

# “Take No Thought”

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*They call it Christianity. I call it consciousness.*  
—Emerson

You’re going to miss it. You’re distracted. Sit up straight. You’re not paying attention.

God does not come and go—your attention does.

All sins are just variations on that same desire to do something else when you’re already doing something. Multitaskers are children of the devil. You can’t serve two masters. Divided attention is just dressed-up inattention.

“Hear, O Israel,” the Shema begins, “the Lord our God is one Lord!” (Deut. 6:4) But are you one? Or do you keep getting shucked, splintered, and spread by every distraction that wanders by?

Put your phone away. Recent studies agree with Jesus. In their distressing 2009 paper “Cognitive Control in Media Multitaskers,” Ophir et al. found that heavy media multitaskers (or HMMs) “have greater difficulty filtering out irrelevant stimuli from their environment.” They are “less likely to ignore irrelevant representations in memory.” And they are “less effective in suppressing the activation of irrelevant task sets.”<sup>1</sup>

Does this remind you of anyone? Do you know anyone who can’t filter out irrelevant stimuli? Do you know anyone who keeps getting sucked down black holes of memory and fantasy? Do you know anyone who can’t suppress the impulse to do something other than what they’re supposed to be doing?

Hmm. Do you know anyone who *doesn’t* fit this description?

Such is the human condition: unable to filter stimuli or shunt impulses, everyone sins. “There is none righteous, no, not one”

because sin beds down in the distraction of our daydreams (Rom. 3:10).

Jesus's canonical take on multitasking looks like this: "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon" (Matt. 6:24).

When Jesus says that "no man can serve two masters," I understand Him to mean that no one can pay attention to two things at the same time.

Serving means paying attention. You serve by *attending*, by giving your full attention to even the least little thing at hand. And, when you attend to the least among these things, it is the same as attending to God himself. "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:40).

How freely Jesus allows you to substitute even the least little thing for Himself!

Jesus doesn't worry about these substitutions. He encourages them. He doesn't worry about you *servicing* mammon because "mammon" just names your *avoidance* of service. "Serving mammon" is oxymoronic because serving mammon is just a way of serving yourself and serving yourself isn't actually service.

It is impossible, then, to serve both God and mammon *because it is impossible to serve mammon*. Mammon names that bifurcation of attention that follows from your *failing* to serve and attend. To serve is, by definition, to serve God.

When Jesus says that no one "can serve two masters," which two masters does he have in mind? The particulars of the first may vary—doing it unto the least of these is the same as doing it unto God—but the second always seems to be the same: you.

*You* are mammon. You can either serve God by attending to others or in attending to others you can try to serve yourself.

Self-interest is this second master that halves your attention. You double your interest in every least little thing with an interest in yourself. Before it even pops up, you've already started to ask: How might this little thing either harm or benefit me? Will I love it or hate it? What does it have to do with me?

Often, your double vision is so bad that you can barely even *see* that little thing because you're so intent on seeing yourself. Then,

having failed to see the least among these, you inevitably fail to see God. And you're sad.

Trying to serve two masters, attention falters. When attention falters, it bifurcates into love and hatred. "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other."

Instead of serving things in terms of what they need from you, you end up judging them in terms of your own preferences—in terms of your own likes and dislikes. This bifurcation of attention into modes of preference—that is, into modes of loving or hating—is the root of sin because it turns attention back on itself.

Attention neither loves nor hates. It serves.

And, in serving, it even loves what it hates by serving it.

"Okay," you may say, "but reading love and hatred as what *follows* from trying to have two masters rather than as the *cause* for its impossibility is a bit unconventional."

"And while we're at it," you may add, "I highly doubt that Jesus actually had multitasking in mind when he claimed that no man can serve two masters."

To be honest, I don't know what Jesus had in mind. But I do know something about what this saying of his *did* to me. And what it did led me to say what I said.

I take it as axiomatic that Jesus's saying is not a static picture upon which I ought to reflect. It is not (in any straightforward way) a transparent representation or object of contemplation.

Rather, my assumption is that the text is itself an agent, an actor, a will—something more like a computer program than a still cut from a movie reel. Jesus's saying is meant to *do* something, to make something happen, to change something. The text is an operation. It's a bit of open-source code. It's a plug-in that needs to be run.

But, strangers in a strange world, we've got compatibility problems, cross-platform issues that require the text to be translated and then creatively recompiled. If we want it to run—rather than sit there like a museum piece—then we're going to have to port the text onto the kinds of platforms *we've* got available. We're going to have to render the text sufficiently pliable to cross that gap.

En route, patches will have to be rigged and foreign material

spliced. Ways of hashing the code will inevitably fork; and then, though multiple paths may be workable, we'll have to settle, for the moment, for one.

But once it's up and running, the text should work more like an aggressive virus than a frozen PDF and it, in turn, will exapt, reformat, and repurpose *our* operating systems to meet *its* ends.

Jesus-text: an applet for viral inception.

In the end, the measure for success in creatively porting a text from one platform to another is just this: When we finally run the program, does it output charity? Does it repurpose my vanity? Because whatever else the text does, it is nothing without charity. If it doesn't show charity, it is only so much sounding brass and tinkling cymbals (1 Cor. 13:1-2).

The advantage, then, of how I've thus far ported this text from Matthew is twofold: Even if it appears unconventional, even if it is only one possible reading among others, my reading (1) responds directly to the experience induced by the text, and (2) opens the door to reading this saying as deeply intertwined with the details of the verses that follow.

