

Sermon Title: Be Devoted
Biblical Text: Matthew 6:16-24
Teaching Series: Kingdom Being
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Matthew 6:16-24

“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

Jesus is in the middle of detailing three spiritual practices. We've looked at giving and praying. Today we'll talk about fasting. Through each of these different

pericopes, Jesus is exposing the same idea. He's cautioning his disciples about the destructive nature of hypocrisy. Within religious context like churches, even this church, it's easy to put on a show. That's what hypocrisy is. *It's pretending.* And though giving, praying, and fasting can and should be deeply formative and worshipful experiences, our hearts easily transform a discipline of devotion into an act of self-glorification—something we use to gain approval or, as Jesus says, *to be praised and seen by others* (see vv.2,5,16). And so Jesus' instruction for his disciples has been to seek discretion, seek solitude ... to embrace secret communion with the Father, who see and is in secret (see vv.4,6,18). He's not favoring private devotion over public worship. Rather, he's healing us from the wounds that cause hypocrisy and the wounds caused by hypocrisy.

However, Jesus isn't just concerned with the pretending of religion. Today he cautions his disciples about the secular allure of materialism. You see, Jesus is safeguarding his disciples from two extremes. He doesn't want them to base their identity on religious performance (that's the moral temptation). But he also wants to protect them from defining their lives through earthly pleasures (that's the modern temptation). Fasting is meant to shape the believer's spiritual imagination, helping us conceive of a life beyond this one.

To make this connection, Jesus employs a word which is best left untranslated. It's the word *Mammon*. In the ESV and NIV it's translated as *money*. But *money* barely scratches the surface of the concept. Mammon is an Aramaic word which was transliterated into Greek. It appears four times in the New Testament, each time

spoken by Jesus (see Matthew 6:24, Luke 16:9,11,13). And while Mammon is not strictly a negative term, Jesus personifies Mammon in our passage today as a rival deity; a false god. Many scholars believe by using Mammon like a proper name, Jesus has in mind not just an idea but a demonic power (see *The Life We're Looking For*, 75).

So we should take Jesus' warning about treasuring the things of earth or Mammon seriously. This is not simply some immaterial benign commodity, but a force which Christians must understand and resist. I think this is what holds Jesus' attention in this entire passage and so that's what I want to talk about today. I want to talk about Mammon. I want to talk about what it is and how we resist it.

Here's how we'll work through the text ...

- *Fasting* from Mammon
- *Understanding* Mammon
- *Hating* Mammon

[Prayer]

Movement 1: Fasting from Mammon (vv.16-18)

Throughout history, God's people have fasted for many different reasons. Fasting is part of our spiritual heritage. Taking a break from food and water, in particular, is a

way of learning to deny ourselves, repent, and trust the Lord in a fresh way. It often accompanies seeking forgiveness or direction and lament ...

- Nehemiah led God's people to fast for confession (Nehemiah 1:4).
- When Jonah preached repentance to Nineveh, the people fasted and wept (Jonah 3:7).
- Esther called God's people to fast before she advocated for them (Esther 4:3).
- Daniel worshipped God through prayer and fasting (Daniel 9:3).
- After the Apostle Paul became a Christian, he fasted from food and water for three days (Acts 9:9).
- Jesus himself fasted for 40 days and 40 nights, resisting the allure of Satan's empty promises (Matthew 4:2).
- The early church fasted and prayed as they sent out missionaries and church planters all over Asia Minor (Acts 13:3).

Food and water and other material goods are not bad. Christians aren't called to fast because the physical world is evil. Rather, we're called to fast because the material world in general and Mammon in particular are not our saviors; they are not our deepest need and gladness.

In his sermon, Jesus doesn't strictly command fasting. Rather he assumes his disciples will fast. He focuses on how; on the attitude and disposition of our souls when we fast. ***Read Matthew 6:16-18 ... “And when you fast, do not look gloomy***

like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you." In the OT fasting was commanded once a year on the Day of Atonement (see Leviticus 23:27). Yet records indicate that many religious teachers in Jesus' day were fasting twice a week. So a practice has emerged foreign to the Bible. Jesus does expect his disciples will take breaks from food and drink, and other worldly distractions, as a practice of worship. However, like giving and praying, fasting comes with temptations. There are some in the religious class who, Jesus says, "*disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others*" (v.16). This is deeply ironic, and ultimately hypocritical. *Why? Because in abstaining from worldly things they are seeking worldly praise.* They're acting like they are *denying* themselves while in actuality they are *hoarding* glory for themselves. Today we might call this *virtue signally*.

Jesus sees beyond the behavior and addresses the issue underneath the issue: *the heart*. You see, as before, fasting isn't the problem. The heart is. It's soul that needs healing. And throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is reframing righteousness around the heart. He invites his disciples to reject the destructive and hollow practice of hypocrisy which manifests in giving, praying, and fasting. He does so by welcoming us into solitude and intimacy. He wants us to see fast as part our inward formation, a private matter between them and the Lord. Again, this is not a condemnation of public displays of faith. (We need look no further than Jesus' very

public death to understand the power of public faith.) Rather Jesus is healing our wounds which cause us to pretend. He's condemning the habit of fasting from food while feasting on Mammon. Which, by the way, is exactly what Mammon wants. Mammon wants us to act and even believe we have denied its power, when in actuality we're serving its purposes.

Remember, Mammon is not a thing.

It's a force, a power, a will.

It's a false god.

We don't always even know we're pretending. That's why we need healing. Jesus is saying we can convince ourselves (or perhaps Mammon convinces us) that we're abstaining from the very thing we're indulging. We do this whenever we seek glory for something which is meant to bring God glory. Fasting from Mammon is a good and healthy and a worshipful practice of faith. We should regularly abstain from food and water and other worldly distractions like media for the sake of spiritual formation. We should abstain from alcohol and shopping and technology as the Lord directs, in order to cultivate a right relationship with him, detaching our hearts from loving this world too much. But we must do so appropriately, without hypocrisy.

Movement 2: Understanding Mammon (vv.19-23)

So, how can we be sure we're fasting properly? How do we make sure Mammon doesn't gaslight us? Well, Jesus continues by helping us understand Mammon

better, directing our attention to what we value and how we see ... Look at v.19.

Read Matthew 6:19-21 ... "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Mammon is not a religious issue. Mammon is a human issue. That means it's not simply a struggle for first-century Jerusalem but also twenty-first century Chicago. And so, Jesus is not only correcting the wrong impulses of moralistic cultures around things like fasting, but he's also correcting the errant practices of modern society's relationship with stuff.

Theologian Marva Dawn wrote about Mammon in the opening to her book, *Unfettered Hope*. It's a book about how we can live with faith in a world of affluence and abundance. She notes that Mammon and the treasures of this life "***tend to overstep their proper role***" (xx). Meaning that money and possessions make promises only God can keep. Jesus, then, delivers a timely lesson to all of us who love our brands and our bakeries; our clothes and remodeled houses; our restaurants and the latest technology. He says, *don't treasure what is on earth*. Now, he's not saying don't own things. He's not even saying don't enjoy things or save up for the future. He's not demonizing the physical world. He made the physical world! He's saying, *don't trust the promises of Mammon. Don't love it. Don't treasure it. Why?* Well, he gives us three reasons.

- Firstly, we shouldn't treasure earthly things because they're corruptible. Jesus says earthly treasures are vulnerable to earthly deterioration. What this world gives, this world takes. Moths eat them up earthly things. Rust destroys them. Thieves steal them. Mammon is corruptible and loseable.
- Secondly, we shouldn't treasure earthly things because they feed on selfishness. Notice, Jesus says don't lay up **"for yourselves."** Pastor John Stott explains, *"What Jesus forbids his followers is the selfish accumulation of goods ... the foolish fantasy that a person's life consists in the abundance of his possessions; and the materialism which tethers our hearts to the earth"* (*The Sermon on the Mount*, 155). You see, materialism isn't about the material. It's about self. It's about our relationships with the material. Mammon promotes selfishness.
- Thirdly, we shouldn't treasure earthly things because somehow what we treasure corrupts our hearts. Jesus says, **"where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"** (v.21). In other words, what we treasure shapes who we are. What we esteem affects us. Or as poet William Blake wrote, *"we become what we behold."* Remember, Mammon is not a stagnate idea. Mammon is a force with an agenda. It's a false god. It wants to transform us into its image and enlist us for its purposes. In 2011 when Jeep released it's newest Grand Cherokee model, their slogan was "The things we make, make us." This is a terrifying admission of the modern mantra of Mammon. *What*

we buy, we believe, makes us. What we wear, we believe, makes us. What we eat, we believe, makes us. Mammon controls and corrupts.

That's Mammon.

Church, *do you see?* This is why Jesus wants us to fast appropriately. When we fast out of worship and trust through self-denial, we're learning to put earthly things in their proper place. By detaching ourselves from food or alcohol or social media or shopping for a period of time ... we learn that our personhood is not dependent on Mammon. We learn that the treasures of heaven are not corruptible ... selfish... or corrupting.

So, how do we know? How do we know if we are treasuring something too much? How do we know if what we are treasuring is corruptible and is corrupting us?

Jesus directs our attention to our eyes. ***Read Matthew 6:22-23 ... "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!"***

Jesus moves from what we treasure, to what and how we see. In fact, he's comparing a person navigating spiritual life with sight with someone who has to move through life blind.

Someone who is in the light and has the light, with someone who is in the dark, in whom darkness dwells. That's our short answer. *How do we know what we're treasuring and what is corrupting us?* We need sight. We need spiritual vision.

But Mammon tries to blind people with the pleasures of this life. So we keep wandering from thrill to thrill ... purchase to purchase ... pleasure to pleasure, all the while avoiding God's commands and what he says life is about.

