

Treasures and Masters

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- [0 : 0 0] John, I was wrong. This is a sermon about working bees. It's just well disguised.
- Before we come to God's Word, let's just pray. Our Father, we thank You that You have given us Your Word. And we ask now that as we come to it, that You would give us hearts and minds and wills ready to receive what Your Spirit has for us.
- May no words be uttered which are not acceptable in Your sight. In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, this week we're back in the Sermon on the Mount.
- And as I was preparing for today's message, I was drawn back to one of my favorite books. It's The Great Divorce by C.S. Lewis.
- And if you haven't read it already, it's actually an allegory about two parallel journeys. One journey to heaven and the other to hell.
- [1 : 1 0] And the essence of the story is that those who find themselves in heaven will look back and sense that their journey was always in heaven.
- But those who choose earth will discover that it was really only a region in hell all the time. In the latter journey, they become more and more isolated from one another and also more intangible in their form.
- But why am I telling you this? Well, I think that this is the same truth that Jesus is illustrating in our passage today. Lewis, in his preface to the book, explains his thinking.
- And it goes something like this. If we insist on keeping earth or any part of it, we shall not see heaven. If we accept heaven, we cannot retain even the smallest souvenir of hell.
- This is the great truth that so often eludes us. When earth is put second to heaven, it will be part of heaven because Christ is there.
- [2 : 2 7] But when earth is put first, there is no heaven at all. As I said, our text forms part of the Sermon on the Mount.
- And that sermon is far more radical a manifesto than anything C.S. Lewis could have imagined or put together. In the previous messages we've heard on Matthew 5 and 6, we've seen that Jesus is teaching his disciples what it means to really follow him.
- He lays out a concept of righteousness that's completely foreign to the religious leaders of his day. Moreover, he declares, much to their chagrin, that he has come to fulfill the law, not abolish it.
- And in that fulfillment, he introduces us to a set of new standards, radical new standards. For the Sermon on the Mount, hatred is equal to murder and lust to adultery.
- Jesus goes on in chapter 6, where we made a start last year, and makes a distinction between public and private righteousness in the areas of almsgiving, of prayer and of fasting.
- [3 : 5 0] And we recall that those who did their good deeds in public, the Pharisees, they get their reward immediately, here and now.

But instead, Jesus instructs his followers to do all these things in private. They must be done. We have to give alms. We must pray. We must fast. However, he tells them that they will be rewarded for them in heaven, but to do them in private.

Because you see, time and again, we heard those great and gracious words, your Father knows. We can all rest assured in the sovereign omniscience of our God.

Now, as we come to this morning's passage, it's quite a tough thing to be an occasional preacher and then be given such a hard-hitting text like we have today.

And that's really where I'm going to touch on the working bee, I guess. Nevertheless, this church subscribes to expository preaching, so I have to deal with a text that comes my way.

[5 : 02] Moreover, verses 19 to 24 are words that none of us should try to avoid because they speak to the heart of what it means to be a true disciple of Christ, especially in this materialistic, hedonistic, selfish world.

And also, they show us how we should cultivate a right attitude to the things that God has loaned us. Unfortunately, the motto of our age is, show me the money.

Think about it. What's the real issue behind the wailing and complaining about our test cricketers foregoing test matches to rather play in the lucrative IPL?

Money trumps prestige. Likewise, you hear complaints in this country and probably every other one about falling standards of public morality.

Bent coppers, corrupt polities, striking emergency services people, all of them saying, show us the money. So this text is especially pertinent to us if we're ever going to have a right view, a biblical view of rewards and treasure and value in these days.

[6 : 33] So to the words of Jesus then in verses 19 and 20. 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.

Verse 19 is probably better rendered. Stop storing up for yourselves treasures on earth. You see, by implication, it is in our very nature to pursue treasure.

We can't help ourselves. We must hoard. We must lay it up. And don't think that these words are directed to pagans and heathens. No, the Sermon on the Mount is primarily addressed to disciples, to Jesus' own followers.

And Jesus is drawing their and our attention to this all-to-human propensity. And redirecting it for his kingdom's purpose.

[7 : 45] The bottom line, if you're going to lay up treasure, make sure it's the right stuff. There are treasures worth having. But first, what are these treasures on earth?

In biblical times, there weren't any banks. There were no insurance companies. There was no social safety net. So wealth was measured in terms of hard currency, of tradable assets like clothing, in livestock.

