

New Perspectives

Changing The Way Matthew 6:30-34 Is Read



May 12, 2016

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Intro to New Testament

**New Perspectives: Changing The Way Matthew 6:30-34 Is Interpreted**

The gospels contain many varying instructions which claimed to have been given by Jesus himself. There is much scholarly debate about sources the gospel writers may have used. What is known is that all the gospels are written long after Jesus himself walked on earth. This does not imply the gospels are incredible, but that the reader would benefit from understanding words or phrases in the context of the gospel writing. Additionally, readers can benefit from viewing varying perspectives beyond a literal interpretation. For example, when reading Matthew 6:30-34 it is challenging for the reader to interpret this in any way but literally if read in a vacuum, because it appears like a simple message when read this way. The message read in this context is often interpreted as such; one need not worry about the material things of today, like what to wear, eat, or drink, because we are to trust God to provide them. However, if read within its context and with an understanding of how the author of the gospel of Matthew uses words and phrases like the “kingdom of God,” then the reader may begin to notice that a materialistic focus contradicts the message of Jesus found within this passage. By reading this text from a new perspective that keeps in mind the context of the wider gospel of Matthew, the interpretation of this text evolves. This offers a new interpretation of the text by understanding that the focus is on being in right relationship with God. When in right relationship, God offers a life with relief from the anxiety of worrying about worldly things. If focused on how this passage fits in Matthew’s context the interpretation of the passage becomes not about the worries of the material earthly realm but to stay the course of maturing faith in God by concentrating on the spiritual realm that exists within oneself and the world around them.

When reading a biblical passage in context, it is also important to take note of who is speaking and who is being spoken too. For this particular passage there is some debate on who Jesus is speaking too. Many scholars suggest that Jesus is addressing the disciples.[[1]](#footnote-1) This particular passage is found in the context of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, and verse 5:1 states “Jesus went up the mountain.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Brendan Bryne explains that “in the biblical tradition mountains are the place of revelation.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Matthew uses this mountain of revelation to parallel the story of Moses, who ascended on Mt. Sinai leaving the crowds below, by noting that Jesus also ascended up the mountain leaving the crowds.[[4]](#footnote-4) Despite this evidence there are still some scholars who would disagree that Jesus is only addressing his disciples based on verse 7:28, the closing of the sermon on the mount, which states “Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Whether he is speaking to disciples or the crowds, it can be said that Matthew is writing to a broader community who will be reading these texts in a different context. Therefore, when it comes to interpreting this text it is key to focus on Matthew’s intent, word choice and placement of the text.

To focus on Matthew’s intent and placement of the text, it is important to understand how the Matthew views the sermon on the mount, which, according to 4:23, crowds were following Jesus because of his fame that was spreading as a result of his proclamation of the “good news[[6]](#footnote-6) of the kingdom.” What this suggests is that the next few chapters, commonly called the sermon on the mount, are Matthew’s discourse of the good news of the kingdom offered by Jesus. Additionally, understanding the placement of this text within the sermon on the mount offers a greater understanding of Matthew’s intentions.

 Doing this involves having an overview of what the message of the good news of the kingdom of God, which is shared between the beginning of chapter 5 to the start of the passage. In chapter 5, Matthew has Jesus beginning this good news message with what is known as the beatitudes. Verses that begin with the phrase “Blessed are” and offer positive displays of blessed people’s actions. Jesus continues on with a positive message, sharing metaphors that display how those who understand the message of the kingdom of God affect the earthly world. For example, he stated that those whom he just mentioned as blessed people are like salt to the earth or light to the world.[[7]](#footnote-7) Jesus focuses first on positive metaphors and offers them in imagery using the materialistic world, but that display a spiritual undertone.

