

Sermon on the Mount – Look beyond the cage

Matt 6:19-24

We have been going through the Sermon on the Mount, Matt 5-7, WE have called it counter cultural, a life of faith in an upside down world, and today we are looking at Matt 6:19-24.

As I started getting ideas for this message I came across a George Wieland video, George is the NT lecturer at Carey College, who tells a story about his hamsters, He is Scottish and got quite an accent so I hope you can understand him, it's very good and I can't present it like he can, so here he is.

Play George Wieland DVD to 4.27

Jesus had wandered up a hill, hence the Sermon on the Mount, with his disciples, not just the 12, we are told back in 5:1 that a great crowd of people who had come to listen to him. And this crowd would have been a fairly normal sort of group and in this group he would have seen people who were trying to get ahead in life, working hard, saving, investing. Maybe some not working so hard and riding on the coat tails of others. Probably the dishonest, stealing and gaining through whatever means they can. People hoarding and gathering more than they need 'just in case'. Normal people worrying about the basics of what they would eat and what they would drink and what they would wear – normal people like you and me.

And Jesus stood on the Mount and looked at the people and said "look beyond the cage, there is a bigger reality here – you are living in God's world, God's kingdom, not just your own little world limited to your time and experience". Jesus says look beyond and trust God.

Lets read what he actually said. Reading from Matthew 6:19-24

¹⁹"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

²²"The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. ²³But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

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 then goes on saying ‘therefore don’t worry about tomorrow, tomorrow will take care of itself, but seek first the Kingdom of God’. But now I am crossing over into next week’s passage.

So what is Jesus saying in this passage – **look beyond and trust God**.

We so often think that our world is the real world. There is that comment that people make ‘that person is so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly use’. It is usually a criticism about how uselessly religious someone is. And of course there is some truth to that, but Jesus is saying, hang on a minute, maybe we, with our feet firmly planted on in our world have got it wrong, that our world is just a small part of the real world and God’s reality is so much bigger than that which is bounded by our experience. We say, it’s all about me and what I do, and how hard I work - Jesus says look to God, we are all in his hands, and we grow and live by trusting in him.

The Sermon on the Mount is all about transformation, so if we ‘look beyond and trust God’, what changes? What changes if we live in God’s reality, in God’s world, in God’s kingdom?

Changes that take place when we live in God’s reality;

The first thing that changes is **Where we store**

¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The question Jesus asks us – on earth or in heaven?

What does it mean to store in heaven?

Well surely we are talking about Christian character that lasts beyond the grave, of course, witnessing and winning people for the kingdom. But actually

to the people sitting around listening to Jesus it would have been obvious that Jesus was talking about money. Sometimes when we are trying to understand scripture, if we don't try and understand the local context we can miss the point. The people listening to Jesus would have known Jesus was talking about money, he was talking about what they did with their possessions.

There had been a long Jewish tradition of giving to the poor and needy – it's called Alms giving – it still practiced today by Jews and is also one of the 5 pillars of Islam, it is part of their, and our, worship. The principle behind it is; you trust in God, you are free to give to others. Because God is generous to you, you can be generous to others.

It was into this tradition that Jesus spoke, and he was saying – Do you know what God looks for? Generosity, generosity in practical things, and so how do you store up treasure in heaven? You store up treasure in Heaven by participating now, right where you are, being generous to others with the things you possess as he has been generous to you.

It was put very bluntly in Matt 19:16-22 with **Jesus' encounter with the rich young man**. The young comes to Jesus and asks 'How can I get into heaven?' and Jesus says, you know the rules. And the young man says, yep kept all of them. And Jesus says 'excellent, one more thing – sell all of your possessions and give them to the poor and you'll have treasure in heaven. Then you can come and follow me.' And the young man went away sad as he had many possessions!

You want treasure in Heaven? Surrender your treasure on earth! Not because possessions are wrong, or we have to make ourselves poor, but because what you do for others lasts, that treasure holds its value beyond this life. Whereas what you gather for yourself is nothing more than what George's hamster was gathering under its straw – mouldy carrots and limp lettuce.

What else changes **when we live in God's reality?**

How we see

²²"The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. ²³But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

What is this about healthy and unhealthy eyes?

Again there was a Jewish tradition that talked about a healthy eye and an evil eye and again it was really about money. It was about being either **generous or stingy** and that is the issue here. How do we look, with what attitude do we look at what happens to other people? The test is – how do you respond when God blesses somebody else? It was like that with the hamsters. How did hamster 1 respond when hamster 2 got a piece of carrot? “God bless you Hamster 2, what a great piece of Carrot you got there, enjoy every minute of it.” Not likely! Hey where is mine, and then all hell breaks out in the cage.

It’s the same reaction that so often happens with us. God blesses someone and we immediately think, hey why not me? Why has God given that to them, that money, or that position, or possession, or that ability or talent, or whatever and we look grudgingly, and that is the unhealthy eye, the diseased eye, the evil eye.

But what about the healthy eye. That is the one that says, I am open to Gods’ light and I recognise in someone else the generosity of God.

Jesus talks about this more bluntly in Matt 20:1-16 in the **story about the vineyard workers**. I am sure most of you will remember how the owner goes out in the morning to find people to work in the vineyard for the day and employs a number of them for a \$1 a day which was the going rate at the time. At noon he decides to employ some more workers to speed up the process and then again at 1 hour before knock off time employs yet some more to finish the job. And then at the end of the day those he had only just employed came forward to be paid and they were given \$1, then the other who had been working all day came up, and they got \$1 as well, and they were annoyed! That’s what they had been contracted for – but they were annoyed – we should get paid more than them, we worked longer, we deserve more than them, it’s not fair. And the owner says to them, is your eye evil, the same expression Jesus uses here in the Sermon on the Mount

¹³ “He answered one of them, ‘Friend, I haven’t been unfair! Didn’t you agree to work all day for the usual wage? ¹⁴ Take your money and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. ¹⁵ Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Is your eye envious because I am generous to others?’

Is your eye evil, the same expression, because I am generous?

And this is the challenge for us. If we are living in the big reality of God's world, then we are glad to see his generosity to others. If we are in the tiny, or partial reality of our little world, then we tend to be annoyed, selfish and resentful.

What else changes **when we live in God's reality??**

It changes **whom we serve.**

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.

The question Jesus asks us here is **serving gain or serving God?** Or for the hamster who are you serving. Are you serving the guy with the carrot or are you serving the carrot?

This is a real issue for those of us in Christian service, not just paid Christian service but all Christian service. Who are we actually serving? Are we serving God or are we serving the gain that we hope to get through doing whatever we are doing?

This is where I have a few issues around some churches that teach prosperity doctrine, serve God and he will bless you, make your life better, more satisfying, more fulfilling, the more you serve the more he will bless. And that sounds a bit like the life of the cage, if I run in the wheel he will give me the carrot. Stand up and look cute, you might get another one. And I think any of us who serve God could very easily fall into this trap.

We often think - I have got God worked out, I know how to get money out of him, I know how to get him to answer prayer, follow these principles, follow these rules, follow these practices and we will get God resourcing us for what we want. It's meant to be the other way around!! That is serving the gain not God.

Again Jesus takes this issue head on with the temple traders when he turns a few tables in the temple. The temple traders' job was to help people worship God by providing appropriate sacrifices for people to offer to the Lord. And I am sure when this was first set up was a good and helpful service. But then

over time, corruption and greed set in and the traders ended up serving gain rather than serving God and Jesus objected to that, rather violently!

What else changes **when we live in God's reality??**

It changes **what we strive for**

Our things or God's kingdom

And I am only going to mention this because it is not really part of my passage for today, David is speaking on this next week. But let me steal a few of his verses.

³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Don't worry about all the little things in the cage, you live in a far bigger reality, you know the owner and he loves and wants to care for you.