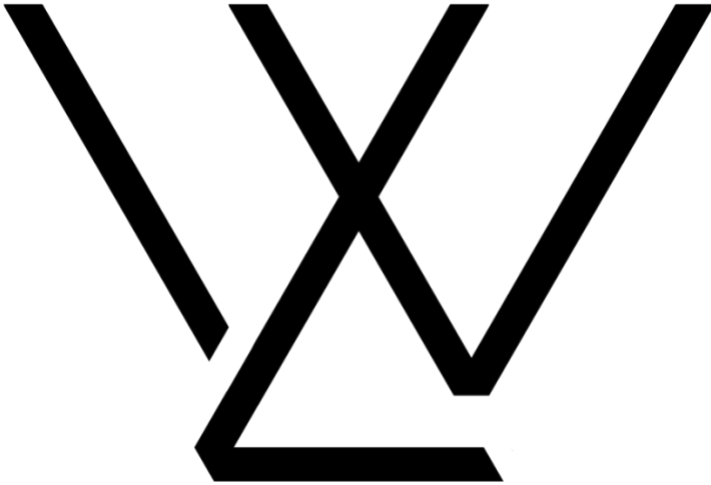




WORD TO LIFE

WEEKS 11-15





Word to Life studies are sermon-aligned study guides, created to help the church dive even deeper into the passages we study together on Sundays.

Each week there will be five studies to help you prepare for the upcoming weekend sermon. This will also be a great discussion tool at your next LifeGroup meeting.

We hope you enjoy and grow deeper in your faith!

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— **WEEK 11** —

- OCT 07
- OCT 08
- OCT 09
- OCT 10
- OCT 11

— **WEEK 12** —

- OCT 14
- OCT 15
- OCT 16
- OCT 17
- OCT 18

— **WEEK 13** —

- OCT 21
- OCT 22
- OCT 23
- OCT 24
- OCT 25

— **WEEK 14** —

- OCT 28
- OCT 29
- OCT 30
- OCT 31
- NOV 01

- **Questions:** Have you ever practiced a fast? If so, what was it like? What did you notice?
 - If you've fasted before, would you describe your fast as more spiritual or physical in purpose?

- **Activity:** Read Matthew 9:14-17 and Jesus' additional teaching on fasting. Write down what you notice below and how it might help you understand the Sermon on the Mount.

- **Optional Activity:** Fasting is referenced a lot in the biblical book titled Acts. What do you notice about what happens around fasting in the life of the early church?

Week 11: Matthew 6:16-18

Day 2: The Least and Great

READ: Matthew 6: 16-18

EXPLORE:

The Hebrew word we translate to fasting is *tsom* and it means to abstain from food. Later on the Greek word we translate as “fast” is *nesteuo* and means to abstain from eating.¹

In Leviticus 16 and 23, during the Day of Atonement the people are told to “deny” themselves which is associated with fasting and many of our Bible translations. Fasting is mentioned multiple times in the Old Testament, but there is very little direction to the Israelites as to how the practice of fasting was to be conducted. In more extreme situations, the Israelites would also abstain from water and modify their appearance in an outward denial by dressing in sackcloth and covering themselves in ashes.¹

So fasting was not a made-up practice by the Pharisees; there are repeated examples in the Old Testament where the Israelites were commanded to fast. There was very little guidance from God on how it was to be done so the Israelites filled in the blanks. As we jump to Jesus’s time, as with other Old Testament laws and practices, we see that the Israelites had once again largely twisted God’s law and design into something that was not necessarily what God intended.

As He has throughout His sermon, Jesus is once again addressing the hearts and motivations behind the spiritual practices of the day. Fasting is meant to be a practice that focuses your mind and

¹ See Esther 4 for reference.

heart on God by withholding food for a period of time. It is not meant to demonstrate to everyone around you how holy you are by how uncomfortable the fasting has made you. The human body can survive and function just fine without eating for a few days. We aren't going to suffer or lose enough weight to make our eyes sink in. Certainly, there is no need to mope around the office looking like you are living out some sad country music song just because you skipped breakfast that morning.

Fasting is a sacrifice we can make, a sacrifice of our comfort, that only God has to know. A secret between you and him. A commitment to redirecting your desires for the pleasures of this world to your desire to connect with the Father in a deeper and more intimate way.

Looking beyond fasting, our relationship with the Father is not meant to be lived out on Instagram so that all of our contacts can "heart" how spiritual we are. How much we pray, fast, or give is meant to be a secret that is seen by God. It was and is something for which you will see heavenly rewards, not earthly recognition.

BIG IDEA: Spiritual disciplines like fasting are meant to deepen your intimate relationship with God and not an outward demonstration of your holiness.

APPLY:

- **Optional Activity:** Read *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster, specifically chapter 4 and prayerfully consider safely developing a regular, secret fasting practice in line with Jesus's teaching in Matthew 6.

Week 11: Matthew 6:16-18

Day 3: Motive for Fasting

READ: Matthew 6:16-18; Hebrews 12:11; Romans 13:14

EXPLORE:

In the last decade or so, there has been a resurgence of excitement and enthusiasm around fasting due to all the physical and emotional benefits it offers. Fasting protects organs against type-2 diabetes and heart disease. It improves blood pressure and insulin sensitivity, reduces inflammation, increases cognitive function, and triggers cellular repair. It promotes autophagy and reduces the risk of cancer. However, the purpose and benefits of fasting in this time and culture are drastically different from biblical times. It tends to be more focused on health and beauty instead of spiritual growth.