Furthermore, this leads Jesus into discourses about how to fulfill the law found in 5:17-6:18.[[8]](#footnote-8) Another theme in Matthew is the importance of the Torah. For Matthew, Jesus is more than just teaching Torah, he is fulfilling it by adding to it.[[9]](#footnote-9) In this section, Jesus offers ways to fulfill the law by sharing a more inwardly spiritually based example. For instance, he states the law, “do not commit adultery,” but then follows that by adding to the law when he states that even lust, an inward desire, is also committing adultery.[[10]](#footnote-10) Another example is found shortly after when he explains to love everyone, even our enemies [[11]](#footnote-11) which focuses on something that first, must be experienced inwardly or in other words spiritually, before one can offer actions outwardly produced by love. It is also in this section that the Lord’s prayer is offered. In the Lord’s prayer Jesus teaches how one is to pray and what to ask for. This will become important later as exploration of specific verses relate to this teaching on prayer.

Finally, verses 19-29, which directly precede the passage, contain additional concerns that Jesus wants to share about the good news that fulfills the law. It is within this section that Jesus delivers a message that may appear to be focused on only the material world if read literally and out of context. Additionally, shortly before the focus passage, Jesus warns against storing the treasures on earth by using metaphors that involve earthly objects like lamps, slaves, food, water, clothes, birds, flowers and, in the beginning of the focus passage, grass which sets up the text with visual earthly material ideas in mind. Perhaps, the use of all this materialistic visual references shortly before the focus passage causes most readers’ initial reaction to read this passage literally. Reading this out of the context of Matthew makes it is easy to conclude that Jesus is saying not to worry about clothing, food, drinks etc. (material things) but to trust that God will provide for you as God has provided for the rest of creation; causing the reader to forget the spiritual undertones and context of Matthew’s Jesus’ message. By exploring the text further, it will become clear that this imagery has a spiritual focus when read in context.

Exploring the text begins by starting with verse 30, as mentioned earlier this text begins by Jesus continuing with this worldly imagery. However, at a closer look at what came previously, much of this imagery is related to creation; animals, grass, flowers. Many people including myself feel God more by focusing on the creation around us. If nature appeals to the senses, I would argue that Jesus is appealing to these senses that draw us inwardly to our spiritual connection with God.[[12]](#footnote-12) As Bryne would put it “Jesus…is not making a moral point, but an imaginative appeal…to inculcate an attitude to God.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Additionally, the use of this imagery stems from Matthews tendency to parallel Torah and Rabbinic texts in which using worldly imagery is a common pattern.

Another one of Matthew’s common motifs found in verse 30 is the use of the phrase “you of little faith.” The use of the adjective “little” suggests that there must at least be some existing faith. Furthermore, it also sets up the listener to be ready for ways in which one’s faith can increase, which leads the reader into the next few verses.

In verse 31, the focus is around not worrying, and the verb used here is merimnēsēte which also means anxiousness as some translations offer,[[14]](#footnote-14) but Bryne would suggest that a better definition for this word is “do not be preoccupied with.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Bryne’s translation suggests that one is not supposed to be preoccupied with the worldly things so that a person can have the opportunity occupy oneself with spiritual things. Since many versions translate this word as worry or anxiousness, I will suggest that the best way to understand this is to relate it to anxiety. For the root of all anxiousness and worry is anxiety, and in light of this Matthew adds emphasis to this verb by using repetition and by repeating the context of 6:26.[[16]](#footnote-16) “Anxiety destabilizes, incapacitates, and immobilize thousands of people every day.”[[17]](#footnote-17) People experiencing any anxiety find it very challenging to focus on anything other than the root of the anxiety. Consequently, Jesus is now saying try to put aside anxiety so the focus can be on what he will refer to later on in verse 33.

 Before verse 33 can be reached verse 32 must be explored. This verse offers another visual of worldly imagery when Jesus mentions Gentiles. The term Gentiles in Matthew and in much of the New Testament text is used to refer to anyone non-Jewish. It is these worldly people who do not know better than to strive for these material things. This verse is used to remind the audience that gentiles seek after material things but Christians are called to seek God’s ways.[[18]](#footnote-18) In other words, if one’s faith is to increase one must seek God’s ways just like the following verse will go on to explain.

