

STRENGTH FOR TODAY

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Matthew 6:19-34 gives us an opportunity to use a simple method of Bible study. It consists of asking a question and reading scripture with an eye for answers. We may be surprised at how often scripture addresses such questions. Familiar scriptures take on a fresh light because new experiences establish a new context for seeing new applications. The answers were not noticed before because we were not prepared for them. Matthew 6 offers insights into matters we never thought the Bible even addressed.

This study of Matthew 6:19-34 asks how we can get the strength to deal with life. The question is not about physical strength but about mental and emotional strength—the ability to cope with frustration, fragmentation, insecurity, disorientation. Life forces us into situations bigger than we are. Does scripture teach us how to handle such problems? These verses in the Sermon on the Mount have implications for psychological strength. Of course, there are other items of interest here as well, but our study focuses on five principles that enhance a person's power to cope.

First, spend resources on eternal things. This advice comes from 6:19-21:

Don't lay up treasure on earth where moths and rust consume and thieves break in and steal, but lay up treasure in heaven where moths and rust do not ruin them and thieves do not break in and steal them. Your heart will be where your treasure is.

To have strength, we have to expend ourselves on things that last—on eternal things, in fact. Frustration so often comes from getting wrapped up in pursuits that take up time, talent, and treasure far out of proportion to their minimal returns.

In America young men like cars. They buy them, fix them up, shine them up, and spend a lot of time driving them around. In effect many organize their lives around them. While they are still in high school, they may get a part-time job at a grocery store and use most of what they make to buy the car, insure it, fix it up, buy gasoline and accessories for it. To a certain extent, this is probably interesting and satisfying to them at the time, but they have little to show for it later. At the local junkyard a few years later, they will see that car rusted out, the hood sticking up, the wheels gone, the windows broken out, the seats rotting away—the very same car someone spent so much time, energy, and money on.

Inevitably whatever receives our time and energy ends up like a car in the junkyard, because material things disintegrate over time. At best our concerted efforts only slow down that process a little. From simply a financial standpoint it is not wise to borrow in order to buy depreciating assets. Experiences like these create the unconscious feeling that life itself keeps crumbling in our hands even though we put so much into it. Laying up treasure in heaven means putting our heart into things that are not subject to deterioration and decay.

Agriculture is a major industry. As years go by, farming operations get bigger because it takes the produce of more land to support the people that farm it. Consequently, many houses built a couple of generations ago stand vacant throughout the countryside. These unoccupied homes have hay bales in them or have the first floor removed so they can be used as hog sheds. They often have ornate trim work around the porches and eaves. Somebody went to a lot of work cutting out that trim work, building that chimney, laying up those stone walls. Now the structures are rotting down despite all that effort.

These buildings illustrate what Jesus says about material things in general. When we put our whole selves into deteriorating things, we feel empty because no lasting fulfillment comes from our work. The house we painted a few years ago is starting to peal and chip again. The car we bought six years ago has a rust spot developing over the back right wheel. The new washing machine we bought eight years ago quit working yesterday. Our own bodies decay; we cannot even avoid the problem by concentrating on ourselves much less cars and houses. A recent photograph laid beside one from twenty years ago tells the story. We are part of a system that degrades over time (entropy). Consequently, the only escape is to rise above that realm by putting our interests in things that do not get old. Putting our energies into what lasts brings a sense of accomplishment and worth. Not everything has to last, but amid so much flux we need something that does not change so we can have some continuity and permanence.

Do everything as to the Lord. Verses 22-24 use some interesting imagery for harmony and wholeness:

The lamp of the body is the eye. If, then, your eye is single your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is evil, your whole body will be full of darkness. If the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness! No man can serve two masters because he will either hate one and love the other or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and riches.

It is rather straightforward to say, “The light of the body is the eye”; but curiously Jesus adds, “*If the light that is in you is darkness it is very dark indeed.*” Perhaps the sense is this: when our eyes work right, we see one image. But if our eyes are “evil,” we see double. A cross-eyed or walleyed person sees two images. The same effect can be achieved by pressing against the side

of one eye; two images result because the eyes are not in focus with each other. There are two basketball goals, two diverging lanes on the road ahead, two needles to thread. This experience pictures what it is like to be drawn in two directions at once. On one hand, we want tangible things; on the other hand, we want intangible things like interpersonal association with God and other people. We want to enjoy ourselves; yet we need stability and centeredness at the same time. We feel pulled apart by two different frames of reference; we have two “masters.” Having two “masters” would make two ultimate authorities in a slave’s life, which would be an impossible circumstance. Jesus uses this impossible picture to teach us that it is impossible to live with two ultimate frames of reference in life—God and mammon, as he calls them (6:24).