Fasting is a spiritual discipline that has been practiced for thousands of years in every part of the world. Beyond the physical benefits, it also offers many spiritual benefits as well. It is a primary way to draw closer to God especially when seeking guidance or direction. Fasting is a way to overcome temptations and grow in self-control. It can aid in repentance and shift perspective on your circumstances. Fasting also helps us to gain a greater appreciation for the blessings in our lives. It helps show solidarity with others and it promotes a harmonious relationship between the body and soul.

Fasting invites God to see our heart, and more so, it helps us to examine our own heart more clearly. Do our thoughts line up with Scripture? Are our motives God-honoring? Do our words and actions reflect the character of Jesus? Fasting helps us to train our bodies to yield to a Spirit-focused mind. Not eating allows more time to renew our mind through the Scriptures, meditate on His Word, and pray to the Lord who hears. It is our duty as believers to subdue our physical desires to follow the Spirit.

It is worth noting that Jesus told His followers not to fast while the bridegroom was with them which tells us two things. The first is that fasting and being somber is not supposed to be the standard of living. We are the temple of the living God which should cause us to live in

great joy. The second is that fasting has something to do with the presence of God in our lives. This spiritual discipline offers us the opportunity to actively and intentionally seek the Lord's will and sense Him at work. Jesus assumes we will fast but does not command it. We should choose to fast because we want more of Him. This is easier said than done though. Most of us long to draw closer to the Lord and to know His will, yet we fail to put any effort or self-sacrifice into the equation. The Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak (Mt 26:41).

Esther fasted to avoid genocide (Es 4:16). Daniel fasted for wisdom (Dan 10:3). Ezra fasted for God's ear (Ezra 8:23). Jehoshaphat fasted for God's intervention (2 Chron 20:3). Nehemiah fasted for reconciliation and healing (Neh 1:4). Isaiah fasted for God's freedom from oppression (Isa 58:6-8). Anna fasted for the redeemer's presence (Lk 2:36-38). The disciples fasted for strength and direction (Acts 9:15). Fasting is a wonderful tool to draw closer to God.

BIG IDEA: Offer your body as a living sacrifice to the Lord and hunger for His righteousness.

APPLY:

- **Question:** When is the last time you fasted from food?

- **Question:** In what areas do you need a breakthrough? Try fasting.

Reasons to fast:

- a. *To strengthen your relationship with the Lord*
- b. *Humility and repentance*
- c. *Resisting temptation to sin*
- d. *Growing in self-control*
- e. *Seeking God's guidance*

Week 11: Matthew 6:16-18

Day 4: The Secret Habit of Fasting

READ: Matthew 6:16-18

EXPLORE:

As we have been discussing, fasting is both an ancient practice as well as a current one in obedience to Christ and His expectations. Jesus stated in Matthew 6:16, *“And when you fast...”* indicating that Jesus assumed and expected that His disciples would continue to fast after he ascended. The warning that is presented in this passage is one of pride and self-promoting. Jesus cautions believers away from secret self-satisfaction under the mask of contrition. So, in order to fast well it is clear that we must free ourselves from the love of self and the need to be recognized for our piety. For, in seeking the approval of men in our fasting, we remove the very purpose of fasting which is to glorify God, strengthen the relationship between Christian and Christ, and to promote self-control. 1 Peter 5:5 states, *“Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’”* Fasting is an act of humility towards God to enable a focused, undistracted communion with the Lord. When we corrupt this attempt with self-promoting and seeking the attention of others, we lose the beautiful intention behind fasting and might as well not even fast at all. Jesus says that those who are seeking the approval of others while they fast have already received their benefit. That is all they will gain. The deeper, richer, more fulfilling reward of furthering intimacy with Christ is lost when we put our desires above God’s.

Now, how can we practically fast in a way that honors Jesus? Of course, we must have the right heart posture, as we have discussed, and in having the right heart posture, we allow ourselves to truly sacrifice things that are hindering our walk with God rather than things that are simply easy to give up for a time.

Food is a bodily necessity and when we sacrifice food for a time for the sake of our walk with Christ, we implant a frequent reminder of our dependance on Christ. So, fasting from food is very helpful. But there are other types of fasting as well. Fasting from TV, social media, sports, phones, music, or even, especially, idols in your life that are keeping you from putting Christ first. Anything that distracts us from our devotion to Christ can be fasted from. Many people, myself (Courtney) included, have medical reasons why they cannot fast from food which is why it is helpful to have alternatives. What we fast from is not as important as why and how we fast. The goal is to fast for the glory of God, not self, and to allow an opportunity to establish a more intimate relationship with Jesus.

BIG IDEA: It is not what we fast from that matters the most, but how and why we fast. Fasting is an opportunity to grow our relationship with Christ and to improve our dependence on Him.

Apply:

- **Question:** How often do you fast (from food, social media, phone, etc.)?

- **Question:** Is fasting important to you? Why or why not?

- **Activity:** Set aside a certain amount of time to fast from something and spend intentional time with the Lord through the Word, prayer, church community, and worship. Ask someone close to you to keep you accountable and to ask how your experience was.

Week 11: Matthew 6:16-18

Day 5: You are You When You're Hungry...

READ TOGETHER: Matthew 6:16-18

EXPLORE TOGETHER:

Instructions: *We believe that biblical study and spiritual growth are meant to be shared. This Word to Life has that exact focus in mind. For some, Day 5 might be a good opportunity to lead your family in a devotional. For others, this study might serve as a simple reminder to tactfully communicate your faith with those around you. Regardless, this study is designed to help you grow in your faith by sharing it with others.*

In 2008 Snickers launched a marketing campaign that used the slogan “You are not you when you’re hungry” to advertise their candy. The popular catchphrase and commercials that followed communicated the idea that when a person is hungry, they do not act like their normal selves. We all know that it is not just about hunger, but about how we handle that hunger that makes the difference.

Have you noticed that hunger reveals a lot about you? Things that weren’t annoying can become a major frustration when you’ve missed a meal or gone without food. In a sense, we could truly flip the Snickers slogan around and say, “You become the real you when you’re hungry.”

We all have the tendency to manage the stress and difficulty of life in different ways. Some people try to control. Others try to separate themselves from stress. Many work to actively silence the stresses and difficulties of life by turning to worldly things. Now, to be clear, not all of the things we turn to are bad. Food, family, friendships, recreation, and work are great things. They are wonderful things, but they are awful substitutes for God. Things which were created by God cannot satisfy us in the same

way that only He can. When we fast like Jesus taught us to in Matthew 6, we actively and humbly remind ourselves of our need for God and his incredibly ability to sustain us.

As we've been studying this week, we've had the chance to look at how Jesus expected His future followers to fast in a way that was really different from some He called hypocrites. The way the hypocrites thought about fasting displayed their pride and self-importance. Jesus taught about how God-honoring fasting is a humble act that reminds us of at least two things. First, it reminds us of how we often sinfully depend on lesser, worldly things to try and fill a God-sized need. Second, it reminds us of God's ability to see us and meet our needs both physically and spiritually.

God has given us fasting to help us notice our need for Him and His goodness to supply. If our heart in practicing spiritual disciplines is clouded by a desire to be seen by others or a sinful sense of self-pity, we will most certainly miss the God-oriented direction of fasting and more!

With those things in mind, let's prayerfully consider a few questions today. When you go without something that you really enjoy what do you notice about yourself? What do you see in your actions? What do you notice about your words?

BIG IDEA: Godly fasting reminds us of our need for God and His ability to supply.

APPLY TOGETHER:

- **Question:** In what ways would fasting help you share your faith with someone who is not a believer?

- **Question:** Explain vv. 22-23 in your own words. What does it mean that the eye is the lamp of the body?

- **Question:** Do you think you are tempted to serve two masters? Why or why not?

- **Question:** How do you think you could know if you are actually storing up treasures in heaven and not on earth?

- **Activity:** Spend some time in prayer and ask the Lord to soften your heart to His truth in regard to earthly and eternal treasures.

Week 12: Matthew 6:19-24

Day 2: Lay Up Treasures in Heaven

READ: Matthew 6:19-24, Matthew 13:44-46, and Hebrews 13:5

EXPLORE:

Today we'll look at our verse with a focus on money. I've regularly heard the saying that money is the root of all evil, but money is just a medium of exchange which helps in transactions of trade so how can money itself be evil? Well, if we look at 1 Timothy 6:10 where this saying was derived, we see it says, "*For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils.*" So, money is not the problem; it is our heart posture towards money that can be a problem.

The Bible speaks frequently about money—there are more than 2,300 verses on money, wealth, and possessions. Why is there such an emphasis? It's because money can easily become an idol that pulls our hearts away from God. Money, at its core, has no intrinsic value—it is only worth what society deems it to be. Yet, when we begin to place our faith in money, believing it can provide us with security, happiness, or status, we unknowingly allow it to take control over us. This is why Jesus warns us in Matthew 6:24, "*No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.*"

When we chase after wealth as our ultimate pursuit, we fall into a trap. Rather than controlling money, it begins to control us. It dictates our decisions, our priorities, and our peace of mind. But Jesus calls us to a different way of living. He reminds us to keep money in its proper place—as a resource to be used for His purposes and for the good of others. When we keep money in submission to God, we free ourselves from its grip and can focus on storing up heavenly treasures.

In Matthew 13:44-46, Jesus tells the parable of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great value. In both cases, the individuals are willing to sell all they have for something greater—the kingdom of heaven. The real treasure isn't in what the world values, but in God Himself and the eternal life He offers us. When our hearts are aligned with God's, we see that true riches are found in serving Him and loving others.

Examine your heart today. Ask yourself where money falls in your list of priorities. Do you find yourself overly concerned with financial security or material possessions? Take time to reflect and pray, asking God to reveal any areas where money may be taking an unhealthy place in your heart. Ask the Lord to help you develop a deep understanding of stewarding what He has given you for His purposes.

BIG IDEA: We look at and strive after what we desire. That is our treasure. What we treasure indicates what really owns us.

APPLY:

- **Question:** How do we make sure we treasure Jesus's kingdom and set our eyes on Him?

- **Question:** If your perspective on money has hindered your relationship with God, what can you do to improve the situation?

Week 12: Matthew 6:19-24

Day 3: The Greatest Treasure

READ: Matthew 6:19-24

EXPLORE:

Have you ever lost something that was really valuable to you? Maybe you had saved up for an item you had wanted for a long time only to lose it once you had purchased it. Or maybe you had purchased something only for it to break shortly thereafter. These instances show the fleeting nature of possessions along with how quickly they can lose their value.

Immediately after teaching on prayer and fasting, Jesus moved to talking about one's treasure. The call of Jesus is to not store up treasures on earth, but rather in heaven. Consider the stark difference between treasures on earth and treasures in heaven. Earthly treasures can be bought with money. They are material. They can be stolen, broken, and destroyed. Treasures in heaven, on the other hand, cannot be bought with money. They are spiritual. They cannot be stolen, broken, or destroyed. Earthly treasures are fleeting. Heavenly treasures are eternal.

So, how do we *“lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven?”*² I (Casey) would submit to you that it is by treasuring Christ. For Jesus says, *“where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*³ What is the greatest treasure in heaven? It is surely Christ Himself! For us to store up treasures in heaven, Christ must be the greatest treasure in our hearts on earth. When the Lord Jesus holds the greatest value in our hearts, our natural response to His worth is to seek to love Him, know Him, and obey Him.