Before going on, a textual issue in verse 32 must be noted. There are varying perspectives on the translation of the verb epizētousin in verse 32. The NRSV uses the verb ‘strive,’ the NIV uses the phrase run after and the RSV, ESV, NASB all use the verb ‘seek.’ The translation of the NIV, RSV, ESV and NASB all suggest a similar usage. On the other hand, the NRSV offers a different perspective with its verb choice ‘strive’ that suggests a strong effort to reach a goal. Using one perspective, Gentiles are just searching out these material objects, yet in another perspective they are working hard and focusing on them. As the second half of verse 32 suggests, God knows you need these material things, but the NRSV use of the verb ‘strive’ suggests one should not focus on worldly things.

Verse 33 then offers the solution to helping change this earthly focus, by Jesus telling the crowd to ‘strive,’[[19]](#footnote-19) or in other words focus on the kingdom of God. In order to understand what Matthew’s Jesus is telling the crowds to do, there needs to be a clarification of Matthew’s usage of the phrase kingdom of God.

 The gospel of Matthew is not known for solely using the phrase the kingdom of God, but more so for the use of the phrase kingdom of heaven. If a clearer picture of what Matthew believes the kingdom of God is to be obtained, then there also has to be an understanding of what is meant by the kingdom of heaven. Matthew’s first reference to this is early on in 3:2 when John the Baptist proclaims Jesus’ coming, quoting from Isaiah, that John the Baptist is telling people to prepare for the way of the Lord. If the kingdom of heaven has not yet arrived, but is near, this would suggest that somehow Jesus’ time spent on earth brings this kingdom of heaven near. This use of kingdom can also be found elsewhere in Matthew in 10:7, 11:12,12:28, 25:34.

In Matthew 6, the kingdom is referenced in the prayer that Jesus was teaching the crowds to pray and asking God that God’s kingdom come. Kingdom here is referenced alone using the Greek term, *basileia,* which means kingship, sovereignty, authority, rule, especially of God.[[20]](#footnote-20) Furthermore, Matthew explains what kingdom means later on in 8:11-12 when he suggests that some of the original heirs of the kingdom (those who follow the Torah) will be thrown out into the darkness. (no longer a part of the understanding of the kingdom of God).

 One very compelling argument for the meaning of Matthew’s use of this phrase comes from R.T. France, who states “This is one of only five places where Matthew uses kingdom of God rather than kingdom of heaven. In each case it seems likely that he departs from his normal usage because the context requires a more ‘personal’ reference to God himself rather than the more oblique language of his heavenly authority.”[[21]](#footnote-21) What he is suggesting is that here the focus really needs to be on God. Furthermore, the kingdom, be it God or heaven, is “a message of Jesus” that “… is anticipated in the present which flows from the past, and it grows mysteriously.”[[22]](#footnote-22) It grows mysteriously because humans lack the ability to have the same spiritual connection to God as Jesus was able to have. This again is suggesting a spiritual connection not materialistic.

 Another word that appears within this verse that must also be explored further is righteousness. One of Matthew’s themes points us in the direction of what his use of the word righteousness may be. For Matthew, as mentioned earlier, Jesus’ message goes beyond the teachings of Torah. This righteousness must then mean that going beyond Torah is how one can obtain righteousness.[[23]](#footnote-23) Righteousness is also referenced several other times in Matthew and based on those contexts probably means that it is something that requires action and seeks to grow spiritually closer to God.[[24]](#footnote-24)

One last thing must be addressed before moving along, and that is the textual issue that occurs in this verse. The NRSV textual notes that other ancient authorities state the kingdom of God and his righteousness in one of two ways. First, to seek the kingdom and its righteousness and second, to seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness. This could cause some concern, but as Davies and Allison point out this text issue is null and void because for Matthew seeking God’s righteousness and God’s kingdom are one in the same by omitting one would not change his meaning behind the text.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Finally, the closing verse 34 of this focus passage offers Jesus’ summary of His message. In the NRSV version, Jesus proclaims “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” The Greek verb used in this closing verse is the same as used previously and again is most likely used for emphasis and is suggesting not to be preoccupied with worldly anxieties. This emphasis can also display Matthew’s recognition that the instructions just given are not easy, but that if one stays focused on God today they will not be distracted by what is to come. After all, today has enough anxieties to overcome. Worry is the opposite of faith which is trust in God, and in order to trust in God one must focus on God’s righteousness. Faith in turn offers relief from worry. Additionally, this passage comes after the Lord’s prayer[[26]](#footnote-26) where one asks for their daily bread in order that they need not focus on it anymore, but can focus on God. In other words, one must struggle daily to focus on spiritualty and increasing faith in God by means of asking God for the provisions that God sees best fit, then letting go of the rest.

