

DEEP IN SCRIPTURE

Jim's Notes from the Fathers

October 4, 2006

The Gospel According to St. Matthew 6:19-24

Matthew 6:19

St. John Chrysostom (died A.D. 407)

Previously he had only said that we must show mercy. Here he also points out how great is the mercy we must show. He says, "Don't store up treasure." It would have been impossible to introduce his discourse on disdain for riches without much preparation. So he broke the discourse up into small portions. Having readied the hearer's mind, he brings up the tougher subject in a way that is plausible. (The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 20.2)

St. Augustine of Hippo (died A.D. 430)

If someone does something with the intent of gaining earthly profit, that one's heart is upon the earth. How can a heart be clean while it is wallowing in the mud? On the other hand, if it be fastened upon heaven it will be clean, for whatever is heavenly is unpolluted. A thing becomes defiled if it is mixed with a baser substance, even though that other substance be not vile in its own nature. Gold, for example, is debased by pure silver if mixed with it. So also is our mind defiled by a desire for the things of earth, although the earth itself is pure in its own class and in its own order. (Sermon on the Mount 2.13.44)

Matthew 6:20

St. Augustine of Hippo (died A.D. 430)

Let us not think that in this text the word heaven signifies the universe of heavenly bodies, for the word earth includes every kind of body, for one ought to disregard the whole world when laying up treasure in heaven. Therefore the reference is to that heaven of which it is said, "The heaven of heaven is the Lord's" (Psalm 115:16). Moreover, since we ought to fix our treasure and our heart on that which will abide forever and not on something which will pass away, the heaven here mentioned means the spiritual firmament, for "heaven and earth will pass away." (Sermon on the Mount 2.13.44)

Matthew 6:22-23

St. John Chrysostom (died A.D. 407)

Now Christ leads us to an analogy more within the reach of our senses, that we may not be confused. He has already 'spoken of the mind as enslaved in captivity. Now he shifts his attention to the eye and to lessons on outward things lying directly before our eyes, so that we might grasp it easily and that we may learn from the body what we did not learn from the mind. For what the mind is to the soul, the eye is to the body. (The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 20.3)

St. Augustine of Hippo (died A.D. 430)

We know that all our works are pure and pleasing in the sight of God if they are performed with a single heart. This means that they are performed out of charity and with an intention that is fixed on heaven. For "love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:10): Therefore in this passage we ought to understand the eye as the intention with which we perform all our actions. If this intention is pure and upright and directing its gaze where it ought to be directed, then unfailingly all our works are good works, because they are performed in accordance with that intention. And by the expression "whole body," Christ designated all those works that he reproves and that he commands us to put to death. For the apostle also designates certain works as our "members." "Therefore," Paul writes, "mortify your members

which are on earth: fornication, uncleanness, covetousness" (Colossians 3:5), and all other such things. (Sermon on the Mount 2.13.45)

St. John Chrysostom (died A.D. 407)

If your eyes were completely blind, would you choose to wear gold and silk? Wouldn't you consider your sound health to be more desirable than mere externals? For if you should lose your health or waste it, all the rest of your life would be unhappily affected. For just as when the eyes are blinded, some of the ability of the other members is diminished, their light being quenched, so also when the mind is depraved, your life will be filled with countless evils. As therefore in the body it is our aim to keep the eye sound, so also it should be our aim to keep the mind sound in relation to the soul. But if we destroy this, which ought to give light to the rest, by what means are we to see clearly any more? For as he who destroys the spring may also dry up the river, so he who has quenched the understanding may have confounded all his actions in this life. So it is said, "If the light that is in you be darkness, how great is the darkness?" (Matthew 6:23). For when the pilot is drowned, when the candle is put out, when the general is taken prisoner, what sort of hope will remain for those that are under his command? (The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 20.3)

Matthew 6:24

St. John Chrysostom (died A.D. 407)

Now Jesus calls mammon here "a master," not because of its own nature but on account of the wretchedness of those who bow themselves beneath it. So also he calls the stomach a god, not from the dignity of such a mistress but from the wretchedness of those enslaved (Philippians 3:19). To have mammon for your master is already worse itself than any later punishment and enough retribution before the punishment for anyone trapped in it. For what condemned criminals can be so wretched as those who, once having God for their Lord, do from that mild rule desert to this grievous obsession for money? Even in this life such idolatry trails immense harm in its path, with losses unspeakable. Think of the lawsuits! The harassments, the strife and toil and blinding of the soul! More grievous, one falls away thereby from the highest blessing -- to be God's servant. (The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 21.2)

St. Augustine of Hippo (died A.D. 430)

"He will be devoted to one and disregard the other." He does not say that one will hate the other, for scarcely anyone's conscience could hate God. But one disregards God, that is to say, one does not fear God but presumes on his goodness. From this negligent and tormented confidence, the Holy Spirit recalls us when he says through the prophet: "Son, do not add sin to sin; and do not say, 'The mercy of God is great'" (Sirach 5:5-6). Note when Paul says, "Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" (Romans 2:4). For whose mercy can be accounted as great as the mercy of him who forgives all, if they convert to him? He makes the wild olive a partaker of the fatness of the original olive tree. At the same time, whose severity can be accounted as great as the severity of him who has not spared the natural branches but has broken them off because of unbelief? (Romans 11:17-22). Therefore, whoever wishes to love God and to beware of offending him, let such a one cleanse the upright intention of his heart from all duplicity. In this way, he will "think of the Lord in goodness and seek him in simplicity of heart" (Wisdom 1:1). (Sermon on the Mount 2.14.48)