

Our Heavenly Father

Devotional Reading: Ephesians 1:3–10

Background Scripture: Exodus 34:4–7; Psalm 103:10–14; Isaiah 40:27–31

Matthew 6:24–34

²⁴ “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?

²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

²⁸ “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ So do not



worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Key Text

Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. —Matthew 6:34

Enduring Beliefs of the Church

Unit 1: Our God and the Holy Scriptures

Lessons 1–4

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the totality of God’s provision for the needs of all creation.
2. Explain how to trust God in order to be free from worries.
3. Make a plan for serving to meet the basic needs of people in the community.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Pulling Back the Curtain
- B. Lesson Context

I. Serve or Despise the Father? (Matthew 6:24)

II. Worry or Trust the Father? (Matthew 6:25–32)

- A. Anxious for Provision (v. 25)
- B. Examples of Provision (vv. 26–29)
- C. God of Provision (vv. 30–32)

Mississippi Wildflowers

III. Kingdom Living (Matthew 6:33–34)

- A. Righteousness First (v. 33)
- B. Today, Not Tomorrow (v. 34)

Living Day by Day

Conclusion

- A. Connecting People to the Father
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Pulling Back the Curtain

In the classic movie *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy and her companions go “off to see the wizard” to get what each so desperately wants. The wizard has a reputation as someone who has the ability to grant their requests.

On first encountering the wizard, they are intimidated by the booming voice of a mysterious, imposing figure. But soon, the curtain is pulled back, revealing that the “wizard” is not an intimidating figure at all!

When thinking about the person and work of Jesus, the opposite often occurs. People at first tend to think much *less* of Jesus than who he really is. That seems as true now as it was in the first century. Jesus “pulled back the curtain” between heaven and earth to reveal the truth about God. Today’s lesson reveals one of those truths.

B. Lesson Context

Today’s lesson text comes from a section of Jesus’ teaching called the “Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew 5–7). In his record of Jesus’ life, Matthew sometimes arranges the material in topical rather than chronological order. The Sermon on the Mount is a case in point. It is located early in Matthew’s Gospel, but it was actually delivered during the first half of the second year of Jesus’ ministry. Some commentators have called this second year of ministry Jesus’ “year of popularity” because large crowds gathered wherever he went (Matthew 4:25).

Matthew 6 begins with Jesus’ warning about hypocrisy as one serves God in various ways. Then come instructions on prayer, fasting, and priorities. Today’s lesson text continues Jesus’ teaching on living a life that depends on a loving heavenly Father’s gracious provision of all our needs. Luke 12:22–31 and 16:13 are parallel texts.

I. Serve or Despise the Father? (Matthew 6:24)

24. “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or

you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

Jesus continues his teaching about living as citizens of the kingdom of heaven, a teaching he began in Matthew 6:19. The word *master* in this context implies a singular individual who has overall charge of a group and its mission. Can any group function smoothly with two bosses who are equal in authority? Think about a *maestro* (an Italian word meaning “master”) who conducts an orchestra. The orchestra is composed of many individuals and their instruments, but there can be only one maestro. Otherwise, there can be confusion. The same can be said for trying to live one’s life under *two masters*. Those who attempt to do so will find themselves constantly torn between who or what receives their attention.

The specific contrast that Jesus depicts is service to *God* versus service to *money*. Older English translations of this verse include the word *mammon* in place of the word *money*. The word *mammon* comes from an Aramaic word that refers to wealth and riches. It is found elsewhere in the New Testament (compare Luke 16:9–13). Jesus is saying it is impossible for a person to give their total allegiance both to God and wealth. We note that financial wealth can be used to serve God and the church (example: 1 Corinthians 16:1–4). However, these things are secondary to serving God.

In another teaching from Jesus on this topic, it is noteworthy that following his teaching, “the Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus” (Luke 16:14). The temptation to place excessive value on items that constitute wealth is what makes covetousness such a deadly trap. Covetousness is a sin addressed numerous times in the Scriptures (see Exodus 20:17; Joshua 7:21; Acts 20:33; Romans 13:9).

What Do You Think?

How does our culture encourage people to give allegiance to financial wealth?

Digging Deeper

What steps can we take to ensure that wealth and its pursuit remain secondary to serving God?