And all of it was that which you had to keep close at hand. However, there is one undeniable fact.

They are all unpreservable. And it's the same for us, for today's treasure. Our earthly possessions deteriorate.

The modern equivalent of rust, besides on our cars, of course, where the ancient scourge is still eating away value, is fraud. It's inflation.

[8 : 55] It's those dishonest institutions we hear about in the business press so often. If the global financial crisis has taught us anything, it's that financial security is a very elusive and ephemeral thing.

It is true, however, that the treasures we value in this world go far beyond possessions. Don't they? Treasure is anything and everything that gains our affection ultimately.

It can be homes and family. It can be people and relationships. It is so often position and status. In fact, it is anything of great importance to us.

And Jesus is making us front up to this obvious truth. Earthly possessions crumble. Earthly pleasures cloy.

Human acclaim wanes. But to make matters worse, not only is it impossible to preserve earthly treasure, they are all ultimately unfulfilling anyway.

[10 : 21] That new car, that beautiful new car, it never satisfies much beyond the next model, does it? Passionate love affairs so often transformed into humdrum coexistence.

Tastes change. That rock group of 30 years ago, in the 8 o'clock service, I had to say 40 years ago, that you just had to see, it doesn't appeal anymore, does it?

Our joy is dull, and even if they don't, the ultimate thief, that inevitable rust called death, steals everything away.

so with this obvious truth in mind, Jesus starts his disciples on a journey of understanding, of understanding how to take heed of the rightful place of earthly treasure.

He'll make his point most plainly in a few verses to come towards the end of chapter 6, verse 33, but strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.

[11 : 42] But we're dealing with verses 19 and 20 and when you compare the two contrasting statements in verses 19 and 20, the only difference between them is location.

You see, treasures on earth, no, not to be pursued. Treasures in heaven, yes. It is these latter and only these that are worth laying up because they're unlosable.

They're unlosable for you, the believer. There is no deterioration in the perfect climate of heaven, nor are there any robbers there. I'm sure it's a story that most of you know well, but I think it bears repeating here because it sums up these verses most eloquently.

Jim Elliott was a young American who gave up fame and fortune to ultimately sacrifice his life in the Amazon jungle as a missionary to a primitive and unreached tribe.

he responded before he left to a fairly rude question, you know, asking him why he was throwing his life away and he gave the reporter these words.

[13 : 09] How is he a fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose? You see, Jim Elliott understood God's economy and that is what Jesus is admonishing all of us to understand too.

I'm sure however at this point you're sitting there wanting to know but what are treasures in heaven then? What are these things that we should be pursuing instead? Well, the real treasure of course is eternal life, a life spent with Christ in glory.

later in Matthew chapter 19 verses 27 to 29 we hear Peter said in reply look we have left everything and followed you what then will we have?

Jesus said to them truly I tell you at the renewal of all things when the son of man is seated on the throne of his glory you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel and everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my name's sake will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life Jesus declares the inverse too earlier in chapter sixteen he says for those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it for what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life or what will they give in return for their life you see it is ultimately a question about our life it's about our life or our death but heavenly treasures are also in the realm of the intangible they are laid up in attitudes attitudes becoming more like

Christ attitudes that see us grow in faith and hope and love heavenly rewards are pursued in deeds deeds done in establishing the kingdom here on earth or done in advancing the gospel the cause of the gospel is the best place for us to be investing in heavenly treasure because its returns are an eternal annuity in practical terms it's that hour spent comforting the sick it's that occasion you grasped to witness to the lost it's those dollars those few dollars pledged to missionary support or building the church and we have this great assurance this great context of the sermon on the mount god never forgets your father knows like with the lessons on private righteousness and prayer and arms and fasting we lay up now for a reward to come actually all treasure whatever its ilk is laid up now every day we laying up treasure but if the treasure is earthly then our reward is now also and as we've seen it's a fleeting reward at best our heavenly treasure on the other hand as Peter describes it is an inheritance that is imperishable undefiled and unfading kept in heaven for you how is he a fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose and this reward is earned by the seemingly most insignificant of acts for example christ says that those who gave a cup of water in my name a cup of water well why is this so important i think i think we come to the crux of our passage when we come to verse 21 for it says where your treasure is there your heart will be also this is why the topic is so important without verse 21 we could probably legitimately say stop making such a fuss i'm smart you're smart we'll store up treasures in both places jesus doesn't allow us this option there is a direct relationship between where your treasure is and where your heart is and your heart can't be in two places at one time even back in deuteronomy mooses makes the same point in chapter 8 in verse 17 he says and a man must not acquire many wives for himself or else his heart will turn away also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself this is the truth of it treasure has a power over you and over your heart it is like a powerful addictive mind altering drug it starts with the heart and takes it captive the heart is always associated with our feelings our emotions our affections and treasure subtly changes this heart

