

CONSIDER THE BIRDS

Matthew 6:25-34

Dear saints loved by God: Grace to you and peace from God your heavenly Father, and from Jesus Christ, His Son, our Lord.

What is life all about? Jesus says in today's Gospel, "Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" Of course it is. We know that. So why don't we *act* like it? That's Jesus' point here in this section of the Sermon on the Mount. "The *Gentiles* seek after all these things," He says, and that's not a compliment. He's shaming us for being just as concerned for daily bread as those who *don't* believe in Him; for seeking first the needs of the body over and above the needs of the soul. Think about it: How do we spend the majority of our time? Is it not in pursuit of perishable things? Do we not spend nearly every waking hour sowing, reaping, and gathering, if not into barns, then into bank accounts, pantries, and walk-in closets? Do we not toil and spin, making ourselves *dizzy* laboring for the present life? We go to school most of the day, so we can work most of the day, so we work most of our lives, so we can one day retire and live comfortably off the fruits of our labor.

O you of little faith (Jesus' words, not mine). If you are anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will put on, if you *prioritize* these things and spend your whole life seeking after them, then Jesus says your faith is little. You are no better than a Gentile, an unbeliever, because that's what they do. *They* worry about these things, because as far as they know, as far as they're willing to believe, the only one looking out for them is them. They *have* to be anxious about tomorrow, because they have no hope. They're an accident, and life has no ultimate meaning beyond, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die."

But we know better, or at least we're *supposed* to. We're supposed to be different, not anxious about tomorrow, not unduly concerned with anything that has to do with the support and needs of the body, but more like the birds and the lilies. Jesus says, "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?" You are. You are worth more than *many* sparrows. For not only were you made in the image of God, but God was made man, in your image and likeness, to ransom you, sharing in your human flesh and securing by means of His own human blood an eternal redemption for all who believe. He cares for the birds, of course. He feeds them. But He did not die for them. He is not raised for them. He does not feed them His true body and blood for forgiveness. No, that honor belongs to you and your fellow human creatures alone. So,

if God takes such good care of the birds, then why do you live as if He won't take care of you? Again, Jesus says this to our shame.

"And why are you anxious about clothing?" He says. "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 arrayed like one of these." Solomon, son of David, king of Israel, is said to have excelled all the kings of earth in riches.¹ He had a yearly allowance of 50,000 pounds of gold, besides that which he received as gifts from visitors. He drank out of cups made of gold. He sat on a great ivory throne, which was covered in gold. There was no one arrayed in more glory than Solomon. No one but the lilies. Even a single flower is more beautiful, according to Jesus, because of Him who clothes it. And if God so clothes the grass of the field, if He's willing to deck out something so fleeting, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, the most important of all living creatures? Will He leave you naked and ashamed? Not even Adam and Eve had to suffer that embarrassment.²

So what are we talking about? Is Jesus saying don't work? Be idle? No, for St. Paul says, "If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat" (2 Thess. 3:10). This is not about waiting around for God to come and save you from starvation, like He did the widow of Zarephath.³ But life *is* more than food and drink, and the body more than clothing. We need these things, as even the ungodly know. But so does your heavenly Father. He knows what you need before you even think to ask, and He graciously provides it, even to all evil people. As we read in Psalm 145, "The eyes of all look to You, O LORD, and You give them their food at the proper time. You satisfy the desires of every living thing." Look out the window. The birds are still singing, aren't they? The grass is still growing? Praise the Lord! If it's true for them, it's true for you times a *thousand*.

"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." Clothing and shoes? Food and drink? House and home? That's all taken care of. You don't have to worry about it. You don't have to be like my children, who come begging for a snack ten minutes before dinner acting like they'll *starve* if they don't get it. What! do you really think we're not going to feed you? We who have loved and cared for you your entire life? You think we're just going to forget you? Even we, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to our children. How much more, then, will our heavenly Father give to us?

