

# The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Bill White

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



## The Sermon Text — Matthew 6:24-34

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

‘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? 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? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 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? Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for 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.

### SERMON

When I first read the lessons for this week I thought, “What a strange passage to read in church during a week when thousands of people are participating in this country’s great political process by letting their voices be heard. The national media tells us that everything rides on Wisconsin. People tell us that this is a make or break period in our history. We are told that what happens here will determine whether we get our hands on the issues that define us or it will terminate all of the hard work of past generations.

And then the scripture for this day says: *Don’t be anxious about your life. Don’t worry about what to eat, what to drink.* No easy task.

First, let’s be sure we know what Jesus is not telling his followers. He is not telling them that what you eat is unimportant. Nor is he telling them that they shouldn’t care about what they look like, what they will wear. He is saying: don’t be *anxious* about it.

Some people have suggested that Jesus is speaking primarily to the perfectionists, people who worry about the smallest details. In his book, “Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff...and it’s all small stuff...” Richard Carlson writes, “I have yet to meet an absolute perfectionist whose life is filled with inner peace. The need for perfection and the desire for inner tranquility conflict with each other.” I think Jesus is talking to all of us and saying, let a few things ride. Pick your battles. Select your concerns.

Will worrying help you to live longer? There is an old saying: By running in the boat you don’t get to land any quicker.

Immediately after Jesus’ words on not being anxious he comes to the theme of this passage, which is really a theme of Old and New Testaments: first things first. I told this story to you before, and even included it in a little book that I published called, “In Over Our Heads.” Good stories bear repeating. *An expert in time management was speaking to a group of students. He pulled out a one-gallon, wide-mouth mason jar and set it on a table in front of him. He then produced a dozen fist-sized rocks and carefully placed them, one at a time, into the jar. When the jar was filled to the top and not another rock of that size would fit, he asked, “Is this jar full?”*

*Everyone in the class said, “Yes.”*

*He next reached under the table and pulled out a bucket of gravel. He then dumped the gravel slowly into the jar, pausing to shake the jar, which allowed the gravel to work itself down into the space between the big rocks. He then asked again, “Is this jar full?”*

*This time the class responded, “Probably not.”*

*He smiled and pulled up a jar of sand, which he poured into the jar. The sand slid into the spaces between the gravel and the rocks.*

*Again he asked, “Is this jar full.”*

*The class shouted, “Absolutely not.”*

*“Right you are,” he said as he pulled up a pitcher of water and poured it until the water reached the brim. When he finished he asked the class, “What did you learn from this?”*

*One student said, “I learned that no matter how full your schedule appears, if you try really hard, you can always fit something in.”*

*The class booed, and waited for the teacher’s response. “What I learned,” he said, “is that if you don’t put the big rocks into your jar first you’ll never get them in.”*

So, what are the big rocks in your life? In case you need a little help, Jesus tells us to “Seek first his kingdom and what is right, and everything else will be ours as well.”

I’m sure everyone of us can think of all kinds of times when we spent our time putting little rocks in our jar and had no room left over for the big rocks. I had a roommate who got tied up in little things. Before he studied he would sharpen all of his pencils, line up his notebooks, adjust the lamp over his desk and make certain that everything was in the right order. Meanwhile, other friends would have been working for 30-40 minutes. First things first.

Martin Luther explains the First Commandment, “You shall have no other gods,” this way: You should fear,

love and trust in God above everything else.” First things first. You get the big rocks in and there is room for others.

“My family is the most important thing in my life. They are my highest value,” the man told me. “Now my wife and I are separated. This separation is tearing me apart.”

“Your wife says that you’re seldom home,” I responded. “You frequently don’t get home in time to see the children before they go to bed. She says you spend many nights at the bar with your buddies. Values are something we do, not just things we say or think. Would you say your children are your highest value?”

During this protracted debate on the direction our state is headed we are talking a lot about wages and money. Both are important. We need money to buy food, provide clothing and shelter. Here is where the teaching of Jesus is vital. You need money, but you cannot *serve* money. The truth is you cannot serve God AND money. He doesn’t say you shouldn’t, he says “You can’t.” It is not possible.

When we begin to make decisions based on money alone, we frequently make bad decisions. They are bad because they are not in our best interest. Good decisions help us choose work that is honest and needed. It normally means we work with people we respect. Bad decisions mean we end up doing work we hate and work with people we don’t respect.

Years ago I knew a wonderful man by the name of Vince. One day over lunch he told me his life story. He was a supervisor for a utility. “Do you like your job?” I asked.

Without hesitation he said, “No.”

I said, “Have you ever had a job you liked?”

Again, without hesitation he said, “I was happiest when I was working on the line, fixing things. Now I spend my entire time settling disputes between workers or between workers and management. It tears me up. I’m very good with my hands. I was very good at fixing things, so good that they promoted me. I worked hard and they kept promoting me. I’m not very good with personnel work. Now I am so far removed from fixing things that I can barely stand to go to work.”

“What prevents you from finding work where you can do what you want?” He answered, “The money. We need the money. My wife says we need more than a man on the line makes.”

I asked, “Does she like the Vince you have become?”

He seemed startled before he answered. “Maybe not. Our marriage isn’t as good as it used to be.”

I said, “I think you are working for the wrong boss.”

He said, “You don’t think I should work for the utility company?”

I said, “You aren’t working for the utility company, you are working for money. Money is a hard taskmaster. I don’t know for whom you ought to work, but I know you shouldn’t be working for money.”

A few months later I moved from that community. Several months later I received a short note that said, “I’ve changed jobs. I’m fixing things again.”

Not everyone has choices. Sometimes a job is a job. However, there are times when we choose vocations we don’t like to make money we think we need. What happens is that we gain the world, but we lose our souls.

Work for God and God will give you your soul. God will give you your life. When you serve God first, you get everything else in return. When we seek happiness first, we usually don’t find it. If we seek God first we get both God and happiness.

If we invest in our families, our loved ones, in principles, we are assured of one thing, we will live with contentment. First things first.

How much is Warren Buffet or Bill Gates worth. At this moment they are both worth slightly more than I am. There is a day coming when we will be worth the same. When all three of us are dead we will be worth exactly the same. In the next life they will not be any richer than I will be. I’ve checked, and they won’t be allowed to take anything with them. As one man said, “No U-Haul in heaven.”

Leona Sonderegger is a wonderful supporter in our congregation – she is just a few months short of her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. She has given Bethel several large monetary gifts. One day when I was visiting her at her apartment in Arizona I thanked her for what she had done. She said, “The money isn’t really mine. I know that. I’m just the trustee. I try to be as responsible as I possibly can with it. I inherited it from my husband, and now I spend it like it belongs to God.” You can have both God and money, but you cannot serve God and money.

At the core of our faith lies the conviction that everything belongs to God. We are trustees, stewards of gifts. The land, the paper money, the stock, is held in trust. When we are generous we are recognizing the true owner.

Seek first God’s kingdom and what is right, and the rest will work itself out. Identify the big rocks in your life, and put them in your jar first. Amen © 2011