² See Matthew 6:20 for reference.

³ See Matthew 6:21 for reference.

Later in the book of Matthew, Jesus will tell a parable of a man who came across a treasure hidden in a field. Apparently, this hidden treasure was worth so much that after covering up the treasure, he went *joyfully* and sold everything he owned so that he could buy that one field.⁴ In the same way, Jesus invites us to lay aside the vanity of earthly treasures and enjoy the eternal riches of knowing Him.

As we treasure Christ, the treasures of this world will “strangely dim,” as the old hymn writer suggests.⁵ For in Him, we have all that we need.

BIG IDEA: Jesus calls us to store up treasures in heaven that are eternal rather than earthly treasures which are fleeting. The greatest treasure of all is knowing Him- the one true God.

Apply:

- **Questions:** What do you value the most? Could God be calling you to give that up?

- **Question:** Is Jesus your greatest treasure?

- **Pray:** Praise God for giving us the most valuable gift of His Son, Jesus! Ask God to help you treasure Christ above all else.

⁴ See Matthew 13:44 for reference.

⁵ “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus” by Helen Lemmel.

https://hymnary.org/text/o_soul_are_you_weary_and_troubled

Week 12: Matthew 6:19-24

Day 4: The American Dream and Holy Gospel: Ideologies at Odds

READ: Matthew 6:19:24, Philippians 2:1-8

EXPLORE:

From birth, Americans are presented with a dream. It is a dream that has a consistent end goal, the triumph of the individual. This dream is what makes or breaks success in American culture. The American dream is defined by large cars, even larger paychecks, and houses that could fill a parking lot. This is the dream that's infiltrated the American mind. However, this is not the dream Christians are called to chase.

Many people live their lives in service of this dream, and when their lives end, they find that their dream ends with them. Yet, the dream that Jesus preaches in these verses of Matthew tells us of an eternal dream. It is the truth of rooting yourself in the Gospel. The Ideology of the American Dream is self-centered and is rooted in a temporary glory. However, the Gospel is founded on glorifying God and serving His eternal Plan.

Our sights should be set upon an eternal wealth that cannot be gained on this earth, and our eyes cannot be focused on two goals at once. Jesus said in verse 24, *"No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other."* The American Dream that we are sold from birth and the Gospel conflict with one another. One of them tells us to serve ourselves and put ourselves first yet the other tells us to put ourselves below others and serve God.

Paul even writes in Philippians, *"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves."* While The American Dream would tell us that we are the number one priority, Paul is telling us to lift others up! The life

that is being lived for the Gospel is not centered around the price of their car or size of their house but is instead focused on glorifying God.

It is not that God wishes for His people to be neglected either! However, there is a fine line between stewarding the wealth God has given you and serving that wealth to your own detriment. Jesus even says in the next few verses of Matthew that we should not worry, because our Father in Heaven will provide for us. When we seek the kingdom of Heaven, we find how truly worthless our earthly wealth and possessions are in comparison to what God promises. This is where our eyes should be focused. We should look towards the Gospel and God for our joy, not the wealth of this world.

BIG IDEA: The American Dream and Gospel cannot be followed at the same time. We should live our lives glorifying God, not our earthly possessions and wealth.

APPLY:

- **Question:** In what areas of your life do you serve earthly treasures? How can you give them up to the Lord and trust in His Providence?

- **Question:** How can you apply Paul's call to serve for other's instead of your own explicit gain?

Week 12: Matthew 6:19-24

Day 5: A Day to Share

READ TOGETHER: Matthew 6:19-24

EXPLORE TOGETHER:

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There is a saying that even a blind squirrel finds a nut sometimes.⁶ I (Stephen) think that this saying is in need of some major changes. Considering the fact that the squirrel with perfect vision loses about 75% of nuts gathered, I'd say that the blind squirrel has no chance of making it through winter. Maybe you've noticed this to be true as well?

Squirrels spend day after day gathering food only to lose most of what they collect. Even as I am writing this Word to Life study, a squirrel is racing through the tree in our front yard probably searching for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snack. It's comical, but it's a tragedy of sorts. It's a tragedy to spend so much time collecting and then realize that the majority of it is going to go to waste. It's even more heartbreaking when we realize how similar we can be to the squirrels. We are not that different from them.

Remember, when Jesus was giving the crowds an idea of how to spend their talents and time, He used the example of earthly treasure and a heavenly treasure. He contrasted the two. The

⁶ It's an old adage of sorts that serves as a reminder that an unpredictable person can still get it right sometimes.

earthly treasure, not unlike the squirrel whose stash goes to waste, will decay or be destroyed. It won't last because it cannot last.

On the other hand, Jesus taught about an eternal treasure which cannot be stolen and cannot be destroyed. It is an imperishable treasure with eternal significance. Jesus' final words in this section are a really challenging summary about this idea. He said, *"No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."*

The question this passage invites us to ask a crucial question not about *whether* we will serve a master, but about *which* master we will serve. We will follow the beck and call of something or someone. The question is whether or not God is our aim and affection, our lord and our master, our treasure and our reward.

As it does for us today, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount would have stirred some hearts and challenged some lives for His original hearers. In a world filled with metaphorical squirrels, busied by gathering and storing things which will be forgotten and ultimately wasted, Jesus issued a challenge to invest in what will last. Serve God as your good and rightful master and invest in what is timeless and not just what is temporary.

BIG IDEA: Serve God with obedience and invest in what is eternally significant.

APPLY TOGETHER:

- **Question:** Where could your time, talents, and resources be better used for God-honoring things?

- **Questions:** What examples does Jesus encourage His listeners to look at and consider? Why do you think He chose those things?

