

Are You Paying Attention?

Matthew 6:25-34

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ September 17, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ 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? ²⁷ And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸ And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ ³² For it is the gentiles who seek all these things, and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

³⁴ “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” (Matthew 6:25-34, NRSV)



How many of you anticipate that you will pay attention to every word I’m going to say this morning? I know the answer. None of you. And I’m not judging you when I say that, because the same would be true of me if you were up here speaking and I were sitting there listening. It is extremely hard for most of us to keep our attention on the present moment for any significant amount of time. And so during this sermon your mind is going to drift away from what I’m saying, no matter how hard I try to keep that from happening.

Your attention might possibly shift to other aspects of the present moment. I remember as a kid during long sermons I used to count the tiles in the ceiling of our church sanctuary. ⁶³⁴ If I remember correctly. Maybe some of you have spent time in this room analyzing the colors of the stained-glass cross. But rather than other

aspects of the present, more likely your attention will drift to either the future or the past. As I’m doing my best to keep your attention in the present, you’ll be either remembering or anticipating.

A recent article in *Psychology Today* reveals that most people are only paying attention to the present moment at best 50 percent of the time.¹ If life is only lived in the present, which I think you’d agree is true, that means that most of us are missing half our life as we give away our attention away to something other than the moment right in front of us. About half the time we are either looking to the past or the future, and ignoring the present.

This is a reality in my life. I have a habit of spending lots of time looking forward to upcoming events that I’m excited about. But then what happens is, as I have anticipated how a future event will go, and built it up so much in mind, when it finally arrives the actual event is often a let-down. It’s hard for reality to compete with imagination. How many kids face disappointment on Christmas morning? Weeks of anticipation, and the new toy loses its luster before lunchtime. Or instead of anticipation, I can find myself spending endless hours and energy worrying about something in the future. I spent three years in seminary worrying about the ordination exams I would have to take at graduation. I’ll let you guess how productive all that worrying turned out to be.

At other times I can become fixated on the past. Just recently I said something in front of a group of people that wasn’t helpful. I was trying to be funny, and instead came off as insensitive and harsh. Nobody said anything, but they didn’t have too. I spent the next two days ruminating in regret about my misplaced words. It’s still painful to think about. Sometimes instead of regret, we look back with sentimentality, longing for what we might consider to be the “good old days” which, in our minds, were so much better than the days we’re living in now. How many churches get stuck moving forward because too many members are always wishing things were like they used to be?

Are you still paying attention to what I’m saying?

¹ Nancy Colier, “How Thinking Blocks Us From Being Present”, *Psychology Today*, August 11, 2018.

Wouldn't you like to be a person who learns to live in the present moment, free from the anxiety and fear that come at us when we focus on the future, free from the regret that comes when we live in the past, free from the unrealistic expectations of both which set us up to miss the joy of the present moment?

Apparently this isn't just a modern-day problem. Right in the middle of Jesus' essential teaching on discipleship, what we call the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks to men and women who are wanting to become like him and he addresses this issue of time and attention. He begins by saying, **"Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life."** That's quite a tall order. Do not worry about your life, about anything in your life. And notice, it's not a suggestion but a command. Don't worry about where you'll get your next meal. Don't worry about having enough to drink. Don't worry about having clothes to wear. Jesus is commanding us not even to worry about the most basic necessities of life. We can easily assume then that his prohibition against worry extends to all the less essential aspects of life as well.

Jesus asks his disciples to consider the natural world around us, the birds and the flowers. Our heavenly Father takes care of them. So then, why would he not take care of us since he values us so much more than anything else in creation? God knows what you need, even more than *you* know what you need. Do you believe that he will provide for you and take care of you? Our worry demonstrates that we do not believe this is true. Worse, our worry does no good, adds zero benefits to a life. Jesus asks, already knowing the answer, **"Which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life?"** In fact, we know from medical science today that worry and anxiety negatively contribute to high blood pressure, heart disease, lung problems, fatigue, insomnia, depression, headaches, and even a loss of interest in sexual activity. Not only does worry not help, it actually does us great harm.

