

Looking Good

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[0 : 00] When this parish was, when the old church was knocked down and this new church was put up, it was given a new name, and the new name was St. John's Memorial Church, and it was really built as a war memorial.

So Remembrance Sunday is an important remembrance in the life of the congregation, and that window indicates something of that.

But among things that are helpful to me, the two standing silver crosses there are memorials to two young Canadian pilots that died in the Battle of Britain, who, apart from that sacrifice of their lives, would probably be a couple of curmudgeons sitting in the back row on that side, wondering what's going on here.

Happy curmudgeons, I'm sure. The passage for today is from Matthew chapter 6, verse 19, which is on page 5.

One line of it is on page 5 of your New Testament section of the Pew Bible. Before I read that to you, I want to read another passage of approximately the same length that is taken from the Atlantic Monthly in June 1993.

[1 : 32] This is an important statement on a two-page full-color ad showing a light bulb without any visible source of power, but it's glowing brightly, but it's also just been smashed.

And the tiny fragments of glass are flying across two colored pages. And underneath that picture, there is written the following by American International Group that presumably paid for the advertisement.

They say, We have a novel approach to conventional ideas in financial services. Managing global financial risk is a challenge that requires a continuous flow of fresh ideas.

AIG's financial services, companies, provide clients with innovative solutions in areas from derivative products to commodities and currency, trading as well as investment.

Management and advisory services. AIG has the highest rating from the principal rating services, and our strong balance sheet provides an added degree of security and stability.

[3 : 05] When your financial and risk management needs to go beyond insurance, AIG does too, with spectacular results.

You may not have got the point of that, but I want to give you another comparable statement, which is even far more profound.

And it reads as follows. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal.

But lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break through and steal.

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. Now, you can accept either or both those pieces of advice if you choose.

[4 : 07] But, I, I was impressed with the thoughtfulness and thoroughness of AIG in assuring you that their investments are not subject to moth, rust, and thieves.

Even though the second reading might have suggested that they are. Three things come out of this passage. I've been in a different Anglican parish on Sunday morning for the last six weeks.

And I've come to the profound conclusion that when people gather in an Anglican parish on Sunday morning, they do so for the purposes of being confirmed in the opinions they brought to church with them.

I have sincerely prayed that that would not be the case this morning. But, it depends. And I suppose it's a work of God's grace that that doesn't happen.

Three questions come out of this whole passage. And to continue so that you know the rest of the passage, there's two more verses to it which read, The eye is the lamp of the body, so if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light.

[5 : 32] And then the third statement, 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 mammon. So, these three questions you need to take very seriously. And the three questions are, first, on the overall, how does your investment portfolio look?

The second question is, how long is it since you had a long talk with your counselor? And the third question is, who are you looking, who are you working for?

Those are three permanent questions that you have to live the rest of your life with. So, I want them to, I want you to relate those three questions to this passage from Matthew chapter 6.

Remembering what Jim Packer pointed out when he spoke on adultery, that this is all an expansion on the original text of the sermon, which is given as, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.

[6 : 58] And this is just adding on to that text and trying to help you become aware of what the kingdom of God is about. So, the difficulty with treasure is that we all live close to somebody who makes us seem poor by comparison.

I've sort of given up preaching at rich people, telling them about how rich they are, because all of them know somebody who's richer, and so they immediately deflect the idea to somebody else.

so it's very hard to get through to the people, because one distinguished member of this congregation, whom most people would think to be wealthy, said to me the other day, those people from Hong Kong come in here and make our money look like it was monopoly money.

so it's a matter of degree for some reason, that we can't accept the reality of our own riches, but then the New Testament doesn't want you to anyway.

The New Testament wants you to be deeply and profoundly aware of your own poverty, poverty. And the way it provides that you should be aware of your own poverty is by bringing you up against the reality of the kingdom of God.

[8 : 38] The kingdom of God and the promises that are connected to it are how you become aware of how poverty stricken you are.

The title given to this sermon this morning is Looking Good Well, you only look good as long as you don't bring yourself up against the reality of the kingdom of God and then you will see the extent we can see the extent of our need and the nature of our profound poverty.

The Beatitudes with which this sermon begins remember contain promises of great wealth. They promise that the meek will inherit the whole earth.

They promise that the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who suffer persecution because of righteousness. And it says that when people falsely say all kinds of evil against you great is your reward in heaven.

So there is a path towards the treasure and the riches which God intends for us that we should have in great abundance.