Instead of living in purely materialistic fashion or trying to hold onto the diverging worlds of materialism and spirituality, Jesus subordinates the material realm under the spiritual one. That organizes life under one frame of reference without denying the material world we live in. A non-religious person does not obtain lasting fulfillment. The half religious person is even more uncomfortable than the straight-out materialist, because he is pulled apart by opposing drives. The only realistic alternative is to be fully religious. When we prioritize transcendent things—the kingdom of “heaven,” everything else gets taken care of. Putting spiritual things first lets everything else fall in place. If the two frames of reference are ever in conflict, the higher one takes precedence. By nature, persons must have a sense of wholeness. When God is really the Lord of a person’s life, things not distinctively spiritual combine with the spiritual orientation to eliminate fragmentation and create wholeness.

Relieving fragmentation in turn relieves frustration and meaninglessness. Wholeness structures life and provides principles for deciding what we do. Life revolves around one center and God is that center. Wealth is not on one side pulling us one way and spiritual ideals on the other side pulling us another way. When we do everything as to the Lord, we unite all aspects of life. We do not feel as if we have lost our identity because we are fragmented by opposing demands. Our various aspirations line up in the same direction. We do not want to do this and that and the other thing. Rather, God stands as the “principle” of selectivity. Instead of being separate and divided, the aspects of life unite and reinforce each other. The Head of the spiritual dimension puts in perspective our use of material things and makes one big picture and one ultimate goal. There is nothing wrong with material things. The problem lies in making them everything or making them ultimate. But if we put material things under the control of the creator, we can use them to accomplish spiritual ends, which gives us triumph and worth.

Trust God to supply needs (6:25-32). Jesus tells us not to worry about food or drink or clothes. He uses birds and grass as illustrations. They do not worry about such things.

Don't you think you are more valuable than they are? Even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like the flowers in the field or the grass in the field. Why do you need to worry about what you are going to wear or look like? These are the kinds of the things all the Gentiles seek after.

For strength in life, we trust God for needs. The point is “needs.” Not all wants are necessities; many of them are desirables. They are fun; they are nice, but we do not “need” them. Christ guarantees that our Father has set up creation in a way that provides for what we need.

Birds and grass are specific images for a general idea. God’s design correlates an answer with every need. He did not build life forms with a need for food and water and then not make anything to eat or drink. If he has provided for even the simplest animal life in that way, he has surely provided for those created in his image. God is aware of our needs and has made ample provision for satisfying them; if we reduce our desires to a level that corresponds with his provisions, we avoid the frustration that comes from overexpectation.

The difficulty is not so much need but want. Someone living in a culture without motor vehicles does not feel deprived over not having a car. But if everybody he knows expects to own one, he feels underprivileged without a car. The problem is not the lack of a car, but his expectancy. The situation presents a problem because of the difference between expectancy and experience. He feels as if he is living in deprivation of norm. Much of our frustration lies in our imagination, because God has provided for the things in reality itself. Once we understand where our frustration and anxiety are coming from, we can do a better job of dealing with them. We can reduce wants and live in better conformity with the true situation.

Evidently Jesus does not take into consideration here the fact that many people exist in hard circumstances and some even starve, go homeless, and lack clothing. Such things are difficult to fit with what Jesus says unless we consider them as aside from his point—as exceptions to his words. He states a general truth about how nature functions. Suffering in these areas almost always traces back to human sin rather than divine failure. Jesus’ approach, however, does have application even to hard circumstances. God does not necessarily deliver us from suffering any more than he delivered his own Son. In the midst of such difficulties, if we maintain spiritual priorities, they will see us through and may even help us develop virtues that would otherwise be less likely to grow. Such situations also give righteous people opportunities to express their righteousness to those less fortunate.

Rank things (6:33). So far we have talked about increasing strength by putting efforts into eternal things, doing everything as to God, and trusting him for needs. The next step calls for ranking things by importance with spiritual things put first. If righteousness and the kingdom of heaven take precedence, we can be confident that everything else will come out all right. Jesus

states his point in relatively specific terms (material vs. spiritual), but the idea belongs to the larger principle of ranking things.

Some people are busier than others, but most people feel too busy. We just do not have enough time to do everything we need to do and have promised to do, much less everything we would like to do. If we do not watch out, we get more stacked on us than we can carry. The same problem applies to money. We want more than we can buy. From the long list of options we must select what we will do for sure and put the rest in secondary position. What we make sure to do should be the important items on the list; otherwise, we feel just as pressured from non-essentials as we do from essentials. We take up so much time with good things that we have little left for best things. By ranking them, we make sure to handle the decisive issues. Lesser things fill in around the edges. We pick them up as time permits without feeling like we have failed if we can't. Not ranking things makes everything equally important, which is frustrating and unfulfilling.