Think about Netflix. In 2016 Netflix introduced the 'play next' button. In fact, you don't even need to click it. In a few seconds the next episode of Indian Matchmaker simply starts. In 2021 they piloted the 'play something' button. You don't even need to choose what you watch, they will pick for you. Netflix is not evil. Watching and even bingeing television is not wrong. However, this is precisely how Mammon works. *You like that? Here's more. Are you sad? Here's a fix. Don't know what to watch? We got you. We're are seeing and our bodies are fully of darkness.*

Jesus wants his people to see so we can flourish. Jesus wants his people to live in the light. It's only in the light—surrendered to God's Spirit, Word, and people—we're able to discern if fasting is about our reputation or God's glory. It's only in the light we're able to know if that new pair of Air Maxes is about covetousness or enjoying God's good creation. It's only in the light we're able to know if our retirement account is an attempt to secure our own future or if it's received as a gift from God. It's only in the light we know if Mammon is corrupting us or if God is blessing us. Only in the light do we know where our hearts really reside.

Movement 3: Hating Mammon (v.24)

Now, *what's the big deal? What if we fast to be seen too much or we buy too many shoes or trust our 401ks a bit too much or dabble in loving this world too much? What's the big deal?* Jesus explains with the strongest language possible.

He's so serious about fasting and treasuring heavenly things and living in the light, that he describes Mammon as an opposing deity or master. It's a false god. ***Read Matthew 6:24 ... "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."*** Historically, Jesus words aren't factual. Slaves in Jesus' day could have multiple masters. But what he's communicating is that the agenda of Mammon and God are so diametrically opposed to one another that it's impossible and illogical to serve both. The kingdom of God and the kingdom of Mammon are building alternate realities with completely different values and materials and aspirations.

You serve one or the other.

You love one and hate the other.

They do not mix.

Writer Andy Crouch has thought extensively about the nature of Mammon in the Bible as well as in the modern world. In his book, *The Life We're Looking For* he lays out Mammon's three primary agendas or desires which explain why Jesus is so emphatic that God and Mammon can't mix. Crouch frames these as three things

Mammon tries to separate; things God has made to dwell in harmony. I think these help us understand what it is we should hate and who it is we should love.

- First, Mammon wants to separate power from relationships. Think about how money and the right app allow you to get things done without friendship. Before that app or without money, we used to rely on community more. Getting groceries when you're sick. *There's an app for that.* Moving your belongings across the country. *There's an app for that.* Get a ride home from the airport. *There's an app for that.* Again, apps and money are not inherently evil. However they are steal from us; they're wooing us to believe we're powerful on our own and can live without being vulnerable with other people. That's exactly what Mammon wants.
- Second, Mammon wants to separate abundance from dependance. It's related to the first. Crouch explains, "*the more we enter the money economy, the less personal our world becomes*" (73). Think about when you were a baby, a kid ... you were utterly dependent on people, for many reasons, one of which being because you had no money or possessions. The poor and the homeless also must depend on each other in ways that the wealthy, those with abundance don't need to be dependent. Think about your retirement accounts (whether you have them or not) ... these are marketed to make us trust that the abundance of money and resources will protect us from being dependent on each other and our families. Retirement accounts aren't evil. A

savings ago is not wrong. But they're not your hope. That's exactly what Mammon wants.

- Third, Mammon wants to separate being from personhood. Mammon does not see persons. Mammon promises only to fulfill fleshly cravings, which in turn belittles persons into beings detached from personhood. Crouch defines a person through the lens of Deuteronomy 6:5 as "*a heart-soul-mind-strength complex designed for love*" (33). Mammon sees people as a flesh bag of urges; urges it vows to satisfy to give us meaning and enjoyment. When we know we bear the holy image, when we know we are the ones for whom Christ died we will resist anything which minimizes our humanity and the humanity of our neighbor. That's exactly what Mammon wants.

Mammon is consistently breaking down the image of God imprinted on every human person. Therefore Jesus does not simply tell us to fast from food and water regularly to cultivate a grateful heart. Nor does he tell us to disdain the material world. Rather he says resist the allure to love and trust and serve Mammon, the force which seeks to destroy you. You should hate Mammon. *Why?* Because in its attempts to separate power from relationships, abundance from dependence, and being from personhood it's telling you that you are god. *You are powerful. You are independent. You can be whoever you want to be.* Trying to be your own god is not only a violation against your humanity but it's dangerous and idolatrous.

This is why Jesus' teaching is healing.

It's healing us from the wounds of hypocrisy.

Through his death, Jesus rejoins what Mammon separates. You see, the one who was independently powerful, initiated relationship with his creation. The one who dwelled in eternal abundance became a dependent human being, within an interdependent human family and community. The one who was a being unto himself, became a human person built for relationships—he was and is the image of the invisible God (see Colossians 1:15). In Christ, the wounds of Mammon are healed. In Christ, the power of Mammon is destroyed. In Christ, the force of Mammon can be resisted. *How?* Through love. By getting our loves in order. When we love God, not stuff ... when we worship God and not technology ... when we trust God and not money ... when we fast from money and possession out of devotion to the Lord ... we rob Mammon of its power.

The more we follow the Lord, the less we'll crave Mammon.

The more we worship the Lord, the less we'll trust Mammon.

The more we love the Lord, the more we'll hate Mammon.