

Treasures

You can try to guess who said each of the following things about money:

1. We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.
2. Too many people spend money they earned ... to buy things they don't want ... to impress people that they don't like
3. I love money. I love everything about it. I bought some pretty good stuff. Got me a \$300 pair of socks. Got a fur sink. An electric dog polisher. A gasoline powered turtleneck sweater. And, of course, I bought some dumb stuff, too.
4. The hardest thing in the world to understand is income tax
5. Money is better than poverty, if only for financial reasons
6. Don't Gain the World & Lose Your Soul, Wisdom is Better than Silver or Gold
7. A rich man is nothing but a poor man with money

There are some interesting thoughts in there about a subject that most of us find interesting, but now let's turn to what Jesus had to say in the Sermon on the Mount:

Don't store up treasures here on earth, where they can be eaten by moths and get rusty, and where thieves break in and steal. Store your treasures in heaven, where they will never become moth-eaten or rusty and where they will be safe from thieves. Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will be also.

Your eye is a lamp for your body. A pure eye lets sunshine into your soul. But an evil eye shuts out the light and plunges you into darkness. If the light you think you have is really darkness how deep that darkness will be!

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

(Matthew 6:24)

This seems pretty straightforward on the surface - build a storehouse of treasure for the life beyond and don't allow your focus to be on material rewards in this present life. But how do we build a storehouse of treasure in a place we won't ever visit in the span of our years here on earth? And what is Jesus saying about our eye being the lamp of the body and does that have any relevance at all to the issues around where our treasures are? What happens to earthly treasures and what outcome are we looking for in trying to build treasures in heaven? There are lots of questions about this passage and I want to go a bit deeper in applying Jesus' words on money matters.

Jesus says that the issue of money is primarily a heart issue. Do you love what money can do for you in this life, or is your heart so set on the life to come that you can detach yourself from things and invest, or be generous, with people? Do you place your security entirely in your bank account, your savings, your investments, or do you trust God along with being a good steward? Do you worry that if you give to God that there won't be enough left for yourself? Can you be generous without being afraid? Or do you hold back on generosity because you believe that others should somehow deserve your generosity? Each of these questions deals with the heart and with the priorities of the heart: selfishness, fear, lack of trust, judgments, worry. And what we find in this

passage is Jesus' solution to all of these heart issues - "Store your treasures in heaven, where they will never become moth-eaten or rusty and where they will be safe from thieves."

What happens to the treasures we store up here on earth? Moth-eaten and rusty describe the effects of natural processes. The things we buy get older with time and as they age, they wear down. We have a fancy word for it called "depreciation", and it touches all our assets. If we own a house, we'll be replacing the roof someday and the hot water tank, and the flooring. If we own a car — well, you know that story. It goes down in value from the moment we drive it off the car lot. The other threat to our earthly treasures that Jesus describes is thieves breaking in to steal stuff. Jesus doesn't mention the fact that we put out quite a bit of money on insurance to protect ourselves from big losses, and He doesn't mention some of the other ways thieves steal from us besides breaking in to our house. Now that we're in an advanced civilization we can be robbed by hackers, who can steal everything from cryptocurrencies to our identity just by hacking the wifi code in our home, or the personal data on our credit cards. And, of course, there are the official thieves who have decided that their best interests are served if they can depreciate the value of the money we earn by, ideally, about 2% each year - call it inflation. Sometimes that gets out of hand and people on fixed incomes find that their fixed income has been robbed of its purchasing power.

There are lots of ways that moths and rust and thieves can take away the value of the things we have invested in here on earth. But what is the point Jesus is making here? He is saying that the treasures we store in heaven are incorruptible. They can't be stolen or ruined and they don't depreciate in value. You don't need to take out insurance on those treasures because they will always be credited to you. You don't need to get a safe, or a safety deposit box, but God guards your eternal treasures. And what rewards they are! Again, think what you can buy with money. And whatever you are thinking about, compare your reaction to buying it with this, from Luke's version of the Beatitudes in chapter 6:

Be happy! Yes, leap for joy! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. (v. 23)

Leaping for joy is not that common an experience, at least from what I've observed at retail outlets from car dealerships to Walmart. But leaping for joy is the appropriate response to the kind of rewards that your Father has prepared for you in heaven.

And then Jesus tells us that wherever our treasure is, that's where our heart and our thoughts will be. Remember that the heart is the centre of a person's being. This is where her motivations lie, where his dreams are rooted, where our inner purpose that drives our plans and then our actions is based. The heart is the most important thing about us and Jesus seems to base so much of His teaching on the state of our heart. Here he reminds us that our heart, the focus of our life, will be on the things we value the most. If they are material things, our heart will be focused on the things of earth. If they are spiritual and eternal things, our heart will derive its chief satisfaction from doing the things that honour God and bring blessing to others.

Now we come to an intriguing little passage that seems to break up the flow of thought, that seems to change the subject from materialism to, well, something else. “Your eye is a lamp for your body. A pure eye lets sunshine into your world.” The word that is translated “pure” is from the same root word that we find in James 1:5:

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

Here in the NIV it is translated “generously” but it could also mean “wholeheartedly”. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the word is used in Proverbs 11:25:

A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.

In Romans 12:8, in a list of a variety of gifts that operate in the Body of Christ, we read this word of encouragement:

If (one’s gift) is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously.

So when Jesus references a “good eye”, a “pure eye” that lets in such light that the whole body is filled with it, the word He uses suggests the element of generosity, of giving liberally.

What about the “bad eye” or the “evil eye” which follows in the next sentence: “An evil eye shuts out the light and plunges you into darkness”? The rabbis taught that an “evil eye” signified a grudging, cheap, ungenerous heart. Proverbs 28:22 says:

A man with an evil eye hastens after wealth.

