

Matthew 6:24-34
"God and Other Stuff"
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Let me start this morning with the gospel according to *Veggie Tales*.

We know *Veggie Tales*, don't we? It's the children's television show featuring a host of anthropomorphic fruits and vegetables. It also features a variety of Christian themes and ideas, so perhaps it's not so surprising that I found the gospel there.

The episode I have in mind begins with Madame Blueberry, who is quite upset and extremely anxious because everyone around her has better stuff than she does. She embarks on a quest of sorts to find happiness, which eventually leads her to a gigantic megastore called *Stuff-Mart*. Salesmen from *Stuff-Mart* greet her with a peppy jingle that says, "Happiness waits at the Stuff-Mart! All you need is lots... more... stuff!" Following the wisdom of the advertising jingle, Madame Blueberry goes on a shopping spree of epic proportions, loading cart after cart with more and more stuff. As she's piling yet more stuff onto her mountains of merchandise a helpful salesman meets her and says, "Madame, I think you're going to like our next aisle... Toaster ovens!" Upon hearing this something is jarred loose in Madame Blueberry's mind and she

seems to wake up a little bit, and return to her senses. "But... I don't... *need*... a toaster oven," she replies. The salesman says, "Well, technically speaking, no one actually *needs* a toaster oven. But... you know you *want* one." I think about Madame Blueberry when I read this morning's text from Matthew's gospel.

I think about infomercials, too. They are full of stuff, and it's usually stuff that you'd never even dream that you need or want. But then they show that lady on the sofa, and she's struggling with that tiny blanket, and she's twisting it and pulling it and wrestling with it to try to cover her whole self with it but it's not working, and she looks so profoundly upset and angry - she's suffering, and then... lo and behold she's wearing a Snuggie. You know, it's the blanket with sleeves. And she looks so warm and comfortable and happy, and... wouldn't you like to be that way, too? Now technically speaking, nobody actually *needs* a Snuggie. But don't you *want* one? And if you keep watching your television you'll see more and more stuff: frying pans, and giant cupcakes, and food choppers, and stuff upon stuff upon stuff... and where does it end? We are fundamentally a culture of consumers.

Now we believe that Jesus says something about this. We believe that Jesus' sermon on the mount is no less relevant today than the day he preached it. When Jesus preaches about "stuff" like food and drink and clothing, he is speaking to us. However, Jesus clearly wasn't thinking of toaster ovens and sleeved blankets while he was preaching, and he was speaking to a crowd of people who lived their lives very, very differently than we do today. The people to whom Jesus originally preached his sermon on the mount were predominantly poor. We know this because he begins the sermon with words of comfort such as, "Blessed are the poor, or the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek, those who have nothing, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Jesus was speaking to people who were poor, and meek, and hungry. The "stuff" he mentions is comprised of the necessities of life: food, drink, clothing. Those were the things that were first and foremost in the minds of those who listened to him preach. And so at first glance, it seems as though the text we read this morning is saying something like, "Don't worry; be happy!" There's a bit of that in this text, and I've heard a sermon or two on

this text that takes that message and runs with it. "Therefore I tell you not to worry about everyday life - whether you have enough food or drink, or enough clothing to wear. Isn't life more than food? And your body more than clothing?" Those are incredibly comforting words to someone living in poverty. Jesus is saying that God values you and will take care of you, just as God cares for and provides for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. God will take care of you. It's a comforting message.

But as I was reading this text and preparing to preach on it, it occurred to me that Jesus' words might mean something a bit different for us twenty-first century Christians living in our culture of *stuff*. You see, we generally have plenty of stuff. We have food, and drink, and clothing, and much, much more. For us, *stuff* is not comprised of the essentials, the things we need. Our *stuff* is made up of things we want. Generally speaking, we live in the midst of abundance, and so for us this comforting text has some teeth. And it's those first couple of verses that seem to bite.

"No one can serve two masters," Jesus said. "for you 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." That word

that is translated "wealth" in our reading is an Aramaic word, *mammon*. Some English versions of the Bible don't even bother to translate it. They read, "You cannot serve God and *mammon*. *Mammon* does mean "wealth", but it's wealth in the sense of accumulated property. In other words, *stuff*.

