

The Way We Live: An Exploration of The Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 6:19-34

Part of what it means to be human is that we have the capacity to treasure things (material or immaterial things; tangible or intangible things; people), to ascribe value and significance to things (possessions, accomplishments/achievements, relationships, etc.). What we treasure we also tend to protect, often to great lengths. As Jesus continues in the Sermon on the Mount, He offers His perspective and instructions regarding treasuring.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:19-21)

Jesus makes a distinction between “*treasures on earth*” and “*treasures in heaven*”, and connects our treasuring to our heart. This tracks consistently with what we’ve noticed all throughout this Sermon...that a good/righteous person is one whose heart is aligned with God’s heart.

So what is a “*treasure on earth*” versus a “*treasure in heaven*”? Anything that has lasting (eternal) value and significance is a “*treasure in heaven*”, as opposed to only temporary value/significance, which would be a “*treasure on earth*”. That being the case, then, nothing that money can buy or secure can be a “*treasure in heaven*”. Additionally, anything that God values or treasures would be considered a “*treasure in heaven*” as well. So, what does God value/treasure?

We know God values people—after all, He created us, sustains us, redeems us, and even became a human in His Son Jesus. Along with that, God values relationships—God is a relationship (Trinity—Father, Son, and Spirit) and desires relationship with us. God values character—love and faithfulness, courage and compassion, mercy and forgiveness, honesty and integrity...basically all the qualities that reflect His character and contribute to healthy human formation and flourishing (think Fruit of the Spirit; see Galatians 5:22-23). And again, money can’t buy such things.

This offers us practical wisdom as to what is truly worth our time, attention, affection, and effort as we make our way through life. Additionally, the two greatest commandments—Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself—also point us in the direction of what is worth treasuring.

These words from Dallas Willard help us to connect last week’s passage (Matthew 6:1-18) to this week’s passage (Matthew 6:19-34)...

“...the two main things that will block or hinder a life constantly interactive with God and healthy growth in the kingdom...are the desire to have the approval of others...and the desire to secure ourselves by means of material wealth.

If we allow them to, these two desires will pull us out of the sway of the kingdom—the range of God’s effective will,—and back into the barren ‘righteousness’ of the scribe and the Pharisee.

But if we keep these two things in their proper place, through constant, disciplined, and clear-eyed reliance on God, we will grow rapidly in kingdom substance. We will progressively incorporate all aspects of our life into the kingdom, including, of course, the social and financial.” (emphasis added)

Since the beginning of this year—our year of Becoming—we’ve been discussing the important role of our desires...which reside in our heart. Jesus makes it clear why this is so important...our heart will be where our treasure is. So treasuring the right things is of ultimate importance. This draws to mind, at least for me, a couple passages in the Old Testament...

- *“Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.”* (Proverbs 4:23, emphasis added)
- *“Whom have I in heaven but You? And earth has nothing I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”* (Psalm 73:25-26, emphasis added)

Treasuring the wrong things not only results in loss and waste (you can’t take it with you, as they say) it also amounts to idolatry. A key function of the Sermon on the Mount is it invites us to examine our hearts. Does our attention, affection, and allegiance, our love and loyalty, abide in Jesus and His Kingdom, or elsewhere? It also invites us to change course (repent) as necessary.

Jesus moves on to an illustration that may not be easy for us modern readers to immediately understand, as it was a cultural idiom of His day. So what is He getting at when He speaks of eyes being the “*lamp of the body*” and good/healthy eyes versus bad/unhealthy eyes? Probably the closest idiom in meaning that we would be familiar with is “*tight fisted*” versus “*open handed*”. Both idioms refer to generosity versus stinginess. Both have to do with how we view and value other people. If our eyes see correctly we view other people highly and are willing to share and be generous. If our eyes are bad, we lack a good view of reality...the reality that people are of incredibly high value. Lacking a good view/understanding of reality is a way of being in “darkness”.

Jesus goes on to say, “*No one can serve two masters.*” (Matthew 6:24) This harkens back to the very first of the Ten Commandments, “*You shall have no other gods besides Me.*” (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 5:7) Because our hearts belong to what we treasure, anything we treasure other than God can become an idol, a master. As Dallