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Seek first God's reign (The Sermon on the Mount, Part 4)

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

In Matthew chapter six, the middle section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us to pray, give alms, fast, and forgive. He offers these tools to help us on our journey to the God of love and peace, to help us love God and all humanity. But in the middle of these helpful teachings, he makes a shocking statement: "You cannot serve God and money." It's one or the other. "Seek first the reign of God and God's justice," he says, "and all these things will be provided to you as well." I consider this one of the most neglected but crucial commandments in the entire Gospel.

Yes, Jesus advocates voluntary poverty like St. Francis and Dorothy Day. He wants us to "hate" money, get rid of it, simplify our lives, give to the poor, and focus our attention, time, and energy on the God of love and peace. We might also translate his statement: You cannot serve both God and country. You cannot serve both God and war. You cannot serve both God and nuclear weapons. You cannot serve both the God of life and peace and the false gods of death and war. It's one or the other.

Spend your life pursuing God's reign, that realm of love, nonviolence, justice and peace, he promises, and all your needs will be met. Jim Douglass once wrote that this commandment is a law of nature, like the law of gravity. If you let go of a pencil, you know it will fall to the floor. Likewise, if you seek God's reign and God's justice with all your might, your needs -- such as food, clothing, and shelter -- will be provided for you. One day, you will reach your goal, enter God's reign of love and peace and meet the God of love and peace. You will have spent your life serving God's reign. And you won't have wasted

your life worrying about food, housing and clothes.

"Therefore I tell you, he says, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?" Here we have another commandment: Do not worry about your life, food, drink or clothes. Seek God's reign and God's justice; trust God to take care of you.

"Look at the birds in the sky," he commands. "They do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly God feeds them. Are not you more important than they?" As Jesus points out, the birds have enough to eat, find shelter, enjoy companions, and manage to raise their young. The Creator provides abundantly for these little creatures, Jesus observes, but we are far more important than the birds. God has numbered every hair on our heads. God beholds our every move. God loves each one of us unconditionally, infinitely, madly, lavishly. We belong to God.

"So do not worry," Jesus says. "Trust in God. Focus your attention on God and God's reign of peace and God's justice. God will take care of you and meet your needs, but God needs your help in welcoming God's reign of nonviolence here on earth.

"Can any of you by worrying add a single moment to your life-span? he asks. We have so many worries-- from our day-to-day personal problems, to the big crises of global warming, poverty, war, nuclear weapons, to the greatest worry of all, death. We worry about how to avoid death, but the answer to his question is "No." Not one of us can add a single moment to our lifespan by worrying.

"So stop your worrying," Jesus says. "It's pointless. It does not help at all. In fact, worrying only aggravates your life. Rather, concentrate on what's most important: God, God's reign, God's justice for the poor, God's nonviolence, God's mercy and compassion. Seek God's reign of justice and peace, everything will be provided for you, you will learn how to live without worries or fears and you will find fulfillment in life and in death."

"Why are you anxious about clothes?," he asks. "Learn from the way the wild flowers grow. They do not work or spin. But I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was clothed like one of them. If God so clothes the grass of the field, which grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will God not much more provide for you, o you of little faith? So do not worry and say, 'What are we to eat?' Or 'What are we to drink?' Or 'What are we to wear?' All these things the pagans seek. Your heavenly God knows you need them all. Seek first God's reign ..."

I suppose each one of us seeks God's reign in our own unique way. But given the dreadful news of war, injustice and poverty, I hope the Sermon on the Mount pushes us more than ever to put aside other goals, and seek God's reign first and foremost in our lives, in our work, in our prayer. That's the great task before us. I hope we can experiment with this text more and more, pursue God's reign and discover in our day to day lives how God takes care of each one of us.

John Dear's new book, *Transfiguration*, (Doubleday) is available from your local bookstore or at online booksellers, and the new DVD about him, "The Narrow Path," is available from www.sandamianofoundation.org. Dear will participate in the annual "Sackcloth and Ashes" nonviolent action at Los Alamos, N.M., Aug. 3-4 (see: www.paxchristinewmexico.org), and is to stand trial for his

antiwar protest Sept. 6. Currently, he is on a speaking tour of England and Scotland. For information, see: www.johndear.org

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