

## **“Treasure in Heaven”**

Matthew 6:19-24

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### **Two Strikes**

Let's start by addressing the elephant in the room. As I stand up to preach this particular sermon in this particular place, I'm keenly aware that there may be some resistance. I know it's not true of everyone, but for some people in the room, I'm coming up to bat with two strikes against me. First, I'm not Pastor Bob, and second, you're dreading the idea of hearing a sermon about money. There's nothing I can do about the first issue, but let me try to set your mind at ease about the second. I can tell you what we won't be doing today: I won't be telling you that God hates money or that Jesus is anti-possessions. I won't be telling you that it's a sin to have a nice home or to save for retirement. I won't be asking you to sell everything you have and give all your money to the church. That's not what this passage is about, and I'm not trying to say something that Jesus isn't saying. What we will do today is spend a few minutes thinking about what we treasure, how we see, and what we serve.

### **Treasures on Earth**

If you were here last week, you heard a short overview about the Sermon on the Mount, which is what we'll be studying for the next month or so. This “sermon” spans three chapters in the book of Matthew, making it the longest discourse of Jesus in this gospel. Scholars disagree on whether Jesus preached this passage the way it's written in our Bibles (as a single sermon), or if the gospel writer took pieces of several of Jesus' sermons and stitched them together into this one passage. I don't have a strong feeling about it one way or the other and we won't spend much time on that question today, because nobody seems to dispute that the content of this sermon is actually what Jesus taught. Figuring out whether he said it all in one day, or over the course of a week or a month or six months doesn't change the truth or value of it.

The Sermon on the Mount is what one of my seminary professors would have called “a target-rich environment,” meaning that there's stuff to dig into everywhere you look. Matthew 5 has the Beatitudes (“blessed are the poor... the meek... the peacemakers”) and the passage we looked at last week of Jesus' Ten Commandments (“you have heard it said... but I say...”). In Matthew 6, Jesus teaches his disciples the Lord's Prayer, and gives one of the most famous biblical teachings on worry, which we'll look at next week. Matthew 7 has the familiar “ask and it will be given to you, search and you will find, knock and the door will be opened” passage and what is known even outside the Christian faith as the golden rule (“do unto others as you would have them do unto you”). And right in the middle of that, we have this lesson about treasures.

Jesus starts with a very clear warning – “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal” (19).

In Jesus' day, wealth could be accumulated in a number of ways, some of which look different than modern wealth. Fine cloth, which would be made into garments of clothing, was one common way of accumulating and sharing wealth. Some people had a lot of garments, some

had just a few. Some pieces were incredibly elaborate, some were more simple in style. But it was a common cultural practice to keep some of your wealth in the form of clothing. Even poor people in the ancient world would hand down their garments of clothing from one generation to the next as an inheritance.<sup>1</sup>

It was also common to have some of your wealth in the form of crops. In other parts of the Bible, Jesus tells parables about people storing up grain. This was a common practice in his world, and his audience would have readily understood it as a stockpile of wealth. Stores of crops could be helpful in a couple ways. They were security against famine (you could eat them if the crops had a bad year), and they were potential revenue (you could sell your surplus). Finally, and most familiar to us, a portion of a person's wealth would be kept in gold, jewels, coins, or other precious metals.

It's pretty clear to me that Jesus' warning here is not to not have or not use those things. None of us would survive long without at least some kind of clothing, food, or money, and I don't think Jesus is asking us to be naked and hungry and poor. In and of themselves, these goods that make up wealth are not inherently bad. Quite the opposite is true; they're all things that we need if we want to live more than a couple days! But they're also things that are subject to decay and destruction and loss. Not one piece of clothing, or one morsel of food, or one ounce of gold is exempt from this rule.

This week, I noticed for the first time a really interesting discrepancy in how Bible translations handle verses 19-20. Some say that "moths and rust" destroy the treasures on earth, while others say "moths and vermin" destroy them. That's already sort of weird, to have rust and vermin being used interchangeably. Rust spreads across metals; vermin are living, crawling creatures like rats. But I've studied enough Greek and read it well enough to notice immediately that something far weirder than equating rust and vermin is going on in these verses.

The Greek word that is translated either "vermin" or "rust" in this passage (βρωσις, "brosis") is fairly common in the New Testament. A common word showing up in a familiar passage isn't weird; what struck me as odd is how it's translated. If I didn't already know this passage in English, I would not have read it in Greek and expected any English translation to have either rust or vermin in it. The majority of times this Greek word (βρωσις) appears in the Bible, it means "eating" in the most natural, everyday sense of the word. Like, after church is over, I'm going to be eating lunch. Or, it's not a Super Bowl party until I eat some wings!