But Jesus doesn't just address the problem here. He speaks to a the solution. The heart of this passage, and where I want to spend the rest of our time, is the last part: **"But seek first 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. Today's trouble is enough for today."** Instead of focusing our attention in the past or the future, where we find mostly regret and worry, Jesus wants us to put out attention on eternity and on the present moment. In that order.

Above all, our attention is to be on eternity, which is the kingdom of God and God's righteousness. Dallas Willard defines God's Kingdom this way, "It is God reigning. It is present wherever what God wants done is done. It is the range of God's effective will." To be clear, Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of God all the time, and never did he suggest that God's kingdom was something only in the future. In his very first public teaching in Mark's Gospel, Jesus declared, **"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."**² Wherever we find life working in accordance to God's will, the kingdom is present there. Of course, it is only in the future when everything finally will be set right, but that does not mean we can't experience the Kingdom in part today. We can. We do. I heard somebody say recently that searching for the Kingdom of God is like looking for your lost keys. When you lose your keys you look everywhere, even the most unlikely places. Same with God's Kingdom. Look for it everywhere! It's all around us.

I like how our speaker from last weekend's retreat, Steve Wise, framed the Kingdom of God. He said that the Kingdom of God is the invisible and intangible reality of God's goodness and love here and now, both in the present and in the future. It's already here, though not yet fully here. And so we can seek after it, along with God's righteousness, which is simply life lived in conformity to his will. As we discover God's kingdom, his ways, his desires, his designs, his will, we then conform our lives in the present moment to him. This is the first and main thing we are to do in life, to seek after the kingdom of God, for focus on eternity.

Those of you who are tennis fans likely enjoyed watching American teenager, Coco Gauff, win the U.S. Open last week. This is a young woman who started playing tennis at the age of 6, and who ever since has committed her life to the goal that she just achieved. That's not to say that she's done nothing else but tennis for the last 13 years. She's gone to school, enjoyed family and friends, watched movies, and whatever else she enjoys doing. But the center of gravity in her life, the thing around which everything else revolves, is her pursuit of tennis greatness. Life was arranged for her around that goal.

This is what Jesus tells us we must do with regard to the kingdom of God and his righteousness. To quote Dallas Willard again, "Arrange your life so that you are experiencing deep contentment, joy and confidence in your everyday life with God." You see, once we give our focus to God's eternal kingdom, to pursue that above all else, and then begin to rest in it's reality, we

² Mark 1:15. This and all other biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

find ourselves able to live with deep contentment, joy and peace in the present moment. That's why Jesus says here that we should not be worrying about tomorrow, and that we should let tomorrow worry about itself. In fact, a sustained focus on eternity is the one thing that can help us keep our attention from always drifting to the past or the future.

Think carefully with me. Do I still have your attention? When my attention is on God's eternal kingdom and his righteousness, I embrace the reality that God is sovereign, absolutely in control of every aspect of reality, and that he loves me and is working out his plans in my best interest. When I come to realize this, suddenly I am no longer worried about the future because I trust the one who holds both it and me in his hands. Furthermore, my kingdom-focus helps me embrace the fact that God, in addition to loving me, has, through Christ, completely forgiven me. When I realize this, suddenly I am no longer full of shame or guilt about the past because I know his grace is sufficient for me. As the lyric in one of my favorite worship songs puts it, "I don't have time to maintain these regrets." And though I may look back in fondness and gratitude at the ways God has blessed me and others in the past, any longing to go back to the past is gone because I know that as I trust Christ my best days are always ahead of me.

This is why Jesus says in verse 32 that is the gentiles who seek after worldly treasure instead of eternal riches. It's not that he's slamming gentiles, but simply saying that since they don't know God they don't know better. Commentator Scot McKnight puts it this way, "Anxiety is a barometer of one's God: those with anxiety about 'life' worship Mammon [or, created things of this world], while those without anxiety worship the providing God."³ The one who puts his or her attention first on the kingdom of God, on eternity, pursuing it with great effort, will be the one who eventually finds it possible to put his or her attention also on the present moment, discovering there peace and joy in levels previously unknown.