Visual for Lesson 2. *Point to this visual and ask, “In what ways has our heavenly Father provided what we need?”*

II. Worry or Trust the Father?

(Matthew 6:25–32)

A. Anxious for Provision (v. 25)

25. “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?”

By saying *do not worry*, Jesus is not expressing his opposition to careful planning. The apostle Paul engaged in a great deal of planning (examples: Romans 1:13; Acts 20:13–16; 2 Corinthians 9:5). We should try to provide for ourselves, our families, and others. However, concerns regarding these necessities should not create worry or anxiety—which is sometimes easier said than done.

Readers should be aware that the bigger picture may be missed if one’s attention becomes tunnel-vision focused on procuring the necessities of life. The idea is not to be overly concerned (see Philippians 4:6).

It can be challenging in today’s culture to hear Jesus’ words above the barrage of sounds and allure of sights in advertisements that encourage us to consider various aspects of material consumption. Jesus encouraged us to see the more significant, heaven-oriented picture regarding such matters: there is more to life than food and clothing.

B. Examples of Provision (vv. 26–29)

26. “Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?”

In a lesser-to-greater argument, Jesus illustrates his point with an image familiar to anyone in his audience: *birds*. Humans *sow*, *reap*, and *store away in barns*, but birds do not (compare Psalms 104:27–28; 147:9). Since the *heavenly Father* nonetheless feeds them, will he not also provide for those who are created in his image (Genesis 1:26–27), who labor at sowing, harvesting, and storing?

In declaring God to be heavenly Father, Jesus reinforces Old Testament teaching about God (compare Deuteronomy 1:29–31; 32:6; 2 Samuel 7:12–14; Jeremiah 31:9). This is just one of the numerous times Jesus refers to God this way in the Sermon on the Mount. No matter how much we labor to meet our needs, we should never forget that our heavenly Father is ultimately the one who provides for us (contrast Luke 12:16–21). Ignoring that truth can lead to yet another “two-master” situation, against which Jesus has just warned.

27. “Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?”

Of additional interest here is the translation regarding adding *a single hour to one’s life*. The idea is to ask the rhetorical question: *Why be overly concerned about things beyond your control?*

Worry can consume us as we waste time stewing over matters that we have no power to change. Excessive worry can contribute to a wide range of health issues and actually shorten our lives in the process.

What Do You Think?

When do we cross the line between making prudent decisions about the future and engaging in undue worry about the future?

Digging Deeper

What questions do you ask to help you discern in this regard?

28–29. “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.”

Jesus now addresses the issue of clothing. To illustrate the counterproductive nature of worry, he again uses a lesser-to-greater comparison. This one involves a word picture, specifically *flowers of the field*. God provides what is necessary for them to *grow* and develop. He is responsible for their beauty.

The *splendor of Solomon*—referring to the wealth and glory of his kingdom—was known and admired throughout the world of his day. The queen of Sheba remarked, after having witnessed several examples of that splendor, “I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard” (1 Kings 10:7).

Yet nothing produced by human wisdom or creativity can match the simple beauty seen in the flowers God has created and provides for. The God who invests such care regarding flowers is the same heavenly Father who created and cares for us.

C. God of Provision (vv. 30–32)

30. “If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?”

The life expectancy of some vegetation is quite long, redwood trees being an example. But those are an exception. The life expectancy of most plants is relatively short compared to humans. And so it is with *the grass of the field*. That is true in terms of both natural life expectancy and the use of flowers and grass to heat the ovens for baking bread. Once again, Jesus’ point is that if God bestows such beauty upon items in nature that are so short-lived, how much more will he care for human beings? Even so, we must do what flowers and grass are incapable of doing: exercise faith that God will provide such care for us (contrast Matthew 8:26; 14:31; 16:8).

Mississippi Wildflowers

I remember the first spring we lived in Mississippi. An unremarkable patch of grass just down the road from our house suddenly began to bloom with the most beautiful wildflowers I had ever seen. They were not part of a garden or a carefully tended landscape. The flowers appeared out of nowhere and took over the plot of land.

I drove by that beautiful scene nearly every day. And every day, I admired their loveliness. Imagine my surprise when, by midsummer, the property owner had simply mowed them all down! What a loss! I briefly considered knocking on the homeowner's door and demanding an explanation.