It is important to interpret the text in a spiritual way for several reasons. First, because reading this text with a material focus can create a challenge for those on the margins reading the text in this way. If read out of context this text suggests to the poor and marginalized that God does not provide for them, because they don’t trust enough.[[27]](#footnote-27) However, if read with focus on spirituality this text does not serve as an issue for the poor and marginalized. Furthermore, if this text is read with this spiritual focus then the idea of worry (anxiety) is also experienced by poor and rich, possessions do not relieve anxiety. If one is to find relief from this anxiety than as Matthew suggests, they must strive for the kingdom of God.

Not all scholars would agree with this spiritually based interpretation. One such scholar is Grant Macaskill, who believes that this passage “does indeed contain a strong teaching on what one’s attitude to the things of this world should be,” but he further goes in my opinion suggesting just the opposite “At its heart, it suggests that a properly restored relationship of creature with Creator will cause the believer to be less anxious over the things of this world…”[[28]](#footnote-28)

In conclusion, by reading this text any way other than with a spiritual focus may encourage apathy and inaction. Additionally, a focus on God providing material things to believers may lead one to think that those who do not have basic provisions are not faithful enough and will lead to a lack of compassion from Christians or the opposite, would lead to Christians believing that those living in abundance are favored in the eyes of God.[[29]](#footnote-29) Finally, if while interpreting this text with a spiritual focus keeping Matthew in mind then when in Matthew’s version of the Lord’s prayer suggests one ought to serve God on earth in “the same manner that the angels serve blamelessly in heaven”[[30]](#footnote-30) To do this means focusing on increasing our spiritual faith in God.

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1. Most all the books in the bibliography concur with this statement. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For reasons that should become clear, all citations are from NRSV translation unless otherwise noted. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Brendan Byrne, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew’s Gospel in the Church Today* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004), 51-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Luke Timothy Johnson *The Writings of the New Testament an Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 177 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Some versions use gospel. The Greek word used in this passage is euaggélion which means gospel or literally means God’s good news. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 5:13,14 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This agrees with Brendan Byrne’s breakdown as found in *Lifting the Burden,* 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 5:17 states quotes Jesus saying “I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 5:27-28 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 5:44 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Leslie J. Francis and Peter Atkins in *Exploring Matthews Gospel* pg 64 would agree with this interpretation [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Bryne, *Lifting the Burden,* 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. ESV and others use this form for translation [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Bryne, Lifting the Burden, 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. W.D. Davies and Dale Allison Jr., *The International Critical Commentary; A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Limited, 1988), 653, 663. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Francis and Atkins, *Exploring Matthews Gospel,66.* [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Craig S. Keener, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 236. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Again RSV, ESV, NASB, NIV use seek [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Strong’s Concordance Greek definition. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdman Publishing, 2007), 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Noel David Freedman et.al *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. W.D. Davies and Dale Allison Jr., *The International Critical Commentary* 502. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ulruich Luz *Hermania-A Critical Commentary on the Bible Matthew 1-7* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 344. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. W.D. Davies and Dale Allison Jr., *The International Critical Commentary* 661. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. 6:9-13 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Margaret Davies. *Matthew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Grant Macaskill, *Matthew 6:19-34: “*The Kingdom, The World, And The Ethics of Anxiety,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 23, no.1(2005): 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ulruich Luz, *Hermania* 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. St. Jerome, *St. Jerome a commentary on Matthew* (Washington D.C. The Catholic University of America Press, 2008) 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)