

Eighth Sunday after Epiphany

RE-MASTERING WORRIERS

Matthew 6:24-34

The Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany Analysis by Ronald Neustadt

24No 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.

25Therefore 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? 26Look 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? 27And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 28And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30But 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? 31Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ 32For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

34So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

Note: Matthew connects (with a “therefore”) two sayings of Jesus that do not appear together in Luke (or Thomas): the saying on serving two masters (lords) and the saying on worrying / having anxiety.

Also worth noting: The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament indicates that the Greek mamonas (translated by NRSV as “wealth” in v. 24) comes from the Aramaic noun mamon, whose derivation is uncertain, “though most likely comes from ‘MN = ‘that in which one trusts’ (J. Bustorf).

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Being Worried

We know we shouldn't worry. We know it doesn't help. We are even told it can harm our mental and physical health. But still we worry. About what? You name it. Jesus speaks of worrying about what we will eat or drink or wear. We who have more than enough to eat and drink and wear still find plenty to be anxious about, though. Will there be enough Medicare for baby-boomers? Will there be any Social Security funds for their children? Will my investments of time and energy and money produce the results I want, etc. On top of that, we sometimes cannot make ourselves stop worrying even when we try. And that only adds to our worry.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Having “Little Faith”

It's no wonder, really, because we have an even deeper problem. We keep putting our trust in Mammon. In fact, that's what Mammon is, by definition – stuff we put our trust in. But Mammon is a master that simply cannot give us what we keep wishing it could. It is a master that just keeps taking from us (energy, time, and money) and gives us only worry in return. After all, moth and rust corrupt, and thieves break in to steal. Master Mammon is a master (owner/lord) who does not value us. Deep down we may know that we have sold ourselves into the ownership of a deadly

master. Still, we keep getting sucked into being a slave (doulos) to it, trusting it to be for us what it cannot be. Master Mammon is a master who is too little to be all that we trust it to be. Faith in a master who is too little is “little faith” (v. 30).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Being Owned by Master Mammon*

The problem with “little faith” is where it gets us, i.e. under the ownership of a master who leaves us “in the darkness” (see Matt. 6:23, immediately preceding this pericope). If our trust is in Master Mammon (and how can we help it?) then it is not in God. We’ve chosen a Master/Owner different from the one who created us, our “Original Owner,” if you will. Finally, our Original Owner/Master can only say, “If you want Mammon as your master, then you can have Mammon, but you won’t have me-and you will end up in the dark, with nothing but rusty, moth-eaten stuff.”

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Getting Re-Mastered by Our Original Owner*

But our Original Master is not content to let us live and die under the ownership of an alien master. Our Original Owner/Master comes to be with us (Immanuel) in order to do what it takes to bring us back into his ownership.

He proclaims the good news of God’s reign of mercy, and heals “every disease and every sickness” (4:23). And when he finds people (even outsiders) trusting him and his proclamation, like the man in the parable (13:44) who sells everything he has and buys a field because there is something in it that he treasures, our Original Owner gives up everything he has in order to buy us back. (Thanks to Pr. Jerry Burce for this insight into this parable as a lens through which to view all of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.)

Here's a Master who values us far more than birds of the air or flowers of the field. Here's a Master who does not leave us in the dark, with nothing but rusty, moth-eaten stuff. Here's a Master who is not too little and who does not require more than he can ever give. Here's a Master who gives his life for us.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Trusting Our New Owner, i.e. Having "Great Faith"*

When God gets it through to us how highly valued we are, we find ourselves able to do what previously we could not do-trust our Original Owner. We trust our "heavenly Father" when the heavenly Father assures us that he knows what we need. "Little faith" (trusting in a master who is "too little") gets replaced with "great faith" (trusting a Master who feeds even the birds of the air and clothes the grass of the field).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Mastering Worry*

Trust in God, our original owner/master, results in our being able to let go of worry (at least for a while). Instead, we can spend our time, energy, money on "striving first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness." That is, we can spend ourselves furthering the gracious and merciful rule of the One who treasures us enough that he gave his life to buy us back from the other master who offered only darkness, death, and corruption. For a sampling of the various arenas where the furthering of God's gracious and merciful rule can take place, see the rest of the Sermon on the Mount.