Reduce life to manageable units (6:34). The final verse of the chapter says, “*Don’t worry about tomorrow; it will worry about itself. There is enough evil in one day.*” This verse hints at another principle for reducing frustration and dissatisfaction. A common saying warns against “*biting off more than you can chew.*” So to speak, Jesus advises “biting life off in chewable chunks” by living a day at a time instead of letting life go on and on and on or trying to face everything all at once. Instead, we can line things up in sequence of time—in something of the same fashion as lining things up in sequence of importance. This approach offers a way to manage responsibilities. The future is broken down into segments we handle a piece at a time. We are not continually looking past what we are doing and worrying about the next one. When that much is finished, then we move to next piece, and so on. We do not try to handle everything at once, but break things down into pieces and put them in sequence. That sequence is then organized into manageable segments rather than conceived of as one endless stream.

History does form a line in that it keeps moving forward to new possibilities rather than simply circulating back and forth among the same old options. But within that linear process recurring cycles mark life off in subunits we can handle. Not only are there hours and days, but weeks, months, years, and generations. This segmenting of life is analogous to the account of God’s creative work. Moses presents the history of creation as a day-by-day, forward-moving, building process, which corresponds with life as an ongoing series of weeks. The Old Testament Jewish festival cycle marked off time by Sabbaths, new moons, annuals feasts, Sabbatical years, and years of Jubilee (note Exodus 20:8-11, *etc.*). Perhaps one reason God built cycles into life is that he also built us in a way that we need them. The fact that we cannot see all eternity now corresponds with the fact that we cannot cope with the whole future at once. Unlike God we do not face everything all at once, nor do we have to face one thing right after another in endless

succession. There are new beginnings in the recurrences of each widening cycle, and we have to face only as much as can come to us in one day.

Some of us need physical exercise to help keep weight down. I have been in the jogging routine for several years and know from that experience what trying hard is like. Most of the time, I jog through the countryside. When I get out away from the house and get tired, I sometimes have to think of the task as running from one light pole to the next. As I get to that pole I look ahead to the next one. Sometimes I get it down to running from fence post to fence post! That way I am accomplishing a big thing a little bit at a time. I do not try to run as far as I can see—to the little house on the horizon. I run to the next point and from there run to the next. Pretty soon I am passing that house on the horizon. When we break life down into manageable chunks, we do not have to be able to run from here to the horizon. We run only from here to the next place and from there to the next until we get to the horizon.

There are endless applications of this principle. An old story tells about a man who willed his estate to the one of his three offspring that could break a bundle of sticks. The first two that tried it could not break the bundle, but the third one untied the bundle and broke the sticks one at a time. It is the same thing in life generally. The “bundle” can be broken either way. If we break them all at once, we do get them broken; but most of us cannot deal with that much at once. Biting life off in manageable chunks is much easier.

At our house we sometimes raise green beans in our garden because they yield well. The trouble is that they come due in the hot part of the year. Picking a thirty-foot row of green beans is sometimes more than I am eager to tackle in the heat. I have learned to make the job easier by kneeling down at the beginning of the row, shoving the bucket out about arm’s length, picking to the bucket, and shoving it another arm’s length. Pretty soon when I push the bucket out there, it bumps into the fence on the other end of the row. I do not pick a thirty-foot row of green beans; I pick ten three-foot rows. We can handle life in smaller chunks like these; but tackling one big long piece is sometimes too much.

There is an important connection between 6:19-34 and the illustration about two builders that built houses respectively on rock and on sand. Building life on these principles gives us side benefits for coping with life. We often think of psychology as a secular discipline, but the scripture addresses more than present moral issues and salvation from future hell. In fact, to a great extent what we call “spiritual matters” are really interpersonal matters. The work of Christ both in his teaching and in his atonement aims at renewing relationship with God. The essence of salvation is reconciliation between alienated persons. Since reconciliation deals with persons, it deals with factors that affect the psychological strength of persons that make up that relationship with God and each other.

The Bible addresses the whole person. When Jesus says to build life on him and his teachings, he is saying more than meets the ear. That has not only to do with spiritual teaching, but with powerful living. To a great extent that “power” is psychological strength, the ability to cope.

In 6:19-21 we find five principles for power: (1) spend time and effort on eternal things; (2) do everything as to the Lord; (4) trust God for needs; (5) rank things by importance; and, (6) reduce life to manageable units. In combination these practices decrease frustration and provide security and satisfaction; they reduce fragmentation, tension, disconnectedness, and division; and offer wholeness and meaningfulness in their place.

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