[10 : 07] To be able to consider these passages there are two things which I think are helpful if you see these as being evident truths.

Take you a minute I'm sure to grasp this but let me give you that minute and tell you what I think is really helpful. First, what you've got when you have nothing is all you really have.

What you've got when you have nothing is all you really have. the corollary to that what you've got when you have nothing is far more than you can imagine.

So that's the background of this business of laying up for yourselves treasures in heaven. So on the basis of that look again at the questions.

When it talks about lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven it asks the question what goes into the treasury box at the center of your being.

[11 : 32] In other words, what is the thing that you treasure that you value the most? What goes in there? You probably don't know so you should ask your husband or your wife or you should spend some time thinking about it and making a list of what it is that goes into the treasury box that is at the very center of your being.

You'll learn a lot about yourself if you can answer that question. And it's not an unfair question. Nor is it a question that anybody can say well I don't need to know the answer because we all need to know the answer in order to understand this passage of scripture among other things.

So ask yourself then what goes into the treasure box at the center of your being. Second question based on the second part of this passage is what kind of lighting systems you have in the dark places of your life.

Now all of us are, I think there's lots of floor space in our world given to dark places. And the way we tend to treat them humanly is just to keep them dark, keep the door closed and not go in there.

And the question of what kind of lighting system you have for going in there and why you don't use it is the question again placed by this passage of scripture.

[13 : 11] The third question, because you inevitably are a slave, a lifelong slave, I mean that's the nature of life.

I think it's a kind of you're stuck. you're caught in time and space from which you cannot escape so that as a lifelong slave, who do you choose to serve?

What's at the heart? What's the lighting system? And who do you choose to serve as a slave? Well, the results of answering these questions, you know, most of us can say, well, I pay mortgages and credit card balances and a car loan and insurance and taxes, but I scarcely have any money for investment.

What is there that we can invest in, because we're so taken up in that process of being successful members of our economy, what do we have left to invest in anything else?

What possible investment could we make in something beyond meeting our regular monthly bills? things? The rich young ruler wanted to ask that question and remember that he pushed Jesus to the point where Jesus turned to him and said, go and sell all that you have and give to the poor and come and follow me.

[14 : 52] Well, it's a kind of a radical cure, but the story is there and the story is important because it is always possible that you could in fact do that.

You could go and sell everything and give it to the poor. The story also helps to gauge the extent of our willingness to find eternal life, to find the thing of ultimate value in life.

You know, that the rich young ruler turned away because what he already had was all he ultimately wanted as he saw it. And the story of his turning away can remind us of the fact that in our lives are we really willing to share the great wealth that God has made available to us in his kingdom, or is that not of any ultimate concern?

The third thing that the story tells us is how blinding is the effect of material wealth with regard to the wealth of heaven. In other words, once we have surrounded ourselves with material wealth of one kind and another, heaven becomes quite remote and distant and not a matter of immediate concern.

And when that happens, most of the New Testament goes dead on you because it doesn't mean anything, because you already are surrounded with the things that satisfy you profoundly.

[16 : 28] Luke tells the story as well of the rich fool, by whom he illustrated that a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.

And for the most part, that's how we measure people, by the abundance of his possessions.

That's how we gain recognition in our society. That's what our world is all about. That's how we relate socially. The people whose abundant level is at that stage want to relate to the people whose abundance is at that stage in the hope that they might become like them.

When they do become like them, the people who were here have become like these people up here. And so it goes on indefinitely. The endless pursuit of the abundance of possessions, which in itself doesn't seem to be condemned, except that it totally blinds us to the reality of the kingdom.

And that is a very great loss indeed, the reality of the faith to which Jesus Christ has called us. So the disparity between rich and poor, which is one of the critical issues of our time, is to recognize in our culture the unlimited wealth which is among us in the reality of the kingdom.

[18 : 13] You see, that's what really is very difficult. Because we are constantly comparing material acquisitions with material wealth, with material wealth.

We're constantly looking at that process and how we are getting along in that process. and forgetting that that process ends up with a person who, like the rich fool, suddenly his soul is required of him.

And he ends up stripped of everything with nothing. And so we, in the pursuit of the material prosperity that is part of our world, end up being spiritually absolutely poverty stricken.

And that happens over and over again. When wealthy and important people come to the church to be buried. And you have to pay tribute to the acquisition of their material wealth.

Because spiritually they were destitute. tribute. And so that kind of thing so often seems to take place.