Now the interesting thing about the word *mammon* is that it comes from the same root as the word *amen*. The two even sound similar as a result. Inherent in that word is a tension between **wealth** and **worship**. On one side is the *mammon*, the stuff of life, the wealth, and the property, and the things that we want and accumulate. And on the other side is the *amen*, the worship of God the Creator and Redeemer in Jesus Christ, a worship that is defined not by what we accumulate, but by what we give away. It's tempting to try to live right there in the middle, seeing if we can hold onto our stuff while at the same time reaching over toward worship. God knows I've tried to do that. I went into Chuck's office earlier this week and said, "Chuck, how am I supposed to preach on a text in which Jesus says, 'You can't serve God and wealth' when it seems like I've spent the better part of my life trying to prove him wrong?" I'm owning up to my toaster oven moments and my

Snuggie moments here. And I think that place in the middle between wealth and worship is where we all live. We are called as Christians to put our complete faith and trust in God so that we can freely give, but at the same time our insecurities, and our fears, and our anxieties drive us to accumulate more stuff.

In his book *The Forgotten Ways*, missionary and sociologist Alan Hirsch says:

*"I have come to believe that the major threat to the viability of our faith is that of consumerism. This is a far more heinous and insidious threat to the gospel [than anything else], because in so many ways it infects each and every one of us... If the role of religion is to offer a sense of identity, purpose, meaning, and community, then it can be said that consumerism fills all these criteria... An advertising executive recently confessed to me that... much of what goes by the name advertising is an explicit offer of a sense of identity, meaning, purpose and community."*¹

That is to say, that in our day and age there's the very real possibility that all of our stuff will get in the way of our relationship

¹ *The Forgotten Ways*, p. 107.

to God. Our *mammon* becomes a poor substitute for our *amen*.

That is really what Jesus is saying to us today.

It's not that Jesus is against stuff. He's not. It's okay if you've purchased a toaster oven or ordered a Snuggie. That's not the point. The point is that our stuff becomes dangerous to our faith, when we look to our stuff for identity, and meaning, and purpose instead of looking to God. The truth is that only God can give us those things. Jesus would have those of us living in our twenty-first century culture of consumerism let go of all the stuff that we hold onto, and instead reach a little more faithfully over to a life of worship. If we, like the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, come to see life as a gift from God, a bountiful outpouring of God's providence, then we will be free to loosen our grip on our wealth, our stuff, and be more generous to others.

Somewhat surprisingly, this is where we connect with that crowd of people who originally heard Jesus' sermon on the mount. I read an article in the news this week that said 72% of the world's poor do not live in what we would call poor countries. Three quarters of the world's poor live in middle-income countries, or wealthy countries like ours. What this means is that for the

overwhelming majority of those living in poverty, the answer to their prayers is not far away. Jesus said to poor people just like them, "You are blessed, and you will be comforted," and at the same time, with the same words, Jesus says to us, "Bless them. Comfort them. Let go." Part of what we are doing by participating in "Love Week" this week is learning to let go. We've been challenged to "let go" of at least one hour, and spend it in service to others. The hope is that "Love Week" will be the beginning of regular habits through which we give away our time, our efforts, and our resources more freely. But in order to do that, we have to let go. And letting go can be quite a struggle.

Marjories Holmes, author of a book called *Two from Galilee*, wrote a prayer that I think sums up our struggle to let go. It reads:

Help me not to put too much stock in possessions, Lord. I want things, sure. But life seems to be a continual round of wanting things -- from the first toys we fight over as children to our thrilled unwrapping of wedding presents to those we buy in our old age. Our concern is not primarily love and friends and pride in what we can do, but things.

Sometimes I'm ashamed of how much I want mere possessions -- things for my husband and the house and the children. Yes, and things for myself, too. And this hunger is enhanced every time I turn on the television or walk through a shopping mall. My senses are tormented by the dazzling world of things.

Lord, cool these fires of wanting. Help me to realize how futile is this passion for possessions. Because -- and this is what strips my values to the bone -- one of my best friends died today in the very midst of her possessions. She was in the beautiful home she and her husband worked so hard to achieve, the home that was finally furnished the way she wanted it with the best of everything. She was surrounded by the Oriental rugs she was so proud of, the formal French sofas, the painting, the china and glass, the handsome silver service...She had been snatched away while silently, almost cruelly, THEY remain. Lord, I grieve for my friend. My heart hurts that she had so little time to enjoy the things that she had earned and that meant so much to her. But let me learn something from this loss; that possessions are meant to enhance life, not to become the main focus of living. Help me remember that we come into the world with nothing and we leave with nothing.

Don't let me put too much stock in mere possessions.

I think that's well said. I might add that we not put too much stock in our time and the schedules we keep, or our financial resources as well. I pray that prayer for myself. I pray it for all of you as well. Let us learn to let go of the *mammon*, so that we and others might hold fast to the *amen*.

Thanks be to God. Amen.