

Matthew 6.24-34  
15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity  
12 September 2021  
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

At first glance the thrust and gist of what Jesus teaches today seems like a heavy burden. He calls you from your earth-bound ways to embrace higher ways. He names and calls the pleasures and joys of this life garbage compared to something else. He who had no place to lay His head trivializes your enjoyment of creature comforts—your La-Z-Boy, your couch, your comfy bed. He says that all your concerns over clothing—how many of you wish to be stylish? All your concerns over food—how many of you would indulge your hankering for your favorite food every day if you could? He says that all of that is Gentilic. Pagan. Sinful. He says that your preoccupation with the size of your 401(k) or pension or the future value of your business on the day you retire and sell it—He says that that's service of an invented God—mammon—and that if you serve mammon you must reject Him.

But something happens in and through the Gospel to change all that. To make what's a heavy burden into a light yoke. One famous theologian once put it something like this: that Jesus takes away from you everything you have in order to give it back to you better. Let me say that again: Jesus takes away from you everything you have in order to give it back to you better.

You've all experienced that. It all started out here—or a place like this. Little infant you were brought to this font. And you showed up with everything you had. You showed up with your god. Guess who that was? You. You showed up with your insistence that you had a right to live and live forever. And that's just because you were you. And to back up your case you showed up with your righteousnesses. Yes. You held even your ignorance of God's existence out—no one told you!—as being in the right. Whatever sins you may have committed—they weren't your fault. Your anxiety over your own poopy diapers wasn't your fault. It was your dad's. Your shrill cry in the night—if your mom had timed it better, you wouldn't have had to cry out. And whatever mistrust of God, hatred of your condition, anxiety, fear, the earliest twinges of manipulation of others—whatever of that you had, well, you didn't give it to yourself. Your parents did.

And then in one fell moment it was all gone. The Word of God broke into the nightmare of your existence and did in you what it said: Begone, unclean spirit, and make room for the Holy Spirit. Do you renounce the devil? Yes. Do you renounce all his works? Yes. Do you renounce all his ways? Yes. Do you believe in God the Father Almighty? Yes! Do you believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord? Yes! Do you believe in the Holy Spirit? Yes! Do you wish to be baptized and to receive all the gifts won for you by the Lord Jesus Christ and to be rescued from death and devil and be given everlasting life? Yes.

You see the swap? Jesus takes away from you everything you have in order to give it back to you better. For yourself as your own god, He gave you the Only True God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For your vain insistence of a right to life, He swapped in the surety of eternal life staked on Christ's resurrection. For the filthy rags of your own righteousnesses, He clothed you in the glorious, complete, full, perfect, superabounding righteousness of the Son of God. For the sad fate of being born a sinner of sinful parents, He gave a new parentage, with God as Father and Jesus as your Brother.

Jesus takes away from you everything you have in order to give it back to you better. You see this, don't you?

And that goes for the rest of your life. Jesus comes with a sword, turning child against parents, brother and sister against siblings. He takes them away. But then He gives them back. Better. He gives you the Holy Church as your mother, and every member of Christ's Church as brother, sister, mother, father (Matthew 12.46ff). And for physical father, mother, brother and sister who are in Christ He doubles the gift. He makes Himself your comfort in your loneliness (2 Corinthians 1). He makes Himself your strength in your weakness (2 Cor 12). In your despair He makes Himself as your hope (Romans 15). In death He is your life (John 11). And when all is gone and lost, when there's nothing more to you, He becomes all in all (1 Corinthians 15).

This is the Christian life. This is your life. Christ is your life.

And that makes what Christ says to you today no burden, but great promise: "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you."

Of course, to a pagan, this is sheer folly. No one feathers a pagan's nest but himself.

But in Christ it's totally different. For you it's totally different.

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There's a little something that's helpful to know about reading the Gospel according to St. Matthew. Whenever you see that phrase, "the kingdom of God" or "the kingdom of heaven"—what Matthew means by that isn't "going to heaven." It's heaven descending to you. In Jesus Christ. The kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven, in other words, is wherever Christ is with His gifts.