Good readings ought to do both. They ought to bluntly connect with our lives and they ought to light up surrounding passages like Christmas trees. As readers, we must faithfully attend to both the least little thing the text does to us and the least little thing it does to the passages around it.

Taking into account the surrounding verses, I think it is crucial to read Matthew 6:24 together with 6:25-34 as one operational unit. I take 6:24 as the unit's thesis and 6:25-34 as an extended explanation of that thesis. The initial explanation of verse 24 is given in 25 and then repeated, by way of conclusion, in 34. The middle section, verses 26-33, elaborates on that explanation.

Here's the full King James Version of Matthew 6:24-34, formatted in such a way as to diagram the structure I've just outlined:

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?

Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they

reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?

Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?

And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin:

And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?

Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?

(For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things.

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

Jesus's advice about how to pay attention—that is, about how to serve just one master—is repeated five times in these ten verses.

He pounds the point home: "*take no thought . . .*"

This is straightforward advice. To pay attention to the least little thing, you have to stop thinking about other things.

When you play with your four-year-old, stop thinking about the book you could be reading. When you go to bed at night, stop thinking about the credit card you have yet to balance. When you're out with your wife, stop thinking about the waitress you aren't impressing. (In fact, as a general rule, stop thinking about that waitress.)

Be where you are. Do what you're doing.

6:25 captures the gist of Jesus' charge. Advising that we take no thought, Jesus specifies: "Take no thought *for your life*."

How would taking no thought for your life help you to serve and pay attention?

To begin with, in order to serve and attend to others, you will have to stop thinking about *your* life. Drop the possessive. If you're thinking about *your* life when you're supposed to be attending to someone else's life, then your attention will bifurcate into prefer-

ential judgments and that familiar, second master (you!) will end up running the show.

For example, you might think: “I really should be paying attention right now to how well I wipe my baby’s bottom so she won’t get a rash, but *I hate* this smell so I’m going to think about checking my email instead.”

Here, attention that should be wholly focused on bum-wiping gets bifurcated by your preference for non-excremental smells and then slips off into daydreams about phantasmatic emails. (Hmm. Heavy media-multitasking continues to take its toll.)

But Jesus also has something more in mind. Verse 25 goes on to specify what he means by “life.” Taking thought for your life, Jesus says, amounts to taking thought for what you are going to eat, drink, and wear: “Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on.”

Shouldn’t we “take thought” for these things? No. This is a frank imperative. Feed and clothe yourself by feeding and clothing yourself, not by thinking about feeding and clothing yourself.

Jesus is clear about his reason for this imperative: “Is not the life *more* than meat, and the body than raiment?” What is this “more”?

Verse 34 recapitulates, by way of conclusion, what Jesus means when he says that you should take no thought for your life: “Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself.”

Taking no thought for your life means taking no thought for tomorrow.

What, then, is this “more” to which Jesus redirects our attention? What is more than tomorrow?

This “more” is the ringing urgency of “now.”

Life is more than your distracted thoughts about what you’d like to do next. It is more than your thoughts about what you plan to eat, more than your thoughts about what you plan to drink, more than your thoughts about what you plan to wear. It is more than your preferences. It is more than you.

Life includes *all* those least little things that metonymize God.

More than your thoughts about tomorrow, life is the overflow of this unchosen moment, a moment whose current is too strong to be parlayed and, instead, can only be served.

Why do you prefer the distraction of your thoughts to the flood of the present? Because your thoughts are thin enough to mold and manipulate. Building sand castles in your head, you play master of the house. But this is one too many masters.

"Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?" Sand castles in your head will not make you taller.

Seek first to serve. Seek first to pay attention. Seek first "the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (6:33).

If you attend to the least little things, then these least little things will add themselves to you.

Instead of wrapping yourself in idle conceits, the lilies will clothe you. Instead of clouding your heart with worry, Solomon's sun will shine down on you. Instead of stuffing your belly with cardboard morale, the grasses will feed you.

When Jesus tells you to "take no thought," he's not advising that you re-pot yourself as an absent-minded vegetable. Nothing grows in the soil of apathy. Rather, taken together with Matthew 6:24 as an explanation of *how* to serve, his apparently irresponsible advice to "take no thought" is nothing of the kind.

Nothing is more demanding than "taking no thought." Nothing is harder than the work of paying attention. Nothing is more essential to service. Nothing is more responsible. And nothing is more productive. Forget yourself, go to work, and the kingdom will add *itself* to you. You will not need to take it.

"Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

Paying attention depends on our faith in this sufficiency. It depends on our willingness to trust that what is given will be enough, that if—on God's behalf—you feed the fowls of the air, they will feed you.

The grace of each day's "evil," of each day's trouble, of each day's need for our full attention, will be sufficient. You should not ask for, nor will you get, more. Tomorrow will give its own little things. As for today, there are already too many.

The kingdom of God is distressingly near. If you find yourself far from the master's face, it is not because he has hidden it from

you. It is because you, in a fever of existential multitasking, are addled and distracted.

Lay down your distraction.

Rather than taking thought, give it.

No man can have two masters.

God does not come and go—your attention does.

#### **Note**

1. Eyal Ophir, Clifford Nass, and Anthony Wagner, "Cognitive Control in Media Multitaskers," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, doi: 10.1073/pnas.0903620106 (accessed October 18, 2010).