The truth is, I knew why. Summer in Mississippi is brutally hot. The flowers were already wilting under the extreme heat. They would never have survived the temperatures. But once again, in the spring, the wildflowers returned and flourished for their season.

God cares for the wildflowers and the grass, even though they wilt in the heat. If he cares about something so seemingly insignificant as seasonal flowers, how much more can we trust that he cares for us? When you consider his tender care for nature, in what ways are you encouraged to believe he cares deeply for your needs?
—B. R.

31–32. “So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.

With his repeat of *do not worry*, Jesus returns to the challenge he issued in the first verse of today's study. In the first century, pagan worshipers often sacrificed to their gods, hoping to appease them and receive blessings. However, for followers of Jesus, the situation is different. Jesus demands nothing besides faith, highlighting the stark contrast between pagan practices and the assurance provided by faith in him.

A tunnel-vision focus on the necessities of life is characteristic of *the pagans*. The underlying Greek word is also translated as “nations” (Matthew 24:9) and “Gentiles” (4:15; 10:5;

10:18; etc.). The underlying term points to non-Jewish peoples. Jesus calls his followers to possess an outlook or mindset different from theirs. The new mindset is based on acknowledging the awareness of the *heavenly Father*. He knows that we need the necessities of life (*all these things*). The question is whether we possess the faith to trust in his provision for us.

That does not imply that God endorses carelessness regarding our earthly responsibilities. Followers of Jesus should be known for their diligence (Hebrews 6:11–12), respected for their honest work (2 Thessalonians 3:7–10), and worthy examples of loving service (Acts 6:1–4).

What Do You Think?

In what ways can we grow in faith to trust in God's provision?

Digging Deeper

How do you balance faith in God and personal responsibility in this regard?

III. Kingdom Living

(Matthew 6:33–34)

A. Righteousness First (v. 33)

33a. “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness,

The verse now before us switches the instruction from the negative (what to avoid) to the positive (what to seek as *first* priority). That priority is *his kingdom and his righteousness*. Jesus does not want his followers to be so consumed by the concerns of this world that those concerns influence the priorities they set, the decisions they make, and the time they spend. There is something else worth seeking that is of far greater, more lasting value.

Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount with a reference to this kingdom, calling it the “kingdom of heaven,” to which the “poor in spirit” belong (Matthew 5:3). The realms of the “kingdom of God” and “kingdom of heaven” are one and the same (compare Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15). Jesus taught his followers to pray, “Your kingdom come” (Matthew 6:10). As his crucifixion drew near, Jesus stood before a puzzled

Pontius Pilate and told him, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). Jesus did not come to institute a kingdom like the typical kingdoms of history, which use military strength to exercise and expand their control. (That was the kind of kingdom that many in Jesus’ day expected the Messiah to establish; compare Acts 1:6). But the power that characterizes God’s kingdom is a different kind of power (1 Corinthians 4:20). His kingdom is “not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17).

The nature of Jesus’ kingdom can also be seen in the words that follow “Your kingdom come” in the Lord’s Prayer. They are the words, “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). To seek first the kingdom of God is to make his will the most important pursuit and priority in our lives. Jesus’ kingdom is not a matter of conquering nations or peoples by force but of individuals submitting to King Jesus and prioritizing his will daily. To seek God’s *righteousness* is to seek what he wants in the world in an effort to make the world right—in a way, to bring heaven to earth by being the salt and light that Jesus calls his followers to be (Matthew 5:13–16).

Thus, we could rephrase the question asked in the previous verse as follows: Do the concerns of the kingdom of God consume our attention to the extent that they influence the priorities we set, the decisions we make, and the money and time we spend trying to satisfy these concerns? Which kingdom are we seeking: the earthly or the heavenly?

What Do You Think?

What concerns and actions are indicative of the kingdom of God and the righteousness of God?

Digging Deeper

What steps will you take to prioritize the kingdom of God in the upcoming week?

33b. “and all these things will be given to you as well.

The phrase *all these things* refers to the food,

drink, and clothing previously discussed. Jesus promises that when we dedicate ourselves to the pursuit of the kingdom of God, the things that consume so much of the world’s attention will no longer dominate our thoughts since they will be provided. As Jesus has already clarified, our loving heavenly Father will be the provider.

