world, begins with him. Even if you are poor, even if you have never been to school, even if you suffer from chronic illness or disability, even if you are old or young or have made serious mistakes — none of those things foreclose the fullness of life made possible in Christ. That is an extraordinary claim. But it is the claim Jesus is making in Matthew 6:19–34.

To understand why, we need to step back and look briefly at what the Bible means by wisdom.

A Short Course in Biblical Wisdom

In the Old Testament, wisdom shows up in many forms. Wisdom is given to the craftsmen who build the tabernacle and the temple. Wisdom is given to Solomon to govern a nation. Wisdom is credited even to creatures as small as the rock badger, who builds its home in the cliffs (Proverbs 30:26). From these examples we can draw a working definition: wisdom, in general, is the ability to do something *very well* — not merely the knowledge of a thing, but the skill and competence to actually do it. Build a building. Lead a people. Cook a meal. Raise children. There are many kinds of wisdom, and I imagine all of them are represented in this room today.

But biblical wisdom — the wisdom the Bible most deeply wants to give us — is the skill to *live life well*. It is the ability to inhabit your one human life at its very best. And because it is about that, it is described in Proverbs as being more precious than jewels, silver, and gold. This is what people need and long for, even when they do not know how to name it. The tragedy, as Proverbs sees it, is that so many people are walking on the wrong road, toward the wrong house.

In the first nine chapters of Proverbs, wisdom is personified as a woman — Lady Wisdom — who stands at the city gate and calls out to passersby. She invites them to leave the road that leads to destruction and to walk instead toward life:

Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: ... but whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of disaster.

— Proverbs 1:20–21, 33 (ESV)

Now hold that image in your mind and turn to the very end of the Sermon on the Mount. There, Jesus makes a startling claim about himself:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

— *Matthew 7:24 (ESV)*

Do you see what Jesus is doing? He is positioning himself as the voice of Lady Wisdom at the gate. He is claiming that the road to a full and abundant life runs through *him*, that the house built on solid rock is the life built on *his* words. The ability to live well — biblical wisdom — begins with Jesus.

Now, if you know your Bible, you may already be raising an objection: *But Preacher, doesn't the Bible say that wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord?* And you would be right. Proverbs 9:10 says plainly, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.” You are absolutely correct. But then we must ask: what does it mean to *fear the Lord*? That question brings us directly to the first half of our passage, Matthew 6:19–24. I want to suggest that these verses give us the most concrete definition in all of Scripture of what it means to fear the Lord.

What It Means to Fear the Lord

He Is Your Greatest Treasure

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

— *Matthew 6:19–21 (ESV)*

There is genuine debate about what exactly constitutes the treasures stored up in heaven. Some suggest they are crowns to be cast back at the feet of Jesus — gifts he gives us precisely so we can return them to him. Others point to the people we love, noting how Paul speaks of the churches at Philippi and Thessalonica: “You are my joy and my crown.” I hope both of those are true. But my greatest treasure in heaven is the Lord himself — and the hope of hearing him say, *Well done, good and faithful servant.*

To fear the Lord is to treasure him above everything else. Wisdom begins there.

His Righteousness Is Your Righteousness

The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

— *Matthew 6:22–23 (ESV)*

Throughout Scripture, light is the language of righteousness — the transforming work of Christ *in* you and *through* you. Jesus has already said in this same sermon, “You are the light of the world; let your light shine” (Matthew 5:14–16). That light is the righteousness of Christ given to you, at work in you, radiating through you. To fear the Lord means to long for his righteousness to become yours — to pray, *Lord, I want to be like you*. Wisdom begins when you seek his righteousness.

He Is Your God

No one can serve two masters, for 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 God and money.

— *Matthew 6:24 (ESV)*

Throughout the Old Testament runs the constant thread of God’s people turning to false idols — placing their trust in things rather than in him. And what is the great false idol of every generation? It takes different shapes, but it always comes back to the same temptation: trusting in ourselves, in our resources, in money, in our own schemes and strategies. To fear the Lord means to make him first — to place your trust and your dependence on him alone. Wisdom begins when you stop serving a second master.

So: He is your treasure. His righteousness is yours. He is your God. That is what it means to fear the Lord. And that fear — that reverent, loving, dependent orientation toward him — is the beginning of wisdom.

What a Life Well Lived Actually Looks Like

This raises the next question. If wisdom leads to a full and abundant life, what does that actually look like? How would you describe a life that is truly flourishing?