[19 : 43] of ours step by step small movement by small movement and before we know it earthly treasure makes us love things and use people whereas Jesus is saying pursue heavenly treasure and how will you know you're succeeding in this pursuit love because you will be loving people and using things using things in his service your perspective on these things will be right you will know where they come from and for what purpose they're intended to love another of my favorite books is lord of the rings and I'm sure well known to most of you but if you remember the case of Gollum and his compulsion to hold on to that ring of power well I think that it's legitimate to see that as an allegory for the group that materialism has on our hearts

Gollum was fixated on that ring and over time his very being was submerged into his desire until all that was left was his desire and the same thing happens to us unfortunately who of you here who have been Christians for a long time cannot recall many examples of young fellow believers who are ardent for the gospel but whose early fervor was not extinguished by some great sin some mortal sin instead it was subsumed by the grip of everyday materialism by careers by home by possessions I certainly can you saw a coolness towards Christ and the gospel become increasingly evident so much so that they hardly darken the door of the church anymore their excuses are many those who bother to do give excuses that is the kids have footy or basketball or some other worthwhile endeavor they bought the boat and Sunday is really the only time that you get to enjoy it or they are working those extra hours those long extra hours just to stay ahead in their careers

Jesus called it the deceitfulness of riches and it is a deceit and it's a deceit that is ultimately terminal for this heart for your heart now before your unspoken objections become too acute I must make some clarifications at this point you see nowhere does Jesus forbid possessions nor is he legislating against prudence proverbs often exhorts us to be like the dutiful ant laying up for winter Jesus is not even forbidding enjoyment of our earthly bounty why would he seeing as it all came from him anyway but that's the key for us remember remember they come from him what we have possessions talents family everything it was given by him and it was intended for his purposes not ours so as a result

Jesus is against covetousness he is against the selfish accumulation of wealth he is against extravagant living and he is certainly opposed to hard hearted miserliness a stinginess and meanness that regards what we have as our own and only ours and as we are going to see in the text there is a chain reaction of sorts because we move from the heart to the eye and into the eye fundamentally to the mind in verses 22 and 23 Jesus now overlays his instruction about earthly treasure with what at first seems a rather confusing analogy the eye is the lamp of the body so if your eye is healthy your whole body will be full of light but if the eye is unhealthy your whole body will be full of darkness if then the light in you is darkness how great is that darkness the eye is pivotal to how we perceive things but the word translated healthy in our

NRSV translations is a complex word the best direct translation would be single so the sense of it is to be single minded to be focused to have everything in its proper perspective if you find yourself in this state then it seems Jesus is saying the body is full of light the unhealthy eye by contrast is clouded it is blurred and why blurred because as we soon shall see it is related to a heart set on earthly treasure the mind the eye clouded by desire and lust lacks clarity especially about the truth and so the body thrashes around in the darkness it's a darkness of rationalization and just to fill it it's a darkness that tries to explain away this covetous heart it finds every excuse saving for that rainy day instead of falling at

[26 : 23] Christ's feet and begging for his forgiveness you see this is what Jesus means when he says if the light that be in you is darkness how great is that darkness it's a darkness that will not accept the truth of these possessions and their effect upon your life in biblical imagery light is nearly always synonymous with spiritual well-being while darkness is equated with spiritual failure we need the eye to see the light and so when our spiritual sight is fixed on heaven we live lives reflecting light we live lives in the light however the opposite when the mind is fixed on the darkness of earthly reward blinded by our own desires we inevitably live in the darkness as for the first couplet of verses again we only have two mutually exclusive choices

Paul explained it this way to the Colossians he said so if you have been raised with Christ seek the things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God set your minds on things that are above not on things that are on earth and put to death therefore whatever in you is earthly fornication impurity passion evil desire and greed which is idolatry you see this is the chain reaction worldly treasure enslaves the heart and then the mind that dwells on these same causes the body to live in darkness before we leave verses 22 and 23 however I need to point out that there is actually a play on words in the original