Do you have Christ's Word? Then you have the kingdom of God and heaven. Do you have Christ's Baptism? Then you have the kingdom of God and heaven. Do you have Christ's Supper and Absolution? Then you have the kingdom of God and heaven.

And if you have the kingdom of God and heaven then you also have God's righteousness. For God's righteousness is Christ.

So Jesus tells you, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness." When He says that He's not talking about a righteousness you achieve—He took that one away from you when you were baptized. He's talking about the righteousness He gives you—His righteousness. And on His righteousness hangs everything. His righteousness alone gives you victory over the grave. His righteousness alone gives you everlasting life. His righteousness alone tears you from the grip of your adversary, the devil. And His righteousness alone gives you a gracious Father in heaven. In fact, to the extent you turn back to your old ways—the ways you showed up with at the font, the ways that argue your case for you on the basis of who you are and what you've done and are doing and will do—to that extent you've lost every promise He makes to you and even the kingdom. The kingdom is *faith* and *not works*.

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In other words, what Jesus isn't telling you is this: Get your life in order and I'll bless you.

What He is telling you, though, is this: that He's already gotten your life in order by a gift—by the gift of His righteousness. This gift you hold solely through faith in Him. If you trust His promise that He's won this gift for you in His holy life, innocent death, and glorious resurrection, then guess what. You have the gift. You have His righteousness. And the kingdom of God and heaven is already yours.

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In better years—some of you may know it—I run for a hobby. It's a good way to stay in shape.

Those of you who are runners will know what I'm talking about when I say that running is mostly a mind game. How else do you convince your body to take one step after another for 5 miles or 7 or 10? How else do you fight through the sudden CO<sub>2</sub> cramp in your lungs? How about the flush of all the lactic acid at about 2.5 to three miles? Or at that one step when you just want to stop and walk the rest of the way keep your left foot moving forward at a running pace?

So here's the mind game. You ready? You need to focus not on what things are like right now, but on what things are going to be like when they're done. Focusing on the right now is self-defeating. My body hurts right now and I need it to feel good. I'm stupid thirsty right now and I need some water. This acid flush is killing me! I have no energy for one more step and I just need to stop and walk.

Now here's the thing. If you've run through any of those things just once you know that you can ... run through them. Things aren't really as desperate as they seem. Your body's got it handled. You can trust that. And at some point, the run's going to come to an end. You just need to stay in it. You can trust that, too.

That's how it is in the faith. And that's what Jesus is saying.

The temptations to get out of the faith—to get out of the run—are so many! There are things to be concerned about. Not trivial little things. But big things. Like survival. And maybe not such big things, but they seem big at the time, like popularity or success or having the right clothes and the right house in the right neighborhood. All of that. In the middle of the race you feel like you need it all. They're like side-stitches and lactic acid rushes.

Like the infamous hare of the tortoise and the hare you feel like it's time to step out of it for a while. You convince yourself that you've got it handled. But when you wake up you find out you've swapped the One True God for mammon and that your faith and loyalty hasn't just been divided, but entirely shifted.

And what Jesus is saying today is: don't do that. In fact, not only don't do that—there's no need to do it. Why? Because if you have Christ—if you have the kingdom of God and His righteousness—you have it all. All these things will be added unto you. That's His promise. What you need of life, God will supply, for Christ has given you a gracious Father in heaven. What you need for food and clothing, God will supply just what you need. The runner trusts his body; the Christian trusts Christ's promises.

And like the runner, the Christian—you—keeps his eyes on the finish line. That's what the kingdom of God and His righteousness is. It's God's promise that the righteousness of His Son Jesus Christ right now is enough and more than enough to bring you to finish line of everlasting life. But when the runner takes his mind off the end of the run everything's lost.

That's why you return to church Sunday after Sunday. Not for some moral improvement regimen—a righteousness of your own. But for the righteousness of God in Christ. Seek that first. Not as an afterthought. Not if you can fit it in. But first. Top priority. And all these things will be added unto you—for your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.

After all, that's what Jesus does: He takes away from you everything you have in order to give it back to you better.

Amen.

*pax dei, etc.*

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