Proverbs 23:6 says:

Do not eat the bread of a man who is stingy (literally, ‘a man who has an evil eye’)

The evil eye is the eye that looks on what others have with envy, or resents one’s obligations to a person in need. So let’s rephrase the translations we have of this section of the Sermon on the Mount:

Your eye is a lamp for your body. A generous eye lets sunshine into your soul. But an evil eye, an ungenerous eye, shuts out the light and plunges you into darkness.

When we read it this way, it fits perfectly into the flow of Jesus’ teaching on money and materialism. It makes perfect sense to urge generosity on people who want to walk in the light, live by the truth, and imitate the goodness of God. And that’s the main point of this middle section: Being generous with people acts as a window that lets beautiful light into your whole being, while being stingy and grudging with people shuts the blinds and refuses to let the light in.

And then Jesus adds this note of caution. “If the light you think you have is really darkness, how deep that darkness will be!” In other words, if you think you are following Jesus and that you are imitating His values and teachings, but you are greedy and stingy in your dealings with others, you are deeply deceived and are probably resistant to the truth that would open your eyes and help you escape the darkness

you're in. So, we need to ask and answer the question: Am I generous with people - in every way I can think of - or am I grasping and greedy, and afraid, when it comes to material possessions.

Jesus continues with His penetrating insight into our relationship with things:

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

Now God enters the relationship between us and money. And here Jesus is forcing us to make a decision about who will run our lives — and neither of the choices is us! In the one case, we are ruled by the insatiable desire for more. We need more money for more things, or for a greater sense of security or to deal with the challenges we're facing like debt or medical bills or something else. In the other case, God Himself is our Master and He is the One who will provide for our needs, who will take care of us. In this case, the choices we make are about how to honour and obey and serve God.

I read a story about a farmer who one day hurried in to tell his wife the good news: their best cow had just given birth to twin calves - a red one and a white one. He added to his news that he felt convicted to dedicate one of the calves to the Lord. They would raise them together and when the time came would sell them both and give the proceeds of the sale of one to the Lord's work. His wife asked him which one - the red or the white - would belong to the Lord. He answered that there was no need to decide that now, but just treat them both the same. A few months later he came in, looking quite miserable. When his wife asked him what was wrong, he answered, "The Lord's calf is dead." "But you said you hadn't decided which the Lord's would be," she responded. "Oh, yes, I always knew it would be the white one, and the white one has just died."

What would you have done? You were feeling quite generous when the thought came that you should give one to the Lord - but now that there's only one left, it becomes a case of sacrificial giving. We don't know the farmer's situation or even what he should have done, nor do we know for sure what we would have done. But we smiled because we can identify with his solution. Who is the Master? Is it money or is it God? What will shape our decisions when things get harder? Who will we show our allegiance to when the choices are as tough as the one we just heard about?

Jesus' teaching on money challenges us on any number of levels, but remember that His first concern is with our hearts: what owns our heart and how does that ownership show itself in our lives? The one who owns our heart is the one who holds our rewards and we have a choice to make: will that be God in heaven, or will that be material things here on earth? That's the whole direction of Jesus' message in these verses. When we invest our lives in the Kingdom of God, we store up treasures in a place where nothing spoils, nothing gets wasted or goes bad. When we invest our lives in getting money or things, with no thought to using those things for God's glory, we run the risk of losing it all in the near term and the certainty of losing it all at the end of our time here on earth.

Jesus wants our heart to be in heaven, to be gripped by the wonder and majesty of the awesome God who made us, who loves us and who rewards us, gladly, for the small sacrifices we make to honour Him and build His Kingdom. And in this passage He gives us some hints as to how we can do that.

1. One of the very important things He says to us is that we should be generous. We should have good eyes, like God does, who generously gives forgiveness and blessing and joy to people who have done nothing to deserve it. In the same place, Jesus tells us not to be stingy, not to be grudging in your generosity. In other words, if you invite someone over for dinner, don't resent the fact that their second helping is diminishing your supply of lunch for tomorrow. Be open-hearted, open-handed, gladly generous like your Father in heaven is.
2. Look for opportunities to invest in the Kingdom. Jesus says that your heart follows your treasure and if you invest a significant portion of your treasure in the Kingdom of God, your heart will be significantly engaged in what God is doing on earth. There are more opportunities than there are available dollars, so choose carefully. If you want to see compassionate ministry take place to some of the world's poorest people, send your money to a Christian agency where at least 90% of the money you invest actually goes to the places of need. Too often a high percentage of what is given goes to administration costs and expensive travel for staff from the Western world. So, ask good questions, read over the reports of the various agencies and, most important, ask the Lord what He wants you to do.
3. The third paragraph in this section of teaching tells us to watch our hearts, to ask ourselves the question, "Who or what am I really serving with the priorities I'm pursuing in life?" As you do that, remember Jesus' statement that none of us can serve two masters, that we can't serve both God and money, even though we think we can. This will just be a matter of being honest with ourselves, seeing what our hearts are most attached to and asking God to help us get our priorities in the right place.

We started today with some quotes; let's end the same way.

1. From John Wesley: "Not, how much of my money will I give to God, but, how much of God's money will I keep for myself?"
2. "When God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work — this is a gift of God." (Ecclesiastes 5:19)
3. "Most people fail to realize that money is both a test and a trust from God" (Rick Warren, pastor)
4. Money never stays with me. It would burn me if it did. I throw it out of my hands as soon as possible, lest it should find its way into my heart (John Wesley)
5. "If a person gets his attitude toward money straight, it will help straighten out almost every other area in his life." (Billy Graham)
6. "There is one who scatters, and yet increases all the more, and there is one who withholds what is justly due, and yet it results only in want. The generous man will be prosperous, and he who waters will himself be watered." (Prov. 11:24,25)