Maybe Jesus wants us to think of rats, maybe he wants us to imagine rust, or maybe (most likely), he wants us thinking of both. The warning is that these treasures of clothing and grains and even gold – they can all be eaten up by other things and destroyed. Moths will eat the clothing, vermin will eat the stores of grain, rust will eat the metal. The first danger is that earthly treasure will be literally "eaten" by something, and lost to us.

The second danger Jesus points to is theft. Though there were some bankers who would hold money for others, a lot of people in Jesus' time would not have had bank accounts. Since their wealth was split between clothing, grain, and money, they had less money, which translates to less of a need to leave it in a bank. The same is true today; if you have \$20, you put it in your wallet, if you have \$20,000, you'll want a more secure place to keep it. Because most people didn't have massive sums of coin or gold or jewels, they would just keep a small stockpile of these things somewhere in their home. Jesus' second warning relates to that stash. A thief could

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<sup>1</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2010), 242.

break in – or more specifically dig in through the mud walls – and steal the money. Again, Jesus isn't saying that it's wrong to have money, just that money is vulnerable to theft.

The Jewish law that Jesus would have learned and studied didn't forbid a person having possessions. What Jewish law did forbid, however, was becoming obsessed with wealth.<sup>2</sup> This is the principle that Jesus is pointing toward. Things like clothing and grain and money can all wear out over time, be destroyed by the elements, or be stolen. If you have invested any of your money in the stock market, I don't really need to explain to you how quickly fortunes can change. And if you've been investing for more than a decade, I don't need to tell you how dramatic a reversal of fortune can be to a portfolio.

About six months ago, I had a service tech at my house working on my air conditioner. In the course of the service call, the tech inadvertently damaged the drain line that is supposed to carry the water from my main unit out into my yard. It was almost two weeks before the damage was visible. That means that all the water that was supposed to leave my house was pooling under my wood floors for two weeks. By the time all was said and done, I had mold in the walls, and needed new flooring for my entire first floor. Two months later, I had to replace my hot water heater after discovering that it was leaking. I was fortunate to have losses covered by insurance and the ability to replace what was broken. But I saw first-hand just how quickly earthly things wear out, and how completely earthly things get destroyed.

The things of earth, the material goods, no matter how well they're made, or how thoroughly they're insured, or how securely they're stored, can all be destroyed or stolen. Jesus' advice is not to do away with them all together, but rather to not be obsessed with them, to not set our hearts on them, to not make them our ultimate treasure. Instead we are to store up, or more literally, treasure up our treasure in heaven. Treasure in heaven can't be eaten by moths or vermin or rust, and can't be stolen by any thief.

### **Treasures in Heaven**

What then is "treasure in heaven?" It's a little less obvious than "treasures on earth." I've heard and read a number of theories as I've studied this week. In Jewish tradition, the phrase "treasures in heaven" represented some kind of eschatological, or end-time, reward. Some have said that "treasures in heaven" are rewards given by God for a life of obedience. Some say they are a heavenly payment of sorts for good deeds. But these ideas fall short for me. I have issues with any theology that says we earn God's favor or blessings through our actions, or that our actions on earth should be motivated by the desire to get some kind of reward later. I think we've missed the point of "treasures in heaven" if we're asking the questions of what we can do to earn it, or what we can do to make ourselves worthy of it.

Fundamentally, "treasures in heaven" are different from "treasures on earth" in every possible way. Asking how we can earn it or what it looks like or how much treasure we'll get reveals that we haven't really changed our understanding of treasure, we've just shifted our idea of where it's located. Treasure in heaven isn't magical clothing that's not susceptible to moths, or genetically-modified grain that never spoils, or a stock market that never crashes, or a house that can never be robbed. To get what Jesus is talking about, we need to completely reframe our thinking about "treasures in heaven," and that's exactly what I think the rest of this passage does.

I may be wrong here, because I read 8 or 10 different commentaries this week, and none of them mentioned what I'm about to suggest to you. Nevertheless, I think what I see in this passage has some merit. I'd like to suggest that Jesus will spend the rest of this passage

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<sup>2</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 14.

illustrating for us exactly what “treasure in heaven” is. Sometimes Jesus speaks very clearly, but more often he speaks in parables and teaches in the abstract. If you read literally, what follows seems kind of disjointed. If you read more abstractly or poetically, it makes perfect sense. Verses 21-24, I think, are an example of Jesus taking his time and painting a complex picture about “treasure in heaven.”

