

SERMON TITLE: "Seek Ye First"
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 6:25-34
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 10, 2021, at First UMC (Stewardship Drive #1)

INTRODUCTION

On Tuesday, October 12, actor William Shatner is going to go where no 90-year old has ever gone before. He's going to fly into outer space on a Blue Origin rocket owned by Jeff Bezos. Despite his many brave adventures as Star Trek's Captain Kirk, Shatner admitted that he's got "pre-flight jitters." Of course, he's also feeling "excited and fortunate to be embarking upon such a historic mission."*

This news of "Captain Kirk's" new adventure got me to thinking about the Star Trek "Prime Directive." Do you remember that? The crew of the USS Enterprise was never supposed to introduce any actions or information to a culture, people, or place that would change their natural course of development. As they encountered a new civilization somewhere out in the universe or went back in time on planet Earth, the Enterprise crew had to be very careful to obey this foundational law, this basic and essential rule, this Prime Directive. Before the USS Enterprise officers could seek out their own new learning or their own well-being, they had to obey this Prime Directive first.

As Christians, we also have a prime directive, which was clearly stated by Jesus in Matthew 6:33. Using the King James translation of it, the verse reads, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." Whatever else we're aiming our rockets toward, our prime directive is to seek first God's kingdom and righteousness.

Not only is that verse the key to today's sermon, it's also the theme of this year's stewardship drive. Beginning today and going through October 31, for four Sundays, we will focus our worship services on what it means to set our priorities in proper order and put God first in our lives. So let's get started here in Matthew 6. This prime directive seems like one of those things that's easier said than done. How exactly to do we seek God first?

1—DON'T WORRY

The advice given first, last, and throughout these verses of Matthew 6 is “Don’t worry.” If we’re going to seek God first, then we have to give up that annoying and sleep-depriving habit of obsessing about things over which we have little or no control. While we may like to think that we can control everything that happens to us, there’s a whole lot that’s simply beyond our ability. Whether our concern is the weather, the economy, the health of our spouse, our neighbor’s barking dog, or our child’s annoying habits—a good deal of the time, we just have to learn to adapt and cope with what life dishes out. The more we can make peace with what is going on around us, the better. As Bobby McFerrin popularized in his 1988 song, “Don’t worry; be happy” is some pretty good advice.

Of course, we all know that the admonition not to worry is more complicated than that. Even though we individually can’t control the weather, a whole generation of young people is worrying intensely about global climate change. And it’s precisely their worry that is motivating us older ones to realize that we human beings need to interact with the world in better ways. When worry motivates positive changes in our behavior, worry can serve a useful purpose. A person who worries about being homeless or hungry might be motivated to get an education and apply for a job. A person who worries about being offensive to others might be motivated to take a shower or use gentler language. A person who worries about being lonely might be motivated to get out of their house and interact with other people at church or a senior center. A person who worries about their grandchildren might be motivated to turn them over to God in prayer.

But if we worry about things that we can’t do anything about—and that worry just eats at our gut and destroys our sense of well-being—then worry is definitely not to our advantage. Or, if we worry and obsess about the wrong things, that can also get us into trouble. In the earlier verses of Matthew 6, Jesus was repeatedly teaching that we shouldn’t be comparing ourselves to other people, trying to impress them by what we do and have. Jesus was also warning about the dangers of accumulating too many treasures on

earth instead of storing up spiritual treasures in heaven. Jesus warned against letting money become our master instead of God. Worry—for Jesus—meant a counterproductive kind of striving, that rat-race existence that gives people heart attacks, strokes, and divorces. Worry about material things puts our focus in the wrong place and gets us all out of balance physically and spiritually. Don’t worry, said Jesus. That’s the first step in seeking God first.

2—TRUST THAT GOD KNOWS WHAT WE NEED

The word “trust” doesn’t appear in these verses, but trust clearly is a second aspect of what Jesus was talking about. How do we stop worrying about our material lives and, instead, seek God’s kingdom and righteousness? How do we put God first? We trust that God knows what we need. Jesus spoke of God clothing the flowers in splendor and feeding the birds. In verse 32, Jesus said, “Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.” In other words, Relax, folks! God’s got you covered.

