

TREASURES IN HEAVEN

SERIES: BLESSED ARE



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Matthew 6:19–24
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Scott Grant
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Matthew 6:19–24

Do you ever feel that you're not seeing what maybe you're supposed to see—that you're just not getting it, whatever "it" is?

Preacher's confession: I feel that way with most texts in the Scriptures, at least at first. I read the passage, and I feel that I'm missing something, maybe lots of things. Even after studying it for a while, I often say to myself, "There has to be more to it than what I'm seeing." This is especially problematic when I know that I have to preach a sermon to hundreds of people on said passage!

One of the most helpful prayers in the Scriptures, especially for those who mine the Scriptures for their treasures, is Psalm 119:18: "Open my eyes, that I may behold the wondrous things out of your law"—that is, out of your "instruction."

Today in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus wants to open our eyes.

Treasures on earth

Matthew 6:19-21:

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

The value of treasures on earth doesn't last forever. Moreover, from the perspective of heaven, treasures on earth aren't even that valuable in the present. Heaven is not simply in the future; it is also in the present. With the coming of Christ, the kingdom of heaven has drawn near (Matthew 4:17). A treasure on earth, then, is anything that doesn't hold what little value it has.

The approval of others, which Jesus warns us about in Matthew 6:1-23, is a treasure on earth. Money is among the most prominent treasures on earth. There is nothing

necessarily wrong with treasures on earth. People express their approval of us, and that can be encouraging. If we have money, we can use that money in helpful ways.

Jesus doesn't warn us against treasures on earth per se; he warns us not to "lay up" for ourselves treasures on earth. The verb translated "lay up" (*thēsaurizete*) is related to the noun "treasure" (*thēsaurus*). To "lay up" means not only to accumulate but also to value. When you lay up treasures on earth, you "treasure" treasures on earth. The problem is not with treasures on earth but with treasuring treasures on earth. Treasures on earth, if you will, are a bad investment.

The best you can hope for by laying up for yourself treasures on earth is to enjoy them, however much you can enjoy them, for a hundred years. A hundred years—that's all. A hundred years—big deal. A hundred years—then what? Later in Matthew, Jesus warns that "the deceitfulness of riches" can "choke the word"—that is, the good news of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 13:22).

Jan Johnson writes of the deceitfulness of treasures on earth:

As I drove my teenagers home that night, I was immersed in thoughts of buying a newer house. The homes up the hill from us had interior walls that weren't chipped, cabinets that weren't dated, and grass that was greener. My mind strode back and forth down that street.

Then I caught myself. I was doing the American thing—longing for bigger and better material goods. I knew better than that. We sponsored a child in a Third World country, and I volunteered at a shelter for the homeless. Was it God's will to use the money our family earned to live in an impressive home? Did I think a newer home would satisfy me? No, but when my mind wanders, I sometimes obsess on things that are contrary to who I believe I am.¹

Who among us hasn't entertained such fantasies? And if our minds constantly wander or even settle, can something snap us out of it?

Treasures in heaven

Instead of laying up for ourselves treasures on earth, Jesus instructs us to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven, both for the future and for the present. If we want to know what qualifies as a treasure in heaven, we would have to know what our heavenly Father values.

Our Father values, first of all, his Son, who is “precious” in his sight (1 Peter 2:4). First, then, in order to lay up treasures for ourselves in heaven, we should treasure Christ. Our word “worship” comes from the old English word “worthship.” We worship what we value. How much is Christ worth? Especially during Advent, “Come and behold him / Born the king of angels.”

Second, we should follow Christ, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reveals treasures of wisdom and knowledge. He instructs us, incentivizes us, and empowers us, for example, to love others, even our enemies. Following Christ involves investing in people, who are eternal. As Paul says, “there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust” (Acts 24:15).

To lay up for yourself treasures in heaven, treasure Christ and follow Christ.

Where’s your heart? Your heart is the essence of who you are: your mind, your emotions, and your will. Your heart will follow your treasure. Where do you want your heart to be? The essence of who you are will follow your treasure. The Pharisees were lovers of money who honored God with their lips but their hearts were far from him (Matthew 15:8, Matthew 15:14).