We note, however, that countless Christians throughout history and from around the world have suffered and died from dehydration, malnourishment, and starvation. This verse is not saying that these things result from a lack of faith. Instead, it is a promise that God is the ultimate provider for his people. One way that he provides for his people in need is through the generosity of others. As believers “seek first [God’s] kingdom and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33a, above), they will show generosity to others in need (Mark 10:30; Luke 12:33; compare 2 Corinthians 8:3–5).

We must remember that Jesus’ words transcend all times and cultures. They are meant to be a standard for his followers, no matter the time in history in which they are living. Since Jesus’ kingdom is “not of this world,” his promise still holds true, regardless of the time or place in history, when and where we are living.

B. Today, Not Tomorrow (v. 34)

34. “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

The degree to which we hoard for *tomorrow* may indicate the degree to which we trust God to provide for our daily needs. An excellent example

How to Say It

Aramaic	<i>Air-uh-may-ik.</i>
Corinthians	<i>Ko-rin-thee-unz</i> (<i>th</i> as in <i>thin</i>).
Demas	<i>Dee-mus.</i>
Gentiles	<i>Jen-tiles.</i>
Pontius Pilate	<i>Pon-shus</i> or <i>Pon-ti-us</i> <i>Pie-lut.</i>
Thessalonians	<i>Thess-uh-lo-nee-unz</i> (<i>th</i> as in <i>thin</i>).

of this problem is found in Exodus 16:4, where the Israelites were instructed to gather enough manna only for the day (except for the sixth day). Most followed the instructions, but some didn't (Exodus 16:20).

Fear of the future can keep us from seeking first the kingdom of God by making us overly earth-centered (compare the case of Demas in 2 Timothy 4:10). We cannot be servants of "two masters"!

Each day will likely include some measure of *trouble* or tragic, unpleasant circumstances. That's because we continue to live in a world reeling from the curse of sin. Yet, to discipline our thinking and focus our attention on kingdom priorities, we must maintain our intent. Paul's words challenge us: "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things" (Colossians 3:2). This is also part of being "transformed by the renewing of your mind" and living all of life as an act of service to God (see Romans 12:1–2).

What Do You Think?

How can we balance focusing on "things above" with the need to pursue justice and righteousness in the world?

Digging Deeper

In what ways do Micah 6:8; Matthew 5:13–16; Acts 20:32–35; and James 1:27 inform your response?

Living Day by Day

Several years ago, my husband and I found ourselves in the midst of a personal financial crisis. We both needed jobs, and we spent nearly every moment searching online job boards and applying for various positions. In the meantime, bills were piling up, and our pantry stockpile was quickly dwindling. Anxiety was overwhelming us.

Before long, my husband stumbled upon an app offering daily work and pay. He started working immediately, and his wages would be deposited into our bank account each day. There was rarely enough for more than the bills or groceries, but God provided just enough each day. During

that season, we learned to trust God to give us our "daily bread" and not worry about the future. He was our provision.

Living day-by-day does not come easy. We prefer to live in security, knowing for sure that we will have more than enough to cover our own needs. But life is not always that predictable. Our inability to control may be exposed in the form of a troubling health diagnosis, job loss, or unexpected news. How might the Lord teach you to trust him for your daily needs?

—B. R.

Conclusion

A. Connecting People to the Father

All followers of Jesus can demonstrate the difference that living in the trust of a loving heavenly Father can make. Each of us has a sphere of influence that includes people to whom God seems far away. In some cases, this distance can become magnified during the Christmas season for various reasons. A change in people's understanding of God may not occur overnight through our efforts. Still, with patience and prayer, perhaps we can use the illustration in the Lesson Introduction, "pulling back the curtain" and helping people see how much their Father really does love them.

In this season, when we celebrate how God came near in a special way, perhaps in some small way, you can show someone around you, through your simple acts of kindness, that their Father has not forgotten them.

B. Prayer

What a sacred privilege it is to know you as our Father in heaven! May we never take this relationship for granted, and may we help others to see what a blessing it is to know you in that way and the difference it makes in our lives, both now and for eternity. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

No one knows our earthly needs better than our heavenly Father.