¹ 1 Kings 10:23.

² Genesis 3:21.

³ 1 Kings 17:8-16.

And that frees us up to ask for bigger and better things, like the kingdom of God and His righteousness. The kingdom of God is none other than what we just confessed in the Creed: that God the Father sent His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, into the world to destroy the works of the devil; that He sent Him to redeem us and to bring us to Himself and to govern us as a King of righteousness, life, and salvation against sin, death, and an evil conscience; and that to accomplish this He has given us His Holy Spirit to bring these things home to us by means of His holy Word and Sacraments. As for His righteousness, that's the perfect obedience of Christ by which He earned for us the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. This we are to seek first and foremost. This is to be our life's pursuit. Not some temporal, perishable good, but everything that God Himself possesses, even His entire kingdom.

May we really ask for such a thing? It seems bold. Maybe we should just content ourselves with seeking our daily bread. Luther, in response to this way of thinking, tells a parable:

It's like a time when the richest and most mighty emperor would tell a poor beggar to ask whatever He might desire. The emperor was ready to give great royal presents. But the fool would only beg for a dish of gruel. That man would rightly be considered a rogue and a scoundrel, who treated the command of his Imperial Majesty like a joke and a game and was not worthy of coming into his presence. In the same way, it is a great shame and dishonor to God if we—to whom He offers and pledges so many inexpressible treasures—despise the treasures or do not have the confidence to receive them, but hardly dare to pray for a piece of bread.⁴

You are not too good for God's promises, and His promises are not too good for you. When Jesus' disciples asked Him to teach them to pray, one of the things He taught them was "Thy kingdom come." In this petition, we are not just asking for Christ's return on the Last Day, but also to receive His kingdom, His rule of faith and the forgiveness of sins, His greatest treasures, here and now. God would have us *demand* things of Him. We see it time and again in the gospels. Jesus compares God with a guy who gave his annoyingly persistent friend, who came and woke him up at midnight, everything he asked for.⁵ He tells a parable about a persistent widow, who kept coming to a judge and asking him for justice against her adversary, which she eventually received, not because the judge had compassion, but simply in order to get rid of her. And Jesus says, "Will God not give justice to His elect, who cry to Him day

⁴ Luther's Large Catechism, Part II. The Lord's Prayer, par. 57.

⁵ Luke 11:5-8.

and night?"⁶ Jesus Himself is moved to compassion by the great faith of a Canaanite woman, who refused to accept Jesus' silence and clung to the good report she had heard.⁷ So, no, it's not too bold to seek God's kingdom and His righteousness. God Himself has invited us to!

And the fact that you're here is a good start. God's kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity.⁸ You're hearing God's holy Word right now. You received the gift of the Holy Spirit in your Baptism. And the body and blood of His Imperial Majesty is prepared here at this table before you to satisfy you who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

But there's a lot of time between now and next Sunday. There's a lot more seeking that could be done. What would it look like to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness Monday through Saturday? Might it look like making the sign of the cross first thing in the morning and remembering your Baptism? Or setting aside a consistent time to read the Bible and sing hymns together with your family? How about sharing a little more of what you have, knowing how valuable you are to God? "Do not be deceived," Paul says in today's Epistle, "God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life" (Galatians 6:7-8).

"Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble." And we have a very present help in trouble. God is our refuge and strength. He is our dear Father, and we His dear children. We are bold to pray, and He is eager to give. So, go to school, go to work, enjoy your retirement. These are not bad things, but they are not *everything*. Consider the birds. To live is *Christ*.⁹ And if God did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?¹⁰

In † Jesus' name. Amen.

SDG

⁶ Luke 18:1-8.

⁷ Matthew 15:21-28 (see also Mark 7:24-30).

⁸ Luther's Small Catechism, The Lord's Prayer, answer to "How does God's kingdom come?"

⁹ Philippians 1:21.

¹⁰ Romans 8:32.