- **Questions:** Do you think anxiety can be something which is eliminated in life? Why or why not?

- **Question:** What are some attributes of God's character and action that we should think about to help us overcome anxiety?

- **Question:** If you were to summarize v. 34 into practical guidance, how would you do it?

Week 13: Genesis 12:1-9

Day 2: The Big Picture of Worry

READ: Matthew 6:25-34

EXPLORE:

How often do you worry? What makes you anxious? What are your fears? How is your mental health? When we look at such topics, it is important to understand the big picture.

Of the adults in the U.S. surveyed, 34% say that stress is completely overwhelming most days. When looking at respondents aged 18-34, that percentage jumped to 62% of women and 51% of men.⁷ Nearly one third of adults in the U.S. report symptoms of anxiety and depression.⁸ This is not an isolated issue in the United States. A 2021 Gallup poll that surveyed 122 countries found that 41% of adults report experiencing high levels of stress.⁹

Seeing the big picture that these statistics present helps us realize that we are not alone in our struggle with what is often called “mental health.” Worry and doubt are common experiences shared by humanity. Jesus’ words in this week’s passage transcend time and culture because they speak to this universal human experience.

Perhaps you don’t worry about food or clothes in the same way that the original audience did, but the reality is that at the table of our hearts, worry will always take a seat if we set a place for it. In

⁷ <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2022/concerned-future-inflation>

⁸ <https://www.kff.org/mental-health/press-release/latest-federal-data-show-that-young-people-are-more-likely-than-older-adults-to-be-experiencing-symptoms-of-anxiety-or-depression>

⁹ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/394025/world-unhappier-stressed-ever.aspx>

the same way, however, when we keep a seat open for gratitude, it can always be filled.

When we look at the big picture of this passage, we see that worry seeks to undermine trust and focus on God. Add to that big picture other passages of Scripture and we find that fear and doubt are best combatted through gratitude and a heart set on God's glory.¹⁰

Once more, let's look at the bigger picture. God does not give us the ability to have victory over worry so that we can keep it ourselves. God gives us victory so that we can shine His light and show others that they too can experience freedom.

In the same way that the birds and flowers are proof of God's love and provision, you get to be proof to others that God takes care of His children. We have no reason to fear!

BIG IDEA: Finding victory over worry through God allows us to be living testimonies of His faithfulness and provision.

APPLY:

- **Question:** How often does worry occupy the space in your heart that could be filled with gratitude?

- **Activity:** Read Philippians 4:6-7. In order, write down each step given to combat worry and the promised result. Commit these verses to memory.

¹⁰ See Philippians 4:6-7 and 4:19-20 for reference.

Week 13: Matthew 6:25-34

Day 3: “When you got nothin, you got nothin to lose” -Jack Dawson

READ: Matthew 6:25-34; Genesis 1:3-31 and James 4:6-8

EXPLORE:

We read last week about Jesus’s instructions to not be hoarders, to have healthy eyes, and to be devoted to serving God alone. These are not individual teachings, rather they share one common thread: materialism. How does worshipping one’s own possessions tie into the passage we are reading today? The more you possess and cherish, the more you have to lose, which is the rich soil anxiety needs to grow, and grow, and grow.

Imagine playing an intense game of Catan. For those unfamiliar, it’s a game of strategy. You have to manage your resources well to earn ten victory points, which you do by building armies, roads, and establishing strong settlements. More resources come from having more settlements and trading with other players.

However, one major problem is you may be working on a great hand of cards to achieve these goals, but it can easily go awash at the roll of dice (you’re thinking, “Sarah, I didn’t open this WTL to learn about how to play Catan!”). The anxiety builds in this game the greater and larger your hand is. When the personal victory is in sight, the more stressed and worried you become. Sound fun? More practically, the question is, does this sound like you?

This passage highlights the common worries of humanity: food, clothing, shelter (resources). Don’t read this wrong, Jesus is not saying “that’s silly, food and shelter are not valid things to worry about.” Surely, they are. God put time, thought and creativity into creating animals and habitats, and called it “good”. He, too, created man in His image with incredibly special qualities, like the ability to think, feel, speak, create, rule, and multiply. He called this creation “very good”.

God, from beginning to end, exemplifies provision for His people, whether in times of great need or when fully blessed. God is caring, which means He cannot be neglectful. You may be tempted to look at others and their possessions and lives and feel that God cares more for them than He does for you and your family, your daily living and your needs. But when you really comprehend this metaphor, you will see that God values you greater than flowers, here one day and gone the next, and more than birds, who were made purposefully by our God, but even so, are not His children or His image-bearers.

We need not worry about His provision for us, because God knows just what we need, which when we reflect, is really not much except Christ and His salvation. God is kind, loving, and all-knowing. If you need food, He will provide it. If you need a roof above your head, He will provide it. If you need more clothing than what you have, He will clothe you further. If you do not have these things, God knows that you do not need them. Who you are and what you have is not a result of a roll of dice, it is intentionally given or taken by a good God. So, let's not worry or become anxious about the resources in our hand, how we will grow them, how we will achieve victory, but instead let's empty our hands before our God, so that He can give us exactly what we need for victory, which is Himself, and Him alone.

BIG IDEA: God is personal and gives YOU everything YOU need. Don't focus on what others have, instead, look to God for what you truly need.

APPLY:

- **Activity:** Analyze what you possess and what you are most anxious about happening/losing. Pray that God would soften your heart to humbly proclaim you only need what He has given you.