Howard Hendricks, the beloved professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, once invited a 93-year-old man to address one of his classes. At the conclusion of his talk, the man told the students, “As far as I’m concerned, my only regret is that I’ve only got one life to give in service to Jesus Christ.” After he sat down, the class gave him a six-minute standing ovation. My guess is he cared little for the applause but cared much for the students, especially that they would learn to treasure Christ and follow Christ by investing in people.

Can you see the value of treasures in heaven? Can you see the value of Christ and the value of following Christ?

Can you see?

Matthew 6:22-23:

“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!”

If you have a good eye, “your whole body will be full of light,” so to speak: you will be able to orient your body appropriately. In fact, Jesus, says, the eye not only receives light, it also gives light: it’s the “lamp” of the body. It’s as if a good eye enables you to orient your body appropriately even when it’s dark.

If, on the other hand, your eye is bad, “your whole body will be full of darkness”: you will be unable to orient your body appropriately. In fact, if your eye is bad, and your whole body is therefore full of darkness, you will confuse light with darkness. If such is the case, indeed, “how great is the darkness!”

Jesus is speaking figuratively regarding spiritual sight. He has just encouraged us to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven rather than treasures on earth. Jesus wants us to perceive the value of treasures in heaven over against the value of treasures on earth and to orient our whole bodies, our whole selves, toward heavenly treasures, not earthly treasures. If we perceive that the earthly treasures are the most valuable treasures and the heavenly treasures are the least valuable treasures, how great is the darkness!

Jesus wants to open our eyes of our hearts to see the value of heavenly treasures. I would suggest that most people who are dissatisfied with Christ and following Christ are in fact dissatisfied with something else: their own flawed understanding of Christ and following Christ. They don’t see Christ for the treasure that he is.

I feel an urgency in preaching to do the best I can to convey the value of Christ and following Christ. I know that treasures on earth have their appeal. But I am convinced in my heart that treasures in heaven have more appeal, way more appeal, if we could only see.

I wrote a few weeks ago about the movement of *New York Times* columnist David Brooks’ movement toward faith in Christ. He describes it this way:

It was and is a sensation of opening my eyes to see what was always there, seeing the presence of the sacred in

the realities of the everyday. Like there's a play you've been watching all your life, and suddenly you realize that the play you are seeing onstage is not the only play that's going on. There's an underplay, with the same characters, but a different level, with different logic and forces at work, and greater stakes. There's a worldly story to follow, as people move closer or further from their worldly ambitions. But there's also a sacred story to follow, as souls move closer or further from their home, which is God.

It's easy to not be aware of the underplay, but once you see it, it's hard to see the other play about worldly ambitions as the ultimate reality. The main story is the soul story.²

Can you see? Can you see the value of treasures in heaven? Can you see the value of Christ and the value of following Christ?

Two masters

Matthew 6:24:

“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

Throughout Matthew 6, Jesus has spoken in binary terms: you can seek the praise of people or the praise of God, you can lay up for yourself treasures on earth or treasures in heaven, your eye can be good or bad, your whole body can be full of light or full of darkness.

Finally, Jesus distinguishes between “two masters.” Masters demand allegiance. Allegiance to two masters doesn't work. Two masters will both want a slave's time, and a slave won't be able to give his or her time to both. Two masters will each issue orders: one will order a slave to do one thing and the other will order the slave to do something else. The slave will not be able to obey both masters. Eventually, a slave who serves two masters will become resentful and want for one master only.

You can serve God, or you can serve money, but you can't serve both. You can serve God and have money, but you cannot serve God and money. If you serve God, you must obey him when he commands you what to do with your money, which means that you will use it for his purposes. If you serve money, you must obey money when it commands you what to do with God, which means that you will try to dismiss God or remake him in the image of money, which many people in our world do.

If you try to serve both God and money, you'll become resentful. Most likely, you'll resent God. So you'll serve money instead.