I know, such trust is hard. As my dad used to tell my brothers and me, “Money doesn’t grow on trees.” Even birds build nests to protect and nurture their young, and many species fly south in the winter so they won’t freeze to death. Even flowers use a lot of photosynthesis energy to burst a sprout out of a seed or bulb, push up through the soil, bloom, and reproduce. Jesus didn’t talk about squirrels or bees, but we know that they certainly do store up food for the winter.

Jesus wasn’t saying that we don’t have to work to provide for ourselves. Of course we do! He was just saying that there’s a big difference between earning a living and obsessing over possessions and wealth that are mainly for impressing other people. Seeking God first means putting all these things in proper order, balance, and perspective. When we seek first God’s kingdom and righteousness, then the other matters of life will fall into place.

This principle reminds me of a class I took in seminary. The professor of the class had been a missionary. He taught us that everywhere in the world, wherever Christianity spread, the people’s standard of living was raised. Wherever Christian faith was taught and believed, schools and hospitals were

built, and jobs were created. When people gave their hearts to Christ, they stopped spending their resources on drinking, gambling, and other bad habits. So they had more resources to care for their families. The professor called this “mission and lift.”

When we put God’s kingdom and righteousness first, all these other things that we need are added. It’s a matter of getting our priorities straight. If we seek God first, God will then direct us in healthy ways to work with God in providing for our material needs—for ourselves, for our families, and for our neighbors near and far. Just like God doesn’t want the birds to become extinct or for all the flowers of the field to be buried under pavement, God doesn’t want us human beings to suffer and die off. God is here for us. God is with us. Jesus is calling us to trust that God knows what we need.

3—CHOOSE RIGHTEOUS WAYS OF MANAGING MONEY

As we seek first the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, there’s one more nuance that Jesus might have intended in these verses. Birds and flowers don’t have to worry about righteousness because they aren’t making moral decisions. They’re only concerned with survival. We humans on the other hand are responsible for more than survival.

In this teaching of Jesus, we are reminded that—as Christians—we are called to choose moral and righteous ways of managing money and material possessions. It may seem like a “dog eat dog” world out there, in which every person has to scrape and scrap for every penny. The richest of the rich are constantly wheeling and dealing to make their next million or billion dollars. Often those rough-and-tumble decisions benefit one at the expense of another. In between those extremes of pinched pennies and capitalistic wealth, most of us try to balance our income and expenses, our needs and our pleasures, our mindful saving for the future and our generous giving of today. While some of that can be done with a budget sheet, it also has to do with our priorities and faith. “How much is enough?” truly is a moral question. Do we need to accumulate more clothes in our closets and more tools in our garage? Do we need to enhance our social prestige with expensive toys in our driveway and costly recreation? Or can we shift to a priority

of generosity to God and others? Instead of seeking more and more and more for ourselves, can we increase our commitment to God's ministries through the church and to the world?

I know these moral questions don't come with easy answers. Just like God knows we need food and clothing, God also knows that we need vacations and entertainment. If we don't take care of our physical and mental health, then we certainly won't be able to take care of anyone else. It's like that instruction on airplanes that we have to put on our own oxygen masks first before we can help our children or others in need.

Still, seeking God's kingdom and righteousness requires us to be mindful of how our choices about money and material possessions affect us and others. Are we hurting others with our greed? Are we being as generous as we can be with the resources that God has given to us? Are we seeking God's will as a first priority? As we make our financial decisions, are we being righteous in the ways we manage our money?

CONCLUSION

A few years ago, we had a baseball theme for our stewardship drive. Do you remember? Some of us wore baseball shirts to church, and—for our consecration day—we placed our pledge cards into a big baseball mitt up here on the altar. Thinking about that reminded me of that Abbott & Costello comedy sketch called “Who’s on First?” Because of the weird names of the baseball players, there’s a lot of confusion in that conversation.

Hopefully there’s no confusion in this message that we’ve received today from Jesus in Matthew chapter six. “Who’s on first” should clearly be God. We can give priority to God by not worrying, by trusting that God knows what we need, and by choosing righteous ways of managing our money. As we continue through this stewardship drive over the next several weeks, I hope you will join me in considering all these ways we can seek God first.

*<https://www.space.com/william-shatner-terrified-blue-origin-flight>