Week 13: Matthew 6:25-34

Day 4: Eternal Perspective and Kingdom Priorities

READ: Matthew 6:31-33

EXPLORE:

What if anxiety were visible? We would see people, our brothers and sisters in Christ, walking with cumbersome burdens upon their backs, weighing them down and causing them to stumble. We would see them hanging tightly to a web of dark thoughts and preoccupations, unable to let go and grasp the steady truth. We hang so tightly to the web of lies, because it gives us the illusion that we are in control, when in fact we are allowing the enemy to take the reins. When we are anxious about something that could come to pass, we want to be able to say to ourselves, "I knew it all along" in order to retain the delusion of self-sovereignty.

What if we changed our perspective to one focused on that which is eternal? In John's gospel account, Jesus's last words are recorded as "It is finished". His words marked the culmination of his work on earth, the fulfillment of the law, and the defeat of death. There is finality to those words, yet humanity still suffers in the same ways it did at the time of His death. We often think, *when will it end?* Yet, if we only inclined our lives to seek the steadfast, eternal, and perfect kingdom of God, we would find ourselves on the victorious side of history. No, we can no longer be lord over our own lives, for the eternal kingdom has its almighty ruler; He is just and powerful, and on the last day, every knee will bow down to Him. Jesus does not simply tell us not to be anxious about provisions but also where we should direct our mental energy and place our priorities. In Matthew 6:32-33 He says, "*For the Gentiles seek after all of these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*"

It could be misunderstood that Jesus has given us the formula for wealth or the remedy for poverty. This is untrue, so let's unpack what Jesus said and why it is important. When we seek the kingdom of God first and prioritize bringing glory to the King, it is like we have put on figurative blinders. The purpose of blinders is to shield the eyes of horses so that they can focus on the task at hand and avoid spooking and injuring themselves, their rider, or those around them. We must not be swayed by the pleasures and pains of the human experience. What is happening around us is temporary, while an

eternity with Jesus is sure. It is easy to sink under the weighty realities of what we experience here on earth, and it sometimes feels like we are drowning in our troubles. Think for a moment about Jesus's disciple Peter. Without a moment's hesitation, he stepped out onto the water when Jesus commanded him to come. Amidst the rushing wind and crashing waves, Peter's eyes were locked on Jesus, and he began to do the impossible. Step after step he advanced, walking on the surface of the water to Jesus, when suddenly he saw afresh the wind and waves surrounding him, and he began to sink. Before he began to sink, Peter demonstrated what it would look like for someone to have an eternal mindset and kingdom priorities.

Keeping our gaze steady on the hope we have in Christ, and resisting diversions is much easier said than done. Like we read earlier in the Beatitudes, the way that we can do this is to truly hunger and thirst for righteousness. When we are hungry, it often overwhelms our minds and completely takes over our thoughts to where the only thing we can think of is satisfying the hunger we feel. When we are truly hungry and thirsty for righteousness, keeping our figurative blinders on to lock in on the face of Jesus will become easier. Our God always keeps His promises, and He promises to satisfy this hunger. Matthew 5:6 reads: *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.* Another exhortation Jesus gave is recorded in John 6:35 and is as follows: *I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.* In our pursuit of righteousness and in our efforts to prioritize doing the will of God, we may not immediately feel relief from anxiety. We live in a broken world, and like Peter, we will have moments where we cannot help but turn our eyes toward the chaos that is life and begin sinking into the abyss of worry. However, we control our thoughts and can actively redirect them to more edifying things. It requires little effort to worry, and it can become almost like an addiction. We must combat the tendency to constantly worry and surrender control to God. Whether we acknowledge it or not, He is always in control. Surrender does not mean apathy; laboring for our provisions is necessary, but anxiousness gains us nothing. I encourage you to stay steadfast, rely on your brothers and sisters in Christ, and never lose sight of what is true, helpful, and good.

BIG IDEA: Combatting anxiety means putting on figurative blinders, keeping our eyes on the hope we have in Jesus, and making it our priority to bring Him glory.

Week 13: Matthew 6:25-34

Day 5: A Day to Share

READ TOGETHER: Matthew 6:25-34

EXPLORE TOGETHER:

Instructions: *We believe that biblical study and spiritual growth are meant to be shared. This Word to Life has that exact focus in mind. For some, Day 5 might be a good opportunity to lead your family in a devotional. For others, this study might serve as a simple reminder to tactfully communicate your faith with those around you. Regardless, this study is designed to help you grow in your faith by sharing it with others.*

Was there ever a time when you were worried and it didn't seem to go away? Certainly, there are times where we might be anxious only for a moment, but I (Stephen) am asking about the sort of worry that lingers for a while. In unique ways and to unique degrees, each of us has experienced a worry or anxiety that we couldn't seem to shake.

As we already know from our Word to Life Studies this week, Jesus spoke truth to those with anxiety. He encouraged them to look at flowers and birds and we ought to ask, "Why?" Why did Jesus direct the anxious heart to look around them at what God had made?

At a basic level, we should not miss the fact that Jesus instructed them to redirect where they look. This is incredibly important. If you are anxious then your perspective, your vantage point is filled with a sense of uncertainty and doubt. To see anxiety addressed we should remember Philippians 4:8 which reads "*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*"

Simply put, the anxious soul needs a redirected focus toward things which remind them of God's goodness, faithfulness, and provision. It is for this reason that Jesus instructed the worrier to observe what was going on around them.

First with the birds of the air and later with the flowers in the field, Jesus exhorts us to see and to appreciate what we might otherwise miss and undervalue. With both the birds and the flowers, the anxious observer is reminded of not only how God sustains what He has made, but how he abundantly provides.

Neither God's graciousness nor His provisions are dependent upon our observation to occur. Both of them happen faithfully without our awareness. Fundamentally, this happens without our "knowing." Our ignorance cannot stop God's purposes. He is not waiting for us to know and to understand. He is inviting and even commanding us to trust Him. Situations where worry might rise up make fertile soil for worship to grow instead. This is good news for the worry-filled soul.

