

## *The Two Masters*

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,  
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,  
*Preached on the 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany, (27Feb), 2011.*

Text: Matthew 6:24a            “No one can serve two masters....” ~Jesus

This is a favorite passage. I think one of my first sermons was on the problem of anxiety and how our materialism contributes to it. As a young man, it was an easier text to preach. Now, older, I’m not so sure. Here are two quotations from Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *The Cost of Discipleship*, to illustrate the problem.

“Be not anxious for the morrow.” This is not to be taken as a philosophy of life or a moral law; it is the gospel of Jesus Christ, and only so can it be understood. Only those who follow him and know him can receive this word as a promise of the love of the Father and as a deliverance from the thralldom of material things.<sup>1</sup>

The world and its goods make a bid for our hearts, and only when they have won them, do they become what they really are. That is how they thrive, and that is why they are incompatible with allegiance to God. Our hearts have room for only one all-embracing devotion....<sup>2</sup>

Though Bonhoeffer was young when he wrote his book, he states clearly our problem with Jesus in his *Sermon on the Mount*. There is lyrical beauty in considering the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, but if you really read what Jesus said here and ponder your own life—your mortgage, pension, memberships in clubs, the clothes in your closets and the bills you pay every month for your lifestyle—you have to let loose a sigh.

Jesus was so offhanded here. Garry Wills said of this passage, “On matters of earthly provision, [Jesus] was happy-go-lucky.”<sup>3</sup> “But,” the problem is, “he was exacting when it came to being prepared for heaven’s reign.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus expressed such a casual view with regard to material possessions. Did he mean it, that we should have no regard for tomorrow, no regard for food, clothing, housing? It is not the business of any preacher of the gospel to gainsay Jesus, certainly not to teach that he didn’t mean this or that. I won’t give you (or me) excuses for dismissing what he said here. Yes, of course, he meant it. I will, however, say when I was younger and less tied into the world, I approached this text differently. Now fully engaged with

---

<sup>1</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. By R.H. Fuller. (NY: Macmillan, 1963), 198.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>3</sup> Wills, Garry. *What Jesus Meant*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 55.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

a family and a congregation that spends too much time worrying about money, I have a more complicated perspective on his words in Matthew 6.

A friend in the ministry went to see a lady from his church facing major surgery. She had never been in the hospital before and had certainly never handled such a crisis of health. She was a nervous wreck, full of anxiety and fretting. She started to cry almost the moment he walked into her room. She asked him to pray for her, which he did. By her bed on the table were some magazines—he couldn't help but notice as he bowed his head. These were those magazines you see in the checkout lines of supermarkets, full of stories about Jennifer Anniston's latest male friend, weight loss fads and Lindsay Lohan's latest court case. She had a stack of them and she was a wreck. He thought as he continued to visit, "There is not a calorie in that whole stack to help her through this experience. She had no place to dip down into a reservoir and come up with something—a word, a phrase, an idea, a memory, a person. Just empty."<sup>5</sup>

It takes more than that to live as a disciple of Jesus. We need to contemplate his teachings regularly to absorb his direction and discipline. Unfortunately we don't discover this until we are somewhere like that woman in the hospital. We blithely go on with one big toe in a baptismal font but the rest of us all in the world, with its shallow materialism and gospel of success. Again Bonhoeffer:

"Be not anxious for the morrow." This is not to be taken as a philosophy of life or a moral law; it is the gospel of Jesus Christ, and only so can it be understood. Only those who follow him and know him can receive this word as a promise of the love of the Father and as a deliverance from the thralldom of material things.<sup>6</sup>

We can't expect to understand a hard saying like this of Jesus if we have not internalized the scriptures, done a fair amount of praying, spent time with a few his saints. I am talking here to me as well as to you. I have found I have to keep coming back to this, over and over. It is not something you master and then forget. Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* is one of his most profound statements about the difference between following him and following something else.

There are three significant phrases in today's reading that point us to his meaning. Bonhoeffer alluded to it when he wrote, "Our hearts have room for *only one* all-embracing devotion." Jesus said quite a bit about fretting over stuff, but in verse 30 his meaning comes out. He said, "if God so clothes the grass of the field . . . will he not much more clothe you—*you of little faith?*"<sup>7</sup> What does faith have to do with it, you ask? What particularly does 'little faith' mean? Everything! This is what he is talking about: God will take care of us and our world. Yes, there are times when it is difficult to believe this but, as Calvin said, "*God neglects none of his*

---

<sup>5</sup> Craddock, Fred. B. *Craddock Stories*. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 30.

<sup>6</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. By R.H. Fuller. (NY: Macmillan, 1963), 198.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 6:30.

own.”<sup>8</sup> All Jesus said about the birds of the air and lilies of the field, what does that not mean except to say, God takes care of creation. Just take a deep breath, God will take care of you, too. Focus on God’s provision, not on your needs and God will find a way. “Only those who follow him and know him can receive this word as a promise of the love of the Father and as a deliverance from the thralldom of material things.” Trust the God you have come to know and whose disciple you have become, and what you need will be provided.

A second hint to his meaning comes in the line, “No one can serve two masters.”<sup>9</sup> It is our double-mindedness, not our poverty that is the problem. We don’t like to think about *things* having a spiritual reality, but they do. Things do become idols in our lives. “Our hearts have room for only one all-embracing devotion.” When we have multiple things vying to control our lives, our time, our energy, *of course*, there is conflict. Anxiety is the sign of our double-mindedness.

The third is a clear finale in Christ’s prescription for disciples troubled about possessions. “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”<sup>10</sup> (That is such an important line in the entire *Sermon on the Mount*!) We know we need things but they are mere shadows of the real treasure we were born to seek. They are in front of us, advertised on television, talked about at the water cooler. Treasure in heaven is harder to grasp and pursue. The seeking is not wrong. What is wrong is where and how we look.

Kierkegaard said ‘*purity of heart is to will one thing.*’ Particularly on the big concerns of life when we try to keep too many plates spinning at the same time, we invite trouble. Jesus possessed that singularity of focus. For him it was love, the love God and neighbors. He demands a similar focus from us, his disciples. Yes, there are other things in world, in life. It is not that they are not important. They are just not or should not be of *first* concern. When you lay hold of a really big idea, something so big you can give your life to it, well, some of the little stuff doesn’t seem quite so significant.

Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own.<sup>11</sup>

Seek *first* the Lord’s kingdom and his righteousness.

End

The Two Masters. DOC

---

<sup>8</sup> Calvin, Jean. *Matthew, Mark and Luke*, trans. by A.W. Morrison. (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1972), vol. 1, 221.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 6:24.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 6:33.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 6:33-34.