### **Hearts, Eyes, and Masters**

First, Jesus says that where our treasure is, that’s where our heart will be also. “The heart in Semitic anthropology is not merely the seat or center of affections, but of thought, conscience, will – in short it is viewed as the control center of the personality... whatever one values most will determine one’s life orientation.”<sup>3</sup> Whatever the thing is that we treasure most, that’s the thing we orient our lives around. It will be the one thing that occupies and guides our feelings, our thoughts, and our actions. Jesus has already explained why treasures on earth aren’t worthy of being at the center of our lives – they’re corruptible and impermanent. It is foolish, Jesus is saying, to orient our lives around something so fleeting. By contrast, he’s also starting to show us that “treasures in heaven” will be permanent, indestructible, and secure.

“The eye is the lamp of the body,” Jesus says, before going on to explain the importance of a good eye that gives good light. These verses can read almost like a tongue-twister or riddle, but the point is pretty simple, once you get down to it. In modern terms, we’re likely to think of eyes letting light into the body. Biologically, we know that that’s what eyes do – the bring light in and translate that light into pictures for our brains to understand. And it also lines up with our modern saying, “the eye is the window to the soul.” In this passage, Jesus probably meant the opposite – the eye was the lamp that would shine light out of the body onto the world around us.<sup>4</sup> In this context, the treasure in heaven, which is what our heart is supposed to be set on and the thing around which we orient our lives, determines what kind of light we shine on the things we look at. In other words, the treasure we choose impacts how we see the world. This is where the illustration gets really interesting to me.

Jesus draws a distinction between a good eye and an evil eye. In the case of the good eye, the language he uses also implies a single eye or a generous eye. By contrast, the evil eye is described with language that can also mean a jealous eye or a greedy eye. When our hearts are properly seated with our treasure in heaven, our eye is singularly focused on that treasure, and as a result, our view of the world is good and generous, not jealous or greedy.

To complete this idea of singular focus and singular vision, Jesus uses the illustration of two masters. “No one can serve two masters,” he says. The word here translated “serve” really means more like “be a slave to.” Many people have had the experience of working for two bosses – even I, when I first started working at Corinth, worked for Pastor Bob and for the principal at the school where I was teaching. I had two bosses, but that’s a little different than what Jesus is saying, because I wasn’t a slave to either. In the ancient world, and even in one of the more shameful chapters of our own nation’s history, slaves were property. Their every moment and every breath were at the disposal of their master. When that’s the definition of “serve,” it’s immediately clear that it’s impossible to serve two masters – no one can have two different people with competing agendas trying to exercise equal claim to his life and equal priority over his time and energy.

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<sup>3</sup> Ben Witherington, *Matthew* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 150.

<sup>4</sup> Leander E. Keck, *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary, vol. VII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 137.

I know that it's tempting to check out at this point and say "I don't serve anyone or anything, I'm my own person, and nobody owns me!" That's a distinctly 21<sup>st</sup> century American way of thinking – and not in a good way. For Jesus, the question isn't *whether* we will serve something, but *what* we will serve. In the end, "every person will be a slave to something, and the choice centers on what one treasures most."<sup>5</sup> Jesus presents us with two options: God, or money. In some translations, you might see the word "Mamon," instead of money. "Mamon" is an Aramaic word. Originally, it referred to the money people gave to bankers to keep secure, but over time it came to represent not just the things that were entrusted to the bankers, but that in which people put their trust. By the time Jesus uses this word, it's basically money personified as a master. The options Jesus presents are that you can serve God, or you can serve money.

So at the conclusion of Jesus' illustration, when he's finished painting his picture, we see two clear options. We can set our hearts on the perishable things of earth, which will cloud our vision and lead us to look at the world with greed and jealousy, and ultimately lead us to be a slave of money and materialism. Or, we can set our heart on the things of heaven, and this life orientation will give us clear and generous views of the world, and ultimately lead us to be a single-minded servant of God.

### **The Not To Do List**

A number of years ago, I heard a story about Warren Buffet that has stuck with me. Now, before I tell you the story, let me state the obvious – Warren Buffet is not Jesus. He has made some fantastic business decisions and has given some massive charitable contributions. Both of those are things I respect. But he's also made a lot of personal and professional decisions that I cannot condone. This is in no way a recommendation to be like Buffet, or my stamp of approval on his life. It's just one story from one chapter of his life that I've found to be valuable.<sup>6</sup>

As the story goes, Warren Buffet is talking to his pilot one day, asking him what he wants out of life. He tells the pilot to make a list of his top 25 goals. The pilot makes the list; 25 meaningful goals that are significant to him. Buffet looks over the list and tells him, "now circle your top 5." The pilot works at it for a while and comes back, having circled the 5 items on the list that mean the most to him. "Good," Buffet tells him, "that's your To Do list." Then he asks the pilot, "what about those other items? What are you going to do with those?" Remember, items 6 through 25 on this list are still among the pilot's top goals. "Well," he says, "those are the things I'm going to work on as I see that I'm making progress on my To Do list. I won't focus on them first, but I'll get to those as I have time."

