

Treasures in Heaven

Matthew 6:19-24

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We continue this morning hearing Jesus' call to discipleship, from the Sermon on the Mount, from the gospel lesson in Matthew chapter 6. What is before us, in our text, reflects how one lives the priorities of the Lord's Prayer. To pray, is to orient oneself to our Father IN HEAVEN, and thus to a heavenly disposition toward stuff and treasure.

We are here, on the question of money and treasure, at something which lies at the center of Jesus' ethical teaching. This is a heartfelt passion of his. To grasp how important this material is to Jesus, consider this: The Sermon the Mount is the heart of his ethical teaching. And in this section, Jesus uses the related words for reward and treasure, ten times in 21 verses.

Now I think we all know, that when it comes to money and wealth, Jesus is ruthless. He is consistently demanding, challenging, and fierce. He's not getting a regular gig on CNBC or the Fox Business channel. He would agree with Calvin who said: It is a major plague, which we find rampant amongst mankind, that they have a mad and insatiable desire for possessions.

Jesus is, without question, an enemy of our materialist, consumerist, wealth-obsessed culture. According to Kierkegaard (19th c. Danish philosopher), Jesus in his teaching on earthly treasures: "assaulted the whole human race at the point where that race is most sensitive: its desire for security." And we will see Jesus do that again here.

Now, it is easy, I suppose, to put someone else in the crosshairs, to criticize perhaps, preachers of the prosperity gospel. But to think that as Americans, embedded in the richest country in the world, we are somehow unscathed by all this, would be a grave mistake. For the gospel of prosperity has infected us all. Which is why Jesus' teaching on wealth gets "what about-ed" as much as his teaching on non-retaliatory suffering love. Again, as a matter of first importance, we must let ourselves (not others, ourselves, we must let), our cherished presuppositions, our institutions, the things we think are obviously true. We must let those things be scrutinized, criticized, put under the microscope of the Word of God – or we risk becoming stagnant at best, idolators at worst.

In our passage, vv. 19-24, Jesus is saying the same thing three different ways – each small piece of text here is making the same point, only with a different metaphor. So we shall make three points. A single treasure in vv. 19-21, a single eye in vv. 22 and 23, and a single master in v. 24. A single treasure, a single eye, and a single master.

I. Single Treasure

First, then, a single treasure. In v. 19, we begin with a prohibition: we are told NOT to store up treasures for ourselves on earth. The force of the text is STOP storing up treasures for yourselves. Jesus assumes this is our natural inclination, and he assumes it is going on, and that it needs to stop. Immediately.

Notice: store up, that is, amass and hold, for yourselves on earth – that is, not for his work, for his kingdom, not for the poor, but for ourselves. So selfish treasure is clearly condemned, but this does not mean – as we will see – that we can have earthly treasures, as long as were generous and use some (most) of it for God's work. Jesus forbids earthly treasures. Period. The text could not be clearer. One may have assets, things they enjoy, one may have possessions, but one can have no treasures on earth—according to Jesus (Paul). How much treasure on earth does Jesus expect us to have in this text? Zero. None. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth. It's not: reduce your treasures on earth – it's don't have any. So – stop. Immediately. Do NOT – it is prohibited- do not lay up treasures on earth.

People who lay up treasure are like the Rich Fool, who decides to build bigger barns, and was satisfied that he would have assets laid up for many years, and who said to himself: take life easy, eat, drink and be merry. God calls him a fool and says that on that very night his soul will be required of him. That he was not rich toward God.

Further, treasures on earth are irrational, they are not even a wise or a sane investment. Notice the whole verse: Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. In a world without banks, treasure would consist in hard currency and material assets, and they would be hidden, either in the home, or in some supposedly safe place. But this type of earthly treasure was subject to being consumed by moths or vermin, or possibly, if it was metal, rusting away. And of course, it was relatively easily stolen by thieves. Today, in addition to theft and deterioration of hard assets, we can lose them by inflation or market fluctuations.

