

The Sermon on the Mount: Where Is Your Treasure?

Matthew 6:16-23

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At first glance the 8 verses of the Sermon on the Mount that we are looking at today seem to cover three completely unrelated topics. Yes, the fasting is connected to the previous verses on giving and praying in that they are all three spiritual disciplines. Yes, the middle verses about our treasure seem related to the final section of chapter 6 that we'll look at next week which is also about treasure. But, then there's this awkward two verse teaching about eyes and light and lamps that doesn't seem connected to anything and just breaks up the flow of the sermon. Yet, Jesus is far too homiletically savvy to just throw something in for filler or to put something in the wrong place, so what are we to do make of this?

To understand that we're going to do something a bit different and start at the end with the two awkward verses and work our way backwards. The first question we need to ask is, what is the purpose of the eye? The answer that comes most readily to mind is that the eye is a window that lets light in. It receives and filters light from outside sources, translating the light into signals that eventually reach our brains. But, in the ancient world the eye was more commonly viewed as the source rather than the receptor of illumination, a lamp that projected one's inner light outward. So, when Jesus says, "the eye is the lamp of the body" he is pointing out that the health and soundness of the eye reflect the well-being of one's whole existence, which perhaps explains why Jesus made restoring people's vision a central part of his healing ministry.

This outward projection of the inner light is, to put it in language more familiar to us, a way of talking about perception and vision. We do not all see the world in the same unfiltered way. The truth is that we all project something of our inner selves onto the world around us, dramatically shaping the way we see and experience things. A situation one person sees as a burden, someone else sees as a gift. An individual whom one person dismisses as worthless, another sees as a treasured child of God. A job one person considers menial, someone else sees as a way of fulfilling God's calling. An event one person may chalk up to random chance or coincidence, another sees as the result of God's providence and grace.

What accounts for the difference? Some of the difference is about maturity and life experience, but as Christians, we know that faith plays a significant role as

well. Faith offers a unique way of seeing the world. It enables us to see things differently and—we trust—more clearly. We come to worship each week and we commit ourselves to a community of faith so that together, we can seek to see as God sees, to be reoriented to God’s perceptions of how things are going and why things happen and what our response is to be.

Because seeing is not enough. Good sight alone does not ensure that we will make right choices. As a lamp that lights the entire body, the eye serves as the entrance to our hearts and minds, which is the doorway to our entire being. Surely it does not surprise us that Jesus is still going on about our hearts. He’s been doing that since the very first Beatitude. It is the thread that runs throughout his entire sermon and links these verses to those that immediately precede them: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

“Treasure” is a word used throughout the Bible in various ways. In the Old Testament it sometimes means accumulated wealth which was stored primarily in palaces and temples. Treasure is also used to refer to wisdom and knowledge, and Israel is called God’s treasured possession. In the New Testament the kingdom of heaven is compared to a hidden treasure, the gospel message is described as a “treasure in clay jars” and believers are referred to as “God’s special possession [or treasure].”

In all these instances, and in the way we use the word today, a “treasure” is something we highly value. It is often the value invested in a particular object that makes it a treasure, not necessarily the thing in and of itself. Treasures can include, for example, a family heirloom that has very little monetary value but is priceless to us for the emotional value it has, perhaps because we attach it to a particular person or a specific event in our family’s history. One way to think of treasure is that it is anything we focus our attention, energy, imagination and resources on.

So, we can and often do treasure non-material things. We can value success, security, happiness, a particular person or relationship or even life itself. The problem with all earthly treasures, according to Jesus, is that they are vulnerable and ephemeral. They are subject to being consumed, either by time or age, or stolen. And, they do not and cannot satisfy the basic needs for security, meaning, and self-esteem that we rely on them to fulfill. Despite being surrounded by a culture of superheated consumption that rolls out an endless array of new products,

new toys, and new models, all shouting out the promise of satisfaction—they never deliver.

What a marked contrast to heavenly treasures which are subject neither to decay nor theft. Jesus is not so much pointing out the difference between that which is spiritual and material or that which is present versus future as between that which lasts and that which does not last, between what satisfies the deep human longing for whole relationships and genuine security and what fails to satisfy. Keep the context in mind: as we said last week, the guiding principle is that all of life is lived in the presence of God. The issue at hand is how our discernment of God's presence shapes our vision and values, the kind of power we exercise, and the character and well-being of our relationships.