Here is how Jesus describes it:

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ... Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

— *Matthew 6:25–32, 34 (ESV)*

Notice that Jesus says *do not be anxious* not once, but three times. A life well lived is a life lived without fear.

That word — anxiety — is not abstract. I came across a poll conducted by the Washington Post last November asking Americans how they define the middle class. The respondents identified six things a person had to have in order to qualify: steady employment, the ability to save for the future, the ability to cover a thousand-dollar emergency without going into debt, the ability to pay bills on time without worry, health insurance, and the ability to retire comfortably. What struck me when I read that list is that five of those six criteria are entirely future-oriented and entirely fear-driven. *Do I have enough if something goes wrong? Will I be able to pay my bills? What if I get sick? Will I be okay in old age?*

I think most of us can relate to those fears. And it is not hard to add more. Fear of failure, so we never try. Fear of rejection, so we build walls. Fear of the unknown, so we never leave our comfort zones. Fear of betrayal, so we trust no one. Fear of vulnerability, so we wear false faces. Fear of loss, so we hold on too tightly. Fear of conflict, so we avoid every difficult conversation. Fear of not measuring up, so we set the bar impossibly low. Fear of missing out, so we say yes to things we should refuse.

And if those personal fears are not enough, we can turn on the television and be handed more: fear of political chaos, fear of foreign enemies, fear of disease, fear of economic collapse. The list is endless.

Fear, in all of its forms, is the great deconstruction of a life well lived. Anxiety creates stress. It robs sleep, fuels depression, breeds isolation, impairs memory, leads to substance abuse, fractures relationships, and disrupts work. It touches everything. There is no corner of a human life that fear does not eventually reach if it is allowed to reign.

And so hear again what Jesus is saying — not as a greeting-card sentiment, but as a direct confrontation with the thing that most consistently ruins human life:

Do not be anxious about your life.

Your Father in heaven knows what you need, and your Father in heaven is good. The next time you watch a sunrise, feel a cool breeze off the river, or see wildflowers blooming along the road — let it remind you. If God clothes the grass of the field in that kind of beauty, how much more will he care for you? You are not forgotten. You are not alone. You are not one bad day away from being abandoned by the God who made you.

Do not be anxious about what you will eat, or drink, or wear.

Do not be anxious about tomorrow.

A life lived without that crushing, chronic anxiety is exactly what Jesus is offering. That is the abundant life. That is wisdom in action.

How to Get There: Three Paths Toward Wisdom

So how does one actually receive this wisdom that leads to a full and abundant life? I want to point you toward three things.

The first is this: wisdom for a life well lived begins with *knowing the Lord*. As our passage has defined it, that means he is your treasure, his righteousness is yours, and he is your God — the one your trust and dependence rest upon. This is not a once-and-done transaction. It is the daily posture of the heart. Do you seek to please him? Do you find your deepest joy and contentment in him? Do you seek to obey him? Do you trust and depend on him? That is where wisdom starts, and if you have never started there, today is the day.

The second is this: plant new secrets in your heart. Much of what Jesus addresses in the Sermon on the Mount is the life of the heart and its desires. He speaks of the wrong things that take root there — anger, contempt, lust — and he also speaks of the good things that can be sown there: acts of righteousness done quietly, generously, prayerfully. One of the most powerful ways to reorder the desires of the heart is to begin filling it with different treasure. Let the habits of prayer, generosity, and worship become the things held closest. Let *he is my treasure, he is my Lord, his righteousness is mine* be the sentences that run beneath everything else.

The third is simply this: *ask*. James says it plainly:

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

— *James 1:5 (ESV)*

I want to address something before I close, because I know it is a thought that quietly haunts a great many people. There is a false belief — and I want to name it as false — that God has a single, perfectly scripted plan for your life, and if you have made wrong choices, married the wrong person, lived in the wrong town, or taken the wrong road, that plan is now ruined, and the best life is no longer available to you. Some people live in grief over that imagined loss. Others live in paralysis, so afraid of making a mistake that they make no move at all.

This is not what God offers. The Lord does not hand you a secret blueprint that you must decode and execute perfectly or forfeit your future. He gives you *wisdom* — and it is by wisdom that you learn to live well in the world he made. It is a good world, made by a good God, full of beauty and bounty. And he is generous. He will give you the wisdom you need to live fully in him, whatever road has led you to this moment.

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

— *Matthew 6:33 (ESV)*

That is the promise. And the One making it is either a lunatic, a liar, or Lord. Given everything we have seen, I think you know which one he is.