

What do you treasure most?

A sermon preached by

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October 20, 2017

Matthew 6:19-21

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

A few weeks ago I called my friend Paul, who was in the process of moving from his wife’s childhood home to a new house that they have built. “What’s going on?” I said. He said, “Well, I’m in the basement of the old house. What do you do with two fondue pots?” And I said (with apologies to those cooks out there who still make a mean fondue), “What do you do with one?”

The challenge of too much stuff is something that afflicts many of us. And the urge to store, collect, hoard, or treasure often defies reason or logic. We carry this stuff like so much emotional baggage, and it is often the case that there are fees involved in carrying this extra luggage.

Lena Corner, who sometimes writes for The Guardian, wrote an article about her interviews with three men who got rid of all their worldly possessions in an effort to live happier and more centered lives. One man discovered he owned more than 7,000 items and set out to destroy every single one of them. Another, a victim of his own shopaholicism, burned £20,000 worth of designer goods, and the third, whose life had hit rock bottom, attempted to sell everything and start again.

In his book *Jesus and Money*, Ben Witherington writes about our gospel lesson this morning and points out that “the heart in Semitic ways of thinking, was the control center of the human personality – the center of thought, feelings and will. This parable suggests that whatever one counts as treasure, whatever one values most, will determine one’s life orientation – what you will do with your time, money and other resources. So, in this way, your treasure is the

ultimate expression of your character. So, the point here is not so much to seek better treasures, but to place one's allegiance with God and God's priorities."¹

Economics in the New Testament world was substantially different from our present-day world. Money in Jesus time wasn't used for most of the day-to-day transactions. Food, cloth, and other daily essentials were obtained through trading. Money was used to pay taxes, tolls, or tributes. It had explicit religious connotations in antiquity that it seldom has today. In the Jewish mindset money and other possessions were given by God, who ultimately was the owner and creator of all that one possessed.

Finally, because the land that we now call the Holy Land was ruled for centuries by foreign occupation and domination, those who had wealth in Jesus' time were often people who had collaborated with their oppressors. So, gone was the idea that money was a blessing from God. In Jesus' time, it was often a sign of graft and wickedness.²

These social and political contexts may be why Jesus talked about money and wealth so frequently. Some studies of the gospels point to wealth over 500 times in the New Testament. So, folks who come to church and complain, "*All they ever talk about is money!*" may indeed be right, because that is what Jesus frequently talked about. For Jesus, it was a window into one's priorities. What you did or didn't do with your resources pointed toward your approach to God.

So, in this parable today, Jesus is following a common theme, that believers must ruthlessly reject whatever distracts them from full devotion to God, because God will make necessary provisions for those who above all seek the greater righteousness of the kingdom. And by contrasting *treasures on earth* with *treasures in heaven*, Jesus notes that our possessions and acquisitions are always corruptible, vulnerable, and temporary. In contrast, gathering *treasures in heaven* means conducting yourself in anticipation of God's judgment and reward. Jesus did not coin this expression, for many Jewish texts speak about living in such a way that one stores up incorruptible treasures, understood as good standing with the divine. In Matthew's Gospel, this idea is consistent with the fullness of *the kingdom of heaven* and all its benefits.

And Jesus' teachings assume this will not be easy. Matthew's first verse might be more accurately be translated as *stop storing up* for yourself treasures on earth. Even in a subsistence

¹ Ben Witherington III, *Jesus and Money: A Guide for Times of Financial Crisis*, Brazos Press, 2010, p. 64.

² Ibid. p. 54-55

economy, such as the world where Jesus lived, the human propensity to run after and gather possessions is already anticipated. But the culture and the economy today encourage us to see the quest to live simply as a negative, as absence of all the stuff we might be able to acquire. We assume that simplicity means a lumpy bed or an undependable car. And if my closet, basement, or attic is anything like yours, these storage spaces point to our belief that the good life can be obtained by storing up these treasures. All of this consumption, this storing up of treasures, leaves a trail.

But another way to look at this quest is to see simplicity not as absence but instead as freedom. Freedom from the pressures of debt and freedom from the complexity of having more than we need. Because I think this *gravity defying* quest for the treasures of heaven is less about what is good or bad to possess and more about what brings you *real* joy and meaning in your life. And in this way, you can begin to avoid, stop storing up, those things that keep you from completing your mission.

One question that might help all of us define and refine our mission is to ask, “What do you treasure in your life?” As Jess and Dean bring Declan for baptism this morning, I’m sure that he is high on their list. And I would expect that most of us would say “Family, children, parents, friends, a well-worn book that changed our lives, a wedding ring given and received, a memory of joy.” These are some of the things that we might treasure. Once you have identified what you treasure, you might ask yourself, Where are you spending your time? Does it balance with what you treasure? Jesus says, Spend your time, energy, and resources there. If you say you love your family, spend your time there. If you say you love the church, contribute to make its ministry better. If you say you want peace and justice, then work for it. For these can be treasures in heaven. AMEN