Greek that has a direct bearing on what our right attitude to treasure will be the sense is that the good eye is generous in fact the same Greek word that is used for the good or healthy eye is the same root for the word that is translated generous whereas the evil eye in Hebrew thought is a synonym for miserliness and mean heartedness a good example is Proverbs 28 32 which is rendered the stingy man is in a hurry to get rich and does not know that loss is sure to come but the direct translation should actually read the evil eye is in a hurry to get rich so now you see how this link and the chain reaction is maintained it comes down ultimately to our attitude our attitude towards our possessions our talents our time and this is where

I would make my little sort of aside about the working being and our money the distinction between the healthy eye and the unhealthy eye is between the generous steward or the grasping accumulator only two choices we are either generous and open hearted with what we have we have minds that first direction is in one or the other way we cannot at the same time be both so when it comes to what you have is your desire to please God first or is it rather to win the vain acclaim of men and women to win that battle with the neighbors do you measure your life by the things you acquire and are you ready to take risks for the gospel not just the physical risk of perhaps going to a tough new environment or the emotional risk of rejection by your peers or your family how about financial sacrifice giving not just from your excess or what about giving up your time time that might otherwise be spent on your preferred pursuits as verse 24 will show us it is not what we confess that matters but rather who do we serve for no one can serve two masters a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other you cannot serve god and wealth treasures grip not only our heart and our mind but also our will people you may be thinking in this day of matrix organizations of overlapping assignments of moonlighting second jobs of even the tension between job and family demands it's actually very easy to serve two or three or five masters but the more precise translation of the sentence is that no one can be the slave of two masters you see we arrive again at two polar opposites you must choose it's god or wealth not god and wealth older versions used mammon a very evocative word and if you know your paradise lost by milton he has a i think an angel of darkness but i think mammon might mislead us occasionally you see there's no pejorative use of the word there's no idea in the word that we read as wealth now of ill-gotten gain this is these are this is neutral it's the same things that you and i pursue and possess so it doesn't let us ordinary covetous off the hook at all we are slaves get it right we are slaves we are slaves either to god or we are slaves to earthly treasure and as we saw in golem and or the account of those who have fallen away

materialism is a very hard master and what do slaves do slaves if anything are only there to serve to serve however is an act of the will it implies choice it implies decision it implies intentional action and then this so then this is the process that which we will to do is the result of that which we think which in turn is moved by the focus of our affections clearly then if our hearts are with earthly treasure wealth is our master we may not think it is but if our hearts there wealth masters us but when our hearts are set on things above then we are in the light and God is our master it is foolish to imagine that you can have it both ways serve God on Sunday and follow mammon for the rest of the week if Israel's history teaches you anything

[34 : 59] God as master brooks no rivals I am the Lord that is my name my glory I give to no other nor my praise to idols Isaiah 42 verse 8 so you are either godly or you are godless no middle ground at all and it seems to me that the worst form of godliness the most deceitful form is that materialism which thinks it is godly take heed of the Laodiceans they were rich but they did not know that in God's sight they were poor blind naked wretched he says neither hot nor cold God threatened to spit them out of his mouth and unfortunately they are the church probably most like us in the western world in the 21st century so as

I bring this message to a close we have noted that there are two kinds of treasure in this world or two kinds of treasure we face in this life and because we are treasure hoarders by nature we should take great care which is the one we choose because both of them demand our whole being they demand our heart our mind and our will you have to answer this for yourself today where is my heart what is it that holds my affections truly where am I spending my time what do I love and once you've answered that an even more revealing question might be do I have to explain my possessions explain my impulses explain my desires do

I find I have to justify them even if only to myself answer these questions honestly and you will be able to answer the most critical question who is your master this text is a hard text as I said in the beginning especially for our western generation of the church by the standard of most ages and certainly most people groups in the world today we are very rich and the scriptures bear out that it's only few disciples who will be found among the affluent so I think Paul's instruction in 1 timothy 6 needs to be taken to heart as for those in the present age who are rich command them not to be haughty or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches but rather on

God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment they are to do good to be rich in good works generous and ready to share thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future so that they may take hold of the life that really is life it is uncalculating generosity that Christ calls each of us to we his rich followers those to whom much has been given of them much will be required so be clear you pick your treasure but at the same time you pick your master and all this is in the context of a God who knows the father knows and sees all things amen manner love to love you you you