"Absolutely not," Buffet tells him. "That's your Not To Do list. You get rid of those things entirely. You never, ever give any of your focus to numbers 6-25. Not one moment or one ounce of energy goes into even thinking about those until you've achieved all of the top 5."

Why did Warren Buffet tell him that? I think it's because in this case, he knows the same principle that Jesus knows. He knows that we can get so distracted with something good, that we miss out on something great. That we can turn our focus to things we care about and lose sight of the things we live for. Items 6-25 on Buffet's list are kind of like money in Jesus' story. They aren't inherently bad things, in fact, they might even be good, valuable, important things. But they are the worst kind of dangerous if they pull our attention away from our ultimate goal and try to divide our loyalty. By working on the Not To Do List, we put our To Do List in jeopardy. By going after treasure on earth, we risk missing out on treasure in heaven.

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<sup>5</sup> Osborne, 240.

<sup>6</sup> Paraphrased from several sources, including [businessinsider.com/warren-buffetts-not-to-do-list-2016-10](http://businessinsider.com/warren-buffetts-not-to-do-list-2016-10).

## The One True Treasure

So, one question remains – what is this “treasure in heaven”? According to the picture Jesus paints in this passage, the treasure in heaven is the thing we should orient our lives around, the thing that defines how we see the world, the thing that we choose to serve at any cost. To me, it’s pretty obvious that our treasure in heaven isn’t a *what* at all, but a *who*. Jesus. Our treasure in heaven is Jesus, who sits at the right hand of God, who intercedes before the Father’s throne, who has prepared a place for us with him, who has bought and redeemed us by his own blood. That truth is what Christians orient our lives around. That’s the truth that shapes the way we see the world. And that’s the God we serve, who we are loyal to above all else.

Treasure in heaven is God; treasure on earth is God’s creation. Since we live on earth, surrounded by earthly things, and can see and hear and taste and touch and smell God’s creation, it’s easy for us to get attached to it. That’s why Jesus warns us about it. Creation – the earth and everything in it – isn’t bad; after all, God made it! The danger is when we look at creation and forget the Creator. Ask yourself, are you more passionate about creation or the Creator? Or to change the metaphor slightly, are you more enthralled by the gifts you’ve been given or by the Giver? Whatever the “things” are that we have and love, be they money or family or health or home or community or whatever, are things that we didn’t create. You might be feeling a little defensive, thinking “I worked hard for my money, I exercise and eat well and don’t smoke, I built the relationships I have in life.” Fine, you’ve been a good steward. But you didn’t decide what family you’d be born into, or what genes you would have, or that you would wake up this morning with a beating heart. That was all God. You might be taking good care of the things he has given you, but you didn’t do anything to create them, and you sure didn’t do anything to earn them. Too often, too easily, we look at the things that God has entrusted to us and fail to see them as gifts that we have been allowed to steward. Instead, we see them as objects that become our god. The Bible has a word for that – it’s idolatry.

Jesus’ warning here in Matthew 6 is ultimately a warning against idolatry. Any time you choose creation over the Creator, the gift over the Giver, it’s idolatry. Our choice, in its simplest terms, is a single-minded focus on God, or making an idol of something God created. Jesus’ call is not to literally hate money, and he doesn’t say it’s evil to have it. There are other places in the Bible where Jesus tells people to sell all they have and give everything away. But in this passage, his call is different. Jesus’ call in this passage to have a radical, counter-cultural dependence on God rather than self. To trust that God can and will care for us better than we could ever care for ourselves. That means that we have to accept that God’s care of us might not always look like material comfort or luxury. Instead of focusing on that comfort of luxury, we orient our lives around our treasure in heaven. We set our hearts on Jesus, and we learn to see the world as he sees it. Our view of the world is clear and generous. We see the possessions we have been given – however many or great they might be – as God’s resources to steward, not our possessions to be hoarded. We see other people not as burdens, but as opportunities for compassion and care and generosity. We look for chances to build God’s kingdom with our time and our talents and yes, even our money.

And we do all this not because we are hoping for a crown full of jewels, or accolades, or a seat of honor at the heavenly banquet. We do it because our eyes are fixed on Jesus, who is our one true treasure. We know that anything else we might have is just a temporary good that we happen to be taking care of right now. We do it because we choose to be defined by our treasure in heaven, not by the standards of the world. And we do it because our ultimate desire is to serve

God, and we know that being a slave to anything less than God is simply not acceptable. Having a treasure in heaven changes everything: our priorities, our heart, our view of the world, and how we serve. There's a lot I don't know, but this much I do: there is no greater treasure this world has to offer – no person or thing more worthy of worship – than the treasure we already have in heaven. Amen.