The treasure, then, that Jesus calls us to seek concerns primarily the righteousness that has been the focus of so much of his sermon. Righteousness as we've already talked about focuses on right relationships, so justice, forgiveness, mercy and love are the hallmarks of the righteousness of the kingdom of God. This righteousness is not a spiritual concern that can be compartmentalized and confined to religious practices or Sunday worship. Instead, it is to permeate the whole of life every day. Thus, it impacts our relationships, but also our work, our time, our attitudes, our values, and yes, our money and material possessions.

I'm afraid that often when congregations know that the pastor is going to preach on this text, there is a collective groan that arises—oh no, here we go again. Another sermon about money and the thick layer of guilt that comes with it. It's grievous that we've done such a poor job of listening to Jesus that that is our attitude, because what Jesus is really doing is offering us freedom—the kind of deep, penetrating freedom that allows us to enjoy and live life to its fullest.

I will never forget an experience I had over 20 years ago now, that often comes to mind whenever I reflect on this subject of treasures. My family was moving overseas to England for a three-year assignment with the Air Force. Emily was nearly four and David was just coming up to his first birthday when this move occurred. When we first arrived, none of our household shipment was there. We borrowed a couple of skillet and some basic kitchen utensils, along with a table and chairs. We slept on air mattresses in the living room. That was the sum total of the furniture we had. As far as clothes or toys, all we had was what I had been able to bring with us in our checked luggage. We lived like that for three or four weeks, and I have to tell you, it made a lasting impression on me. I could not believe how free I felt. I didn't spend any time cleaning because there was no

furniture to dust and not many toys to pick up. I didn't spend much time cooking because very simple, basic meals were all that I could prepare without my heavy-duty mixer and blender and pots and pans. There was no maintenance to do because there was nothing to maintain. I spent my days fully focused on my children and getting to know my new neighbors. Because I had nothing to distract me, relationships were my highest priority.

I'll be honest, I was glad to see my household goods finally arrive. I was glad to have my own bed again and there came a point when having a vacuum cleaner with two preschoolers in the house was a good thing. But, I have never forgotten that feeling of being liberated from "stuff." I have never forgotten how much time it freed up to have less. And, I think that's part of Jesus' invitation. How do I want to spend the majority of my energy and efforts? The more stuff I have, the more work and time and money I have to expend to maintain it, protect it, polish it, insure it, and store it. I don't know about you, but I don't want my tombstone to read, "She had a really clean house." I don't want my life to be summed up that way. I don't want people to remember how I treated my things—I hope they will be able to remember how I treated the people in my life and that I had some sort of positive impact on those whose paths I crossed.

But, Jesus knows that it is incredibly difficult to maintain that attitude and outlook. We are bombarded all the time, consciously and subliminally, with messages that urge us to accumulate or to impress or to exert our power, to value earthly things that seem to promise immediate rewards. And, that's why I think he brings up the spiritual disciplines of giving, praying and fasting before he launches into his teaching about lasting versus temporal treasures. We delved into this last week, but I want to say a special word about fasting primarily because it has been largely lost to a vast part of the church in the modern era. We don't teach or talk much about fasting anymore. It's not really in vogue, spiritually speaking. But, that's only because we've become so deaf to large portions of the gospel.

If we stand any chance, if we have any hope of being prepared to make choices that align with God's kingdom, that pursue lasting treasure instead of temporal treasure, we must prepare ourselves in private. We must see that Jesus is offering us tools that equip us to live as disciples which is why giving, praying and fasting are good indicators of how well we grasp Jesus' message.

In simplest terms, fasting is abstinence from food for spiritual purposes. We choose to forego food in order to pray or meditate or to seek God in a particular way or for a particular purpose. There is significant spiritual value in fasting as it

has been practiced for hundreds, even thousands, of years. To bring us full circle from where we started this sermon, fasting helps us see more clearly, helps us perceive with clarity God's presence, how God is at work, and what God would have us do in the circumstances we face. Practically, if you have not ever fasted and you're interested in trying this spiritual discipline, it's important that you do some homework and think through how you want to structure your fast both physically and spiritually. There are a lot of resources on the internet, or I'd be happy to talk with you about it.

I also want to suggest that fasting can include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself in order to pursue a special spiritual purpose. For example, media fasts are a common modern-day application of this practice. For some people, just the idea of turning off the phone, not watching TV, not getting on Facebook or responding to texts or emails for a set period of time creates major anxiety. But, by setting aside normal activities, whether food, media or anything else, we create space in which we focus on and listen for God. We make a priority of practicing the reality that all of life is lived before God and in so doing, open ourselves to the gift of an experience shared only with God. We are rewarded in so many ways—with eyes that are clearer, with hearts that seek more lasting treasure and with a deeper intimacy with the One who loves and knows us above all. Thanks be to God. Amen.