BIG IDEA: Looking at what God has made and how He sustains it is a good and necessary reminder for the worry-filled soul.

APPLY TOGETHER:

- **Question:** Have you ever noticed that redirecting your focus toward what God has made being helpful in battling worry?
- **Question:** Would you describe anxiety as a distrust of God? Why or why not?

Week 14: Matthew 7:1-6

Day 1: A Day to Explore

READ: Matthew 7:1-6

EXPLORE:

Instructions: Spend time reading Matthew and complete the activities and questions below.

- **Activity:** As you are reading this week's Bible passage, take notes in the space below about what you observe.

- **Question:** Matthew 7:1 is one of the most often misunderstood Bible verses in our day. How does the context of verses 2-4 help you understand verse 1 rightly?

- **Question:** Why do you think it is easier to see the speck in our brother's eye than it is to see the log in our own?

- **Question:** Scripture teaches that not all judgments are bad. What makes a judgment good or bad according to Jesus in Matthew 7:1-6?

- **Question:** Is there a difference between judgement and discernment/correction in your mind? If so, what is it?

- **Questions:** Do you have people that help you remove the proverbial speck or log in your eye?
 - If yes, what is an example of how their humble judgment has helped you?

 - If no, why do you think you do not have people who are willing to say hard, uncomfortable truths to you?

Activity: Matthew 7:6 can be tricky to understand. Participate in the activities below to see more necessary context. Jesus said, *“Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.”*¹¹

- **Read:** Proverbs 26:11 and 2 Peter 2:22 for some context that will be helpful to understand Jesus’ words.

- **Consider:** The command does not mean that we refrain from preaching the gospel. It does, however, speak about the harsh realities of repeatedly sharing true things with people whose only response is scoffing and ridicule.

¹¹ See Matthew 7:6 for reference.

Week 14: Matthew 7:1-6

Day 2: Humility, Discernment, and Judgement

READ: Matthew 7:1-6

EXPLORE:

Have you ever been accused of being judgmental? Sometimes the critique is unfair or unwarranted, but often it is a perfectly accurate description of our behavior. And even if we have never been on the receiving end of such an open critique, we can all admit that there have been plenty of times when we have fallen prey to being judgmental toward others. Jesus knows that this is a major stumbling block, both within our Christian community and for our broader witness to the world, hence his warning in Matthew 7:1-6.

The command to *“judge not, that you be not judged”* in Matthew 7:1 is perhaps one of the most well known and most quoted verses in all of Scripture. Ironically, this is largely due to the fact that it is also one of the most misused and misunderstood verses, particularly among non-Christians. The world is quick to label arguments for absolute truth, for the reality of sin, and for a real difference between *right* and *wrong* as intolerant, arrogant, and even hateful. An opportunistic quote of Jesus saying *“judge not”* is often used as a way to blunt any disagreement with moral relativism. But Jesus is not teaching us to set aside all moral distinctions. We are not called to be blind to the extensive moral teachings of scripture or the numerous examples of Jesus encouraging our use of discernment to identify, call out, and correct sin.¹² We are called to be a people who *“judge with right judgement”* as Jesus teaches in John 7:24. Sadly, those seeking to blunt judgement by turning to Matthew 7 are often twisting Jesus’ words, whether intentionally or inadvertently, to protect their own favorite sins and shield themselves from moral accountability. Non-Christians are not the only ones who do this though. Right judgement is warranted, and as followers of Jesus we

¹² See, for example, the handling of sin in Matthew 18:15-17 or Paul’s call for judgment within the church in 1 Corinthians 5. Even here in Matthew 7:6, Jesus implicitly expects us to discern who in our midst are *“dogs”* and *“pigs.”*

must carefully discern our own hearts, being open to correction and accountable for our thoughts, words, and deeds.

This same discernment applies when we are in a position to judge. As Jesus illustrates in verses 3–5, “*right judgment*” cannot be judgmental, and it is not hypocritical. In the outlandish example of a man with a log in his eye, Jesus compels us to discern sin in our own hearts before turning to others. This is a call to humility before all else. Although difficult, we need to be more interested in judging ourselves than we are in judging others. Only with the humility of a fellow sinner should we seek to lovingly correct our brothers and sisters in Christ. In verse 5 Jesus does allow for helping our brother, but only after we first humbly assess our own condition.

We need to also assess our own motives. The experience of overcoming sin can be helpful wisdom for a struggling brother. But do we come bearing mercy, with a genuine love of neighbor, or are we catering to the sinful desire to make ourselves look good and feel better about ourselves at the expense of others? Are we building up, or tearing down? Self-righteousness has no place in the Christian community, yet it is an all-too-attractive sin to prop ourselves up as gods in our own image. But as John Stott notes, Jesus’ warning here is a call “to renounce the presumptuous ambition to be God (by setting ourselves up as judges).”¹³ Let us remember who we are and put to death hypocritical, self-serving, and merciless judgmentalism.

BIG IDEA: The command to “judge not” is not a call to abandon moral distinctions. It is a call to exercise discernment of our own sinful hearts, to approach others in complete humility, and to abandon all presumption that we stand over and above others.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Reflect on your own tendency to judge others. Where do you see this occurring? What personal sins lie at the heart of these thoughts or actions?

¹³ John Stott, *Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, pg 177.

Week 14: Matthew 7:1-6

Day 3: Which Logs are in Your Eye?

READ: Matthew 5:3–7:5

EXPLORE:

Which parts of Matthew 5–7 do you find most convicting? For example, are you avoiding persecution by compromising your Christian witness? Are you losing your saltiness by blending in with the world? Are you failing to let your light shine before a world in darkness? Are you angry, vengeful, and unforgiving, or do you love your enemies? Are you indulging in lust, or are you committed to fighting lust in your own life? Do you use your words to manipulate others or to speak truth? Whose attitude toward marriage have you adopted: God's or the world's?

