

## **The Topic is Not Treasures but Trust**

By Bob Young

Text: Matthew 6:19-24

### **The Content of the Sermon on the Mount: Wisdom Literature**

We come today to one of the great and familiar texts of the NT. Because it is part of the Sermon on the Mount, we meet an interesting genre question. The Sermon is set in the larger context of the Gospels, and is frequently identified as wisdom literature. Blenkinsopp suggests that wisdom and law are two great rivers which eventually flow together in Christian theology. He also suggests that Matthew in his Gospel intended to place the teaching of Jesus within the ongoing tradition of Israelite and Jewish wisdom. Matthew seems interested in presenting Jesus as the wise teacher. Thus Matthew organizes Jesus' teachings into five discourses, perhaps modeled on the Pentateuch. Wisdom literature is a broad genre. There is no doubt that the OT wisdom tradition continues in NT, as wisdom is used in the NT with a variety of nuances. It seems that Jesus recognized two types of wisdom—the one accepted and the other rejected.

*"There is in the Sermon on the Mount the clearest and fullest approach to the wisdom method to be found in the teachings of Jesus. The love of life and learning of large lessons with spiritual import from nature, both of which characterize the sages of the OT, are evidenced in Jesus' longest sermon of record. Even the short, pithy, sometimes antithetical method of the wisdom writers seems to have been employed by Jesus."*

### **The Context of the Sermon on the Mount**

The structure of the Sermon on the Mount is complex, and there are many excellent treatments of the subject, but to survey those is beyond the scope of this little essay. Consider this overview of the Sermon. First, the Beatitudes are followed by several admonitions and summary. Second, six contrasts (You have heard it said...but I say to you....) are summarized in Jesus' concern for righteousness. Chapter 6 treats three areas where righteousness can go astray and follows with three negative admonitions. The sermon concludes with several contrasts—this time representing kingdom choices. The kingdom contrast community will be established on different principles, different practices, and different priorities.

### **The Choices of the Sermon on the Mount**

Sermonic themes such as blessing and righteousness are typical of wisdom literature, as is the rhythm of the Sermon—principles, practices and priorities; contrasts, new constructs, choices. What is the focus of life? What shall we run after? What do we seek? What can we trust?

I think of three illustrations. First, John Updike, in "The Bulgarian's Poetess," writes, "Actuality is a running impoverishment of possibility." On too many days, the minister's life resembles "Let's Make a Deal." Which door will I choose? What shall I do? By what power will I accomplish it? Whom do I trust? Solomon, allowed by God to choose one thing, chose wisdom.

Second, consider Billy Crystal and the movie "City Slickers." What do you do, where do you go, how do you respond when life is boring, routine, and meaningless, and you are caught up in sameness? Crystal's character in the movie leaves the corporate world to be part of a

cattle drive. There he meets Curly, played by Jack Valance. One memorable scene from the movie has Curly saying that all of life is summed up in finding that "one thing." That life is about finding "one thing" speaks to our priorities.

Finally, Paul in Philippians 3 says, "I am focused on one thing, one thing I do. I forget the past, I forge on to the future, because there is a prize there worth more than anything else." In the teachings of Jesus, the same truth is present in the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price (Matthew 13).

### **The Content of Matthew 6:19-24**

In preaching and in life, few tasks are more difficult than discerning what matters, what is important, and to what we are called. We are surrounded by the siren songs of multiplied missions, opportunities, numberless challenges, and pressing needs. What shall we do? Where shall we spend our time? The trivia of the urgent often finds actuality impoverishing possibility.

To turn from the trivia of the urgent to the priority of the essential is a first step toward wisdom. In life, there are plenty of opportunities to spend our money, cut an ethical corner, and do our own thing.

#### Trust and treasures—where we spend our resources

Wisdom literature sharpens our focus and defines our priorities. In ministry, I must ask myself, where is my focus--on Jesus or on self? What shall I think about? tomorrow? next Sunday's sermon? For ministers, this is a special problem, for our tomorrow is often intimately wrapped up in "kingdom things." My very life is "kingdom things"--at least I can rationalize it so. Can I really be focused on kingdom things if I am not focused on Jesus Christ, the king? Can I really be focused on kingdom things if I am relying upon my own abilities to get my tasks done?

Everyday life presents the same challenge for every one of us. Dependence and trust lets go and lets God. We can only store treasure in heaven when we see the temporary nature of this world and decide that storing up things here is ultimately foolish.

#### Trust and tactics—law and ethics

How will I get it all done? Ministry is always a place for dependence and a time for trust. Where can I find refuge, focus, direction, priority? Jesus says such are kingdom issues (Mt. 6:33-34). In ministry as in life, our answers are in the kingdom matters, not in the material world.

Merely quoting the verses provides no panacea. The passage demands interpretation, because Jesus responds to our questions with the same words, "Seek first kingdom things." Can following Jesus really be that demanding? Are priorities really that important? What price are we willing to pay—even to compromising our own ethics? If law and wisdom merge in Jesus' sermon, we must see that the ethics of the law have not been removed—they have been exalted to a higher place where they are no longer an exterior concern but an interior reality.

#### Trust and tasks—doing whose thing?

My task is not to identify your kingdom things. My task is to remind you that all of life is in finding your one thing--"your kingdom things"--and pursuing it. Pursue it according to your talents, abilities, inclinations, personality, preferences, and opportunities. But pursue it trusting in God's power, not your own. Find your kingdom role; seek God's power to fulfill that role. To say, "don't worry about what you cannot do--do what you can do" raises the wrong issue.

Today I will seek God's will and God's way by God's power, for today. Tomorrow will take care of itself. That is trust.