In his classic book *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis puts it this way, "[God] wants us to attend chiefly to two things, to eternity itself and to that point of time which is called the present. For the present is the point at which time touches eternity."⁴ Again, eternity is not the future. In fact, Lewis says that the future is the thing that is most unlike eternity because the future is never reality. The future doesn't actually exist, which means you will never get to it. Once you think you do, you are in the present. We remember the past, and it is

fixed. We will never reach the future and will always and only be in the present. And it is therefore only in the present where we meet God and know God, where we obey his voice, and bear the cross he has given us, and receive grace for the moment, and give thanks for a present pleasure. Lewis concludes, "[The devil] wants a whole race perpetually in pursuit of the rainbow's end, never honest, nor kind, nor happy now, but always using as mere fuel wherewith to heap the altar of the Future every real gift which is offered them in the Present."

In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a 14th century anonymous work of Christian mysticism, we read this timeless truth:

Take good care of your time. Watch how you spend time for nothing is more precious. In the twinkling of an eye heaven can be won or lost. Here's how we know time is precious, God the giver of time never gives us two moments simultaneously. Instead he gives them one after another after another. Here's one. Here's one. Here's one. We never get the future; we only get the present moment.⁵

Does all this mean that we should never look back to remember, and never look ahead to plan? Of course not. The scriptures are full of commands given by God to remember. This giant cross up front, and this table at the center of the room, and the baptismal full of water in the back which you walked past to come in this morning, are all dedicated to helping us remember how God has been faithful in the past, so that we might be full of gratitude and humility in the present. And only a fool never stops to think about what needs to be done today in order to be ready for tomorrow. The duty of planning for tomorrow's work is the duty of today. Money matters, and so does food, and work, and planning. But 'matter' is not the same as 'worship'. As Scot McKnight puts it, "Jesus doesn't call us to be care-less about provision, but to be care-free."⁶ We can certainly consider the possible future in the present without worrying about it, and without undue anticipation, so that we do not miss what God has for us in the present.

And remember, one of the most important spiritual realities that we can ever learn is the reality that God only gives us what we need for the present. In most other religious faiths in our world, people are taught to seek after, and then rely on, a pathway, which is either a set of teachings or practices that they can possess and which then lead to some anticipated salvation or new

³ Scot McKnight, *The Story of God Commentary: Sermon on the Mount* (Zondervan, 2013), 217.

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, (Bantam Books, 1982), 43. I paraphrased his quote to fit the context.

⁵ Cited by John Ortberg in the *Become New* podcast, August 8, 2023.

⁶ McKnight, 223.

reality. But Jesus did not give us a pathway to follow. What did he give us instead? He gave us himself. Remember his words in John 14:6, **“I am the way and the truth and the life.”** He *is* the way. If he gave us a way besides himself, then we would no longer need him. So he gives us himself, that we live life, every present moment, depending on him. Jesus will not give us extra of himself for some future moment or day, but enough of himself, his grace, for this moment and this day. The Israelites learned this in the wilderness when God gave them just enough manna for the day, and then told them not to try to collect any for tomorrow, because tomorrow there would be enough for tomorrow.⁷ We learn this when Jesus doesn’t teach us to pray for bread for a lifetime, but simply to pray for daily bread.⁸

This is why Dallas Willard says, “The first and most basic thing we can and must do is to keep God before our minds.”⁹ Others have called it practicing the presence of God. Psalm 16 puts it this way, **“I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure.”**¹⁰ Attention is worship. I don’t know if you’ve ever thought about it that way, but the thing that you can’t stop thinking about is likely the thing that you worship, the thing that you are looking to in life to bring you ultimate identity, security and meaning. The person who thinks about money and material things all the time is the person who worships wealth. To worship God is to cultivate a habit in our lives of turning our attention in the present moment over and over and over again towards God.

Easier said than done, right? But not impossible. Training our attention to focus on eternity and the present moment is a habit that can be learned and formed in us with God’s help. I love Steve’s mantra from last weekend’s retreat – I can’t do this on my own, but Christ won’t do it without my cooperation. There are things we can do – that’s our cooperation – that help us move slowly and steadily in this direction. Before I close, let me offer you just a few suggestions.