Paul: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs” (1 Timothy 6:10). Money is not the root of all kinds of evil; love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. In one of his apocalyptic songs, Bob Dylan sings, “I saw thousands who could have overcome the darkness / For the love of a lousy buck, I've watched them die.”³ You cannot serve God and money.

If we're trying to serve two masters, can something snap us out of it? Can you see the value of Christ and the value of following Christ?

To appreciate the value of Christ and the value of following Christ, consider two verses in the Scriptures, one in Matthew and one John. The verse in Matthew conveys a story, and the verse in John conveys an image. May the story and the image snap us out of it. May the Lord open our eyes so that we can see.

A story

Later in Matthew, Jesus tells this two-sentence parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Matthew 13:44).

The kingdom of heaven is worth everything you have. It's worth more than everything you have. It's priceless. Look closer. What is it about the treasure that makes it priceless? What motivates the man to sell everything he has? It's “joy.” Literally, Jesus says “from his joy” the man sells everything he has in order to acquire the field.

The man doesn't sell everything he has because he's forced to. He doesn't sell everything he has because of guilt. He doesn't sell everything he has because of obligation. He sells everything he has because he wants to. He sells everything because of his joy.

What is it about the kingdom of heaven that generates such outrageous joy? When I stumbled upon the kingdom forty-six years ago, I couldn't believe what I had found.

If the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure, then the jewels of the kingdom are multifaceted. Let's consider one facet.

An image

In the upper room, Jesus told his disciples that in a little while, they would see him no longer. He told them that they would grieve. But he also told them that in a little while they would see him again. In fact, in John 16:16-21, the words “you will see me” appear three times. Jesus told them, “You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.”

Indeed, after his resurrection, Jesus would see his disciples again.

Finally, Jesus tells his disciples, “So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (John 16:22). We expect Jesus to say “you will see me again,” because those words have been used three times already. But that’s not what Jesus says. He says, “I will see you again.” They will see him, and he will see them. When they see him seeing them, they will rejoice.

The disciples were a pretty messed-up bunch. Finally, when Jesus was arrested, they abandoned him. Maybe you’re a little messed up too. Maybe in a sense, like the first disciples, you’ve abandoned him. How do you feel about seeing Jesus? How do you feel about being seen by him? I mean, how do you feel about being seen all the way through? How do you feel about being seen by Jesus, the one you’ve abandoned, who sees you all the way through?

Jesus says that when his disciples see him again and when he sees them again, all the way through, they will rejoice. They will rejoice to such an extent that “no one will take” their joy from them. They will have joy everlasting.

If Jesus sees us and he’s angry, and we see that he’s angry, will we rejoice? Of course not. If Jesus sees us and he’s frowning, and we see that he’s frowning, will we rejoice? Of course not. If Jesus sees us and he’s indifferent, and we see that he’s indifferent, will we rejoice? Of course not.

Why would we rejoice? We would rejoice if Jesus sees us, and we see that his face is beaming. His face is beaming! He wants to be with you! He wants to be with you forever!

What’s so great about the kingdom of heaven, which has come in part now and will come in full later? It’s the king! Especially, it’s camaraderie with the king! Jesus sees you, his messed-up follower, whom he died for, and his face his beaming. Can you see it? Can you see him? Rejoice! Rejoice forever! Joy to the world!

Face to face

One day, according to both Paul and John, we’ll see Jesus face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12, 1 John 3:2, Revelation 22:4). When that day comes, based on my understanding of the Scriptures, I imagine him saying something like this to each of us who have followed him:

“I’ve been waiting for this day since before time began. I’ve been waiting for you since before time began. I’m so pleased to see you. Let me tell you about my kingdom. I want to share it with you. Let me show you around”

Treasure Christ and follow Christ—for the joy of it!

Endnotes

- 1 Jan Johnson, *Enjoying the Presence of God* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1996), 48-49.
- 2 David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (New York: Random House, 2019), 233.
- 3 Bob Dylan, “When The Night Comes Falling From The Sky,” track 8 on *Empire Burlesque*, Columbia, 1985