

“What Do You Treasure?”

Introduction: With the arrival of Pentecost last Sunday, we move into the time in the church year known as Ordinary Time. The church year, you remember, begins in Advent (Dec) as we anticipate the birth of Jesus, and then runs through his life, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, and his pouring out of the Holy Spirit. Now, as Ordinary Time begins, what it provides, after having traced out the larger story of God’s salvation, is a long stretch of months to reflect on this story, to absorb it and to find our place in it. Importantly, “Ordinary” does not mean second-rate or inferior but simply “every-day.” It reminds us that the Christian faith is not only about the future, but also about this life, and about these days in which we are living.

So as we think about this life and these days, and about who Jesus is and all that he has done, it’s a good time to step back into our study of that great body of teaching he left us, the Sermon on the Mount. In this teaching, Jesus helps us to understand what it looks like to live as citizens of the kingdom of heaven, as salt and light in our world. To that end, we spent time thinking about some of the “core work” Jesus has given us to help form and shape us under the Spirit’s direction. Now, in the next two Sundays, we’ll consider what Jesus warns us can distract our hearts, causing us to veer off course from the life he holds out for us, to lose our saltiness and hide our light, as he put it (Ma. 5:13-16).

In this regard, Jesus talks about two things: the pursuit of wealth, which we’ll consider today, and the weight of worry, which we’ll address next week. [READ]

I. Where is our treasure?

A. In this section of the Sermon, Jesus rather bluntly lays out three contrasting pairs, three alternative choices. For those of you studying Proverbs on Wednesday nights, the choices are really between the way of wisdom and the way of folly, between the way that leads to life and the way that leads to death. The first pair has to do with whether we are laying up treasure on earth, or treasure in heaven:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.

B. What are earthly treasures? They are all of those things the mind-numbing number of commercials that come at us say we need to have to be happy, from the latest iPhone, to a particular beverage, to a car that basically drives itself.

Illustration: I remember a few months ago going into Marconi Radio on Rantoul St. in Beverly and was amazed at the huge number of used iPhones available for sale. I asked the owner why this was so and he explained that people just have to have the latest model, that as soon as a new model comes out, they’re trading their current model in. They’re never quite happy, never quite satisfied.

Earthly treasures do not satisfy and they do not last. In Jesus’ day what folks were tempted to treasure could be lost or destroyed by moths, vermin, or thieves. Today we’re more likely to lose our earthly treasures through inflation, devaluation, obsolescence, or rust, but we lose them just the same.

C. What, then, is a better investment, a more satisfying treasure? What in the world are treasures in heaven? Lest we imagine some heavenly ATM machine that never runs out, remember that heaven is a way of describing God's dimension of reality which gets us thinking that to store up heavenly treasure is to invest our resources in what God is doing. To put it another way, if storing up earthly treasures involves grabbing and holding on to things, then storing up heavenly treasure involves giving and letting go of things. As we heard Paul parse this out for a church leader named Timothy, don't put your hope in the pursuit of wealth, but lay up for yourselves treasure for the coming age by being generous and willing to share (1 Tim. 6:17-19). [eg., For His Children, Brian and Malissa Ellis, Build a Bed]

To this we could add the wisdom of the Proverbs (21:26):

"All day long [the fool] craves for more, but the righteous [the wise] give without sparing."

Pursuing earthly treasure will never fully satisfy. The wise know that our heart follows what we treasure so that giving directs our heart in a healthy direction. Store up for yourselves treasure in heaven by focusing not on increasing your standard of living but your standard of giving.

Illustration: It's instructive to remember how John the Baptist responded to the crowd out in the wilderness when they asked him how they could best prepare for the coming of the kingdom of God that he had been preaching about. John gives three very practical responses: everyone should share their clothing and food with the poor, tax collectors shouldn't pocket extra money, and soldiers should be content with their pay and not extort funds from the citizenry they were supposed to protect (Lk. 3:7-14). No one had asked John how to handle their wealth, but John's response couldn't help but speak about wealth because how we think about it and handle it has everything to do with our life of faith and the formation of our hearts. Pursuing earthly treasure, Jesus would say, is folly; it doesn't last, and it leads our hearts away from the life that is truly life.

## II. What is our focus?

A. How can we guard against such folly? Jesus goes on to give us a second contrasting pair, talking about our focus, our vision:

The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness.

Are your eyes healthy or unhealthy, he asks? It's an important question because our eyes, what they focus on, directs our whole being, warns Jesus. "Fix your eyes on Jesus," the writer of Hebrews exhorts, the "pioneer and perfecter of faith" (Heb. 12:2). And then he goes on to talk about the cross and what Jesus did there for our sake. Helpful to know is that "healthy" implies generous, and "unhealthy" implies stingy. So when we look at Jesus and are able to see the unbelievable generosity of his grace that comes to us as an undeserved gift, it opens our hearts in healthy ways. Conversely, as Eugene Peterson puts 6:23 in *The Message*: "If you live squinty-eyed in greed and distrust . . . what a dark life you will have."

B. Remember the parable of the workers in the vineyard? There, the landowner paid everyone the same amount, whether they worked a full day or only an hour. It was an incredible illustration of God's grace, though not everyone was able to see it. "Are you envious because I am generous?" the landowner asked those who were complaining (Ma. 20:1-16). As one writer puts it, "as thunder follows lightning, giving follows grace." The more we can see grace, the more our hearts can drink in God's

generosity, the more our hearts will generously open to pursuing heavenly treasure and the life that is truly life, and the less our lives will be mastered by money.

### III. Who is our Master?

A. And that is the third contrast Jesus puts before us:

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

Who is our master? Jesus is blunt once again: is it God, or is it money? We cannot, Jesus observes, serve both. Now please note that Jesus nowhere says that money is a bad thing. What's bad is when it becomes a number one thing, when it becomes what we treasure above all else. When that happens, our life will veer way off course. As Paul puts it a bit earlier to Timothy, it's love of money, our eagerness for it, that leads to folly, that is the root of evil (1 Tim. 6:10). It's when money becomes not a servant through which we do good things, but the boss which orders our lives. We don't use the term, the Almighty Dollar, for nothing!

Illustration: A sobering illustration of the strong pull of wealth was recorded a few decades ago in a book called *Buyology*, by Martin Lindstrom. He reports on a group of neurologists who scanned the brains of people of faith as they brought to mind the times they felt close to God when in prayer, worship, or silence and solitude. At these times, a particular area of the brain responded; it "lit up." It turns out that this same area of the brain "lit up" when another group of people was presented with products such as iPods, Ferrari's, and Harley-Davidsons. Further, Lindstrom's research reveals that ninety percent of our buying behavior is unconscious. That is, we purchase things not for their functionality but for what we believe they say about us and what we believe they will enable us to become, from deodorant that will make you irresistible, to cars that will make you attractive.

In other words, the material world provides a strong rival to God in terms of what we think will bring us life. Our wealth, and what we think it can buy, competes for our hearts.

As we seek to be salt and light, as we seek to shine the light of Christ around us, as we seek to have Jesus form our hearts so that we may live the life that is truly life, be aware of who your master is and where you are storing your treasure. Fix your eyes on Jesus and the grace that is revealed on the cross, to which we now turn.