[19 : 31] So you can't, let me just remind you of this too as you read this story. Remember that you can't separate the Sermon on the Mount from the person who preached it.

Lots of people like to do that. In Time Magazine last week, I think it's a week ago now, there was an essay on the back page which talked about Christians, that our society is becoming very hard on the poor and that the poor are considered to be the authors of their own misfortune.

And they have every opportunity not to be. And so the essay in Time Magazine says that we have to return to the Sermon on the Mount, return to an understanding of what true human wealth is in terms of that sermon and how poverty relates to it.

The essay ends with a brilliant line for us. It doesn't translate well by speaking it to you.

The last line is that the Christian right has become the Christian light. Only light is spelled L-I-T-E and like Coors.

[20 : 59] and it's that strange business that the kingdom of God which Jesus teaches us about is a kingdom the entrance to which involves a relationship to the one who teaches us about it.

You can't cut it off. Time Magazine can't cut off the Sermon on the Mount and give it to the Republican Party as a platform because you can't dissociate the reality of the kingdom and the reality of what is taught in the Sermon on the Mount from a relationship to the person who taught it.

So you have to look then at the first question which is where is your treasure?

The second question is how long is it since you had a long talk with your counselor and this seems to be it talks about it here when it says the eye is the lamp of the body so if your eye is sound your whole body will be full of light but if your eye is not sound your whole body will be full of darkness if then the light in you is darkness how great how great is the darkness?

Well there are large dark areas in our lives and we are to walk in the light as Jesus is in the light we are to have an eye we don't have the option of 56 channels that we can choose from we have an eye which is focused on the person of Jesus Christ and the light from him is to fill every area and every relation and every dark passion of the whole of our bodies and unless that light is getting in there bringing healing and bringing recognition and bringing restoration unless that light is getting in there how great is the darkness and the darkness continues to compound itself so that in areas of your life and mine where the light is not penetrating the darkness is compounding and that's why I say how long is it since you've seen a counselor how long is it since you've talked to somebody and I'm thinking of the counselor basically as the ministry of the Holy

[23 : 51] Spirit perhaps through another Christian that you talked to but that you allow the light to break in to those areas in your life where the darkness is building up and compounding itself and becoming ever deeper and this is a lifetime thing and in your relationships and in all the things you do in your life either the darkness is getting through and bringing light and healing or else the darkness is compounding and Jesus warns us about that he warns us about our treasure he warns us about the inside of our lives how light is to break in there and finally he asks us who we're working for I would like to take as an example of a man with two masters a modern NHL professional hockey player who belongs to his owner on the one hand and to his union on the other with the surprising result that he doesn't play hockey and that's what happens when you have two masters the game that you're meant to play the very thing you're meant to do with your life is you can't do it because of the conflict between the two masters that are claiming your loyalty and your commitment to them and what you need to do is recognize that you have only one master and that is a passion to play hockey under any circumstances that's the thing now

I'm not trying to resolve their problems for us but I'm just trying to use their problem to help illustrate what our situation is and that is that we are not caught up with loyalties to two masters which are constantly in conflict but we have a loyalty only to one master and that that one master is our Lord Jesus Christ and that we are we are to serve him that's why people are offended when you get turned to the book of Titus and slaves are advised how to relate to their masters but if you read the passage carefully I think in in Titus chapter chapter two you'll see that what the slave is to do is to demonstrate that he serves only one master and that the master whom he serves in his relationship to his earthly master is his heavenly master and he serves his heavenly master in such a way that his earthly master may come to acknowledge that he too has a heavenly master to whom he is responsible so that's

I think what the passage this morning from the sermon on the mount is saying to us and that I think we need to take I think I need to and I suspect you need to to take very seriously where are you investing in your treasure the thing that means the most to you in life the thing that makes life meaningful for you where do you invest that how long is it since you have consciously tried to bring light into the dark places in your lives and who are you working for and I suspect that we all need a small group with whom we study with whom we pray with whom we face those questions consistently a group that can help us deal with those questions in our lives you'd be surprised how helpful other people can be if you will let them that close to you and if you will open up to them and up to yourself because we're brilliant at hiding this from ourselves what our true treasure is we are brilliant at hiding the dark places in our lives when we desperately need some light and we're very ambivalent about whom we serve and we need to get straight on that and Jesus tells us that and he tells us that simply because he himself in his role as our savior and redeemer how he continues to work in our lives in the accumulation of treasure in the penetration of light and in the effective obedience of one master in our lives amen