Since the time that monastic communities formed in the 4th century, Christians have been practicing something called the Divine Office, or the Divine Hours. This is simply a practice of marking the hours of the day by taking moments along the way to turn one’s attention to God, mainly in prayer. While most of us can’t join a monastery, or even incorporate large chunks of our day towards pausing to gather with others to worship, we can establish a simple habit that can work for almost anybody in almost any circumstance, from the retired

man with loads of time on his hands, to the young mom surrounded by young children who constantly need her attention.

What if you took one minute every hour, just 60 seconds, to turn your attention to God in the present moment and asked, “Lord, what are you doing in this moment? What can we do together in this moment? How can I thank you? What do I need from you? How can I rest? What gift can I enjoy and give thanks for? What do I need to confront? Who can I bless?”¹¹ With technology as it is today, it’s easy to set an alarm on your phone or watch to gently remind you each hour to pause and redirect your attention back towards eternity and the present. As we train ourselves, over time our minds will begin to return to God as the needle of a compass always drifts towards north.

Since I don’t want to overwhelm you with ideas, let me offer just one more. How crucial it is that we are constantly feeding on God’s Word, especially the life and teachings of Christ we find in the Gospels. If you don’t only begin the day in God’s Word, but then work to keep God’s Word in mind as you move through the day, even returning to it as you end the day, the reality of God’s eternal kingdom proclaimed there will help keep your attention where it needs to be. Even better, memorize parts of scripture so that they are imbedded in your heart and mind. Psalm 1 reminds us that the person who delights in God’s Word, and meditates on it day and night, is like a tree planted by a flowing stream of water that bears fruit in the right time and never withers.

I’m not good at this. Let me just confess that right out this morning. In fact, some circumstances in my life recently have made me realize just how hard it is for me to keep my attention on eternity and the present moment. But this is my desire. I want to be this sort of person, because I believe that this is where freedom can be found, and peace, and joy, and contentment that is unaffected by past regrets, present circumstances, or future threats. If this is also your desire, if I have your attention this morning, I hope you will take some small step this week to move, with God’s help, towards this freedom.

Let me end with the lyrics of an old song called The Dolomite Chant, which I hope will encourage you. Let’s sit for a moment with these words, and the promises that they bring to mind about time, eternity, and this present moment.

⁷ See Exodus 16

⁸ See Matthew 6:11

⁹ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission* (Harper, 2006).

¹⁰ Psalm 16:8-9

¹¹ Ortberg was helpful here.

Not so in haste my heart!
Have faith in God, and wait;
Although He linger long,
He never comes too late.

He never cometh late;
He knoweth what is best;
Vex not thyself in vain;
Until He cometh, rest.

Until He cometh, rest,
Nor grudge the hours that roll;
The feet that wait for God
Are soonest at the goal.

Are soonest at the goal
That is not gained with speed;
Then hold thee still, my heart,
For I shall wait His lead.¹²

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Matthew 6:25-34 again. What do you notice?
2. What do you worry about? What worries you most? And if we know worry is not helpful, why do we still do it?
3. Which is your tendency, are you somebody who tends ruminate with regret or sentimentality about the past, or somebody who looks to the future with anxiety or anticipation? Why is that your tendency?
4. When Jesus says here that we are to first think about God's kingdom and his righteousness before all else, what do you think that means? Why does the person who does this find, according to Jesus, that all these other things will be given to him or her as well?
5. C.S. Lewis writes, "The present is the point at which time touches eternity." What do you think he means? Why does this matter?
6. Jesus says that each day has enough trouble of its own, and that tomorrow will worry about itself. What does he mean?

7. What is one step you want to take this week to become a person who turns your attention towards eternity and the present moment, rather than to the past and the future? Be as specific as you can.
8. What is the main thing that Christ is teaching you here? How do you respond?

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



Which is the most important, the past, the present, or the future? In which one do we meet God?

¹² Cited by Fredrick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 1 (Eerdmans, 2004), 335.