Is your motivation to be noticed by others? Maybe you want them to notice how good, religious, spiritual, or talented you are. In our natural state, we do good things to win the approval of others. But in our new life in Christ, we replace that old motivation. Instead of wanting others to think well of us, we want others to glorify God when they see our good works. We should look to our Father in heaven for our reward, regardless of whether others see our good works or what they think of them. Are you growing in that area?

What is master in your life? Is it God, or is it money or something else? Are you consumed by anxiety about the future, or are you learning to trust in God's provision? It is easy to judge others, until we read Jesus' words and take them to heart. Then we recognize the logs we have in our own eyes. Whichever of these verses convict you, do not delay. Confess it to God. Remember that Jesus, who is perfect in every way, died for our sins and rose from the grave. Do not trust in yourself but rely fully on Jesus' righteousness.

Do you need God's help every day to grow in these areas? Recite these verses every day. Tell them to yourself over and over again. Recite them whenever you are facing temptation. That will help you to "take the log out of your own eye."

BIG IDEA: Jesus' Sermon on the Mount reveals many logs that we have in our eyes.

APPLY:

- **Activity:** Memorize some verses from Matthew 5–7 that will be especially helpful as you seek to "take the log out of your own eye." Make a plan to rehearse these verses every day. Think about situations you face in which you need to have these verses ready to help you resist temptation.

Week 14: Matthew 7:1-6

Day 4: Pearls Before Swine

READ: Matthew 7:1-6

EXPLORE:

Today we will go over Mathew 7:6, *“Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.”* This can be a challenging verse to properly apply as it deals with how we should go about evangelism to those who are hostile to the Gospel. A common interpretation of this passage is that the pearls described by the verse are Gospel truths. The imagery of dogs and pigs are not all unbelievers, but only those who adamantly oppose the Gospel message. This can be a difficult passage to apply, as it can lead us to neglect our evangelistic mission if applied too liberally. One way to help in interpreting this passage is in light of Matthew 10:14-15, *“And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly I say to you it will be more bearable on the day of judgement for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.”* The act of shaking the dust off their feet was a repudiation of the place, that God had deemed it unclean, virtually pagan, and unworthy of the Gospel message. Both passages deal with how to react with sharing the Gospel message to those who are hostile to it.

While we need to be careful not to apply the teaching too liberally, this message should be rightly applied to those who are hostile to the Gospel and should know better. In the Bible this is often interpreted as people with knowledge of the Messiah, who have the background to identify Jesus yet strongly reject him. We can compare this group to groups that split from the Church and

deliberately reject the Gospel, however we should only implement this wisdom when it becomes clear that they are closed from the truth.

We, as Gospel messengers, have the obligation to protect what is holy: the Gospel message we have been entrusted. We need to be discerning in our audience, be open in sharing with those who are not outwardly hostile to the message, pray that God works to change those who are, and always be prepared to share the Gospel when the opportunity arises. If you question that it is time to walk away from someone from a Gospel perspective, you should approach this with humility and prayer for guidance. This verse should not be used as an excuse to pass over a difficult conversation, but it is about not wasting your time and energy on an audience that is adamantly and repeatedly opposed to your mission and the Gospel.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Have you ever experienced hostility to the Gospel message? How did you approach this issue?
- **Question:** How can we implement prayer and accountability in our evangelistic mission to ensure that we do not pass over difficult conversations, yet approach those who are hostile to the Gospel in a wise manner?

Week 14: Matthew 7:1-6

Day 5: A Day to Share

READ TOGETHER: Matthew 7:1-6

EXPLORE TOGETHER:

Instructions: *We believe that biblical study and spiritual growth are meant to be shared. This Word to Life has that exact focus in mind. For some, Day 5 might be a good opportunity to lead your family in a devotional. For others, this study might serve as a simple reminder to tactfully communicate your faith with those around you. Regardless, this study is designed to help you grow in your faith by sharing it with others.*

Imagine that someone asked you, “Are you a good judge of character?” How would you respond? Some of you might want to unpack the questioner’s question. Others might respond with a quick “Yes” or “No.” Few, however, would try to challenge the value of the question altogether.

At minimum, we all seem to intuitively know that some form of judgment is healthy and necessary in order to sustain a team, a society, a church, and more. Even though nobody would want to live in a world devoid of judgment, our culture and sometimes our churches have bought into the lie that judgments are bad. We live in a culture that would prefer Matthew 7:1 without remembering to read the continued explanation in verses 2-6.

To be clear, Jesus was not opposed to judgment. He was opposed to hypocritical, poor judgments. There is a crucial difference between the two. Notice the two questions that Jesus asked. He said, “*Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye?*”

The passage we have been studying this week helps us distinguish between good and bad judgment. For example, good judgment considers and makes use of an objective standard that applies to all people. A good judge will make good judgments that embrace humility and active reliance on God.

Maybe you have already noticed, but one of the major challenges to judging rightly is a fear of what might happen as a result. Sometimes we are afraid to mention something that is not right out of apprehension concerning what others might think. It would be helpful for us to remember, however, that we ought not simply be fearful about what will happen if we speak, but also about what will happen if we choose to remain sinfully silent. There are not just ramifications for judgment; there are also consequences for failure to judge like we should.

BIG IDEA: There are not just ramifications for judgment; there are also consequences for failure to judge like we should.

APPLY TOGETHER:

- **Activity:** Start memorizing Scripture today and in the weeks to come.
 - a. *³“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye. – Matthew 7:3-5*



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