Wealth, in any age, Proverbs tells us, has a way of making itself wings and flying away. The point is treasures ON EARTH are not durable. They are not secure. So, if we want a genuinely safe and secure, a durable investment, we are to store up treasures in heaven. Here treasure would move beyond the purely

material, and would include everything which will benefit us after our death – character, deeds of love and mercy, almsgiving, and the kingdom centered use of our wealth. In the Sermon on the Mount, one commentator says, the actions which are specifically described as accumulating rewards include suffering persecution for Jesus' sake, loving one's enemies, generosity to the poor, fervent and sincere prayer, and humble fasting.

In short, the whole of our Christian lives is to be a laying up of treasure in heaven. Calvin again: those who lay up treasures in heaven, are those who rid themselves of earth's entanglements, and direct their concern and zeal to consider the life of heaven.

Now notice this: Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth...BUT lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven. There is a stark contrast, an antithesis. Stop doing the one. Do the other. Let me be clear here, so we don't evade this: Jesus does NOT think you can have TREASURE on earth AND in heaven. He does not think this is a both/and situation. He does not say the stuff we say. He doesn't say: as long as you use 10% of your earthly stuff for my kingdom, go ahead and keep amassing it. He says rather: *Any one of you who does not renounce all that he has, cannot be my disciple.* A man can store and amass treasure, the Lord says, in only ONE place. You cannot have some treasure on earth, for yourself, and some in heaven.

All treasure, including our earthly assets, is to be stored and deployed for the kingdom of heaven. We may have earthly things, earthly assets, but we are to have NO earthly treasures. Our treasure is to be in heaven. Period. No remainder. And if you think I'm overselling or overstating what Jesus requires, here's Luke's version of this same text:

Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near, and no moth destroys.

Our treasure is to be in heaven. Period. If you have to sell you possession to do so – sell them. The whole New Testament teaches orients us this way when it tells us our reward is in heaven, our inheritance is in heaven, our citizenship is in heaven, our hope is anchored in heaven, our affections are in heaven, and we inwardly groan for heaven. In short, our Jesus is in heaven, and we too, already, by faith, in the Spirit, are raised up into heaven to participate in God, who is himself our blessedness and reward– where else would our treasure be? We agree with the Psalmist, who said:

Whom have I in heaven, but thee? And there is none upon the earth, that I desire besides thee. My flesh and my heart fail, but God is the strength of my heart, my portion forever more.

Besides, Jesus makes a practical point. The earthly stuff is unsafe and will be lost. The heavenly stuff is safe and will never be lost: in heaven neither moth nor rust destroy, nor do thieves break in and steal. Jesus then summarizes why we need to stop amassing one form of treasure and start amassing the other: For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. This is an extraordinarily powerful diagnostic proverb. I would suggest that we tend to naturally reverse it. We would say: wherever your heart is, there you will find your treasure. And yes, there is a lot of truth in that.

But here, Jesus reverses the order because he does not want to leave us an out which we are susceptible of taking. We don't get to say that the "real me" is who I am in my heart, so don't worry about my assets, my treasure. I mean I've got all this stuff, but my heart's really in heaven. We don't get to say that Jesus is "my true heart treasure," but with my actual treasures it kind of looks like I'm pursuing the American dream.

Jesus insists that the heart FOLLOWS one's treasure. WHERE you reckon your highest goods to be – there you are tied, there you are fixed. Show me, he says, What place your time, and your talents, and your physical assets are deployed for... show me what place you cherish and protect and sacrifice for, and invest in, what losses grieve you, and what gains you rejoice in, and there, he says, that is the place your heart is. And it is a binary choice, stark and unmixed: heaven or earth.

II. Single Eye

Our second point is a single eye. Beginning in v.22, Jesus contrasts two types of eyes, two ways of seeing. And here the eye is a metaphor for a person's heart, the center of their being. So, having just told us that the heart is determined by our treasure, Jesus now focuses on the heart and its ability to affect our body, and here body means the whole person. On the one hand we have a healthy eye. This means a sound eye, an eye singularly focused on the kingdom, and thus, a generous eye. This sort of eye means our lives, our bodies, are full of light. The other type of eye is called unhealthy, and it means a stingy, envious, greedy or selfish eye. A person with this type of eye is filled with great darkness.

In context, the point is clear. One type of eye seeks to amass treasures in heaven; the other seeks to amass treasures on earth. One type of eye sees the invisible God dwelling in the highest heavens, the realm of the eternal and heavenly, the other type of eye is transfixed on the realm of the visible and temporal. Kierkegaard said that purity of heart is to will one thing (repeat). You can only have a single treasure, in a single place, and you can only have a single eye. A single heavenly treasure requires a single, generous, focused interior vision.

Finally, our third point, a single master. It is almost as if Jesus can hear our natural protest. Surely we can have treasures in BOTH places! I mean we are good at multi-tasking, and life is complicated, and we have a lot of earthly things to attend to. But in v.24 Jesus reaffirms the absolute contrast: No one can serve two masters. This can appear plainly false to us.

Sometimes we work two jobs, and we are able to please our bosses and handle the situation quite well. But that is not in view here. The word for serve in v.24 is the word for “be a slave to.” That is, we are to be bond-servants, slaves of Jesus Christ and THAT attachment demands fulltime, exclusive loyalty. It cannot be mixed, adulterated, with another master.

And notice, the masters in view here, at the end of v.24, are God and money, or God and mammon. It is crucial to see this. Mammon, wealth, is viewed by Jesus as a rival master to his kingdom. It is not correct, though it is often affirmed, to say that money is merely neutral and it’s what you do with it that matters. Jesus recognizes that money has a seductive power about it, that it COMPETES with Him to be our master. He treats it as a POWER, a principality, which seeks to master us. In Luke, he even goes so far as to call it unrighteous mammon. This means we need a critical suspicion toward it, we must recognize that money is not like apples, or flowers, or screwdrivers – it wants to be our Master.

And in this battle of God and mammon, only one can win. You will end up, Jesus says, hating the one, if only by neglect, and loving the other, or, being devoted to the one, and despising the other. Hear this: The love of mammon, making mammon a master and serving it, will make you one who hates and despises God.

But the text cuts both ways, and this a point often overlooked: The love of God, following Christ as master, means you will hate and despise money. The text could not be plainer about this. That is, you will recognize its power, and you will seek to dethrone it, to de-sacralize it, to profane it, by giving it away, by laying hold of it and sowing heavenly treasure and insisting that it serve your one and only Master, Jesus Christ. Mammon places us into war. It forces a choice of allegiance on us. Notice, you CANNOT serve BOTH – God and mammon. Just as you cannot have treasure in both places.

This text, then, calls us to wake up to the reality that our goods, our affluence and wealth, and all their attendant distractions, COMPETE with the Kingdom of God. But we are accustomed to thinking we can have it both ways. And if we cannot serve two masters – if it is not possible - the text requires us to say that partial commitment to Christ, coupled with partial commitment to mammon, is nothing but idolatry.

Let me conclude. The Puritan Thomas Brooks said: It is a very high point of Christian wisdom and prudence always to look upon the good things and great

things of this world, as a man will certainly look upon them when he comes to die. So, think of your stuff, your good stuff, your highly valued stuff, NOW, as you will think of it in the hospital 20 minutes before your death. For dying saints know where lasting treasure is. If we were well-persuaded, Calvin said, that our happiness was in heaven, it would be easy to knock the world aside, to scorn earthy goods, and ascend to heaven. This, he says, is the mind of Paul, who wishing to lift the faithful up to the heights, and to urge upon them zeal for the life of heaven, sets Christ before them.

Christ, raised in heavenly glory, is himself our Treasure. Which is why the apostle can charge us:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

Heaven or Earth? It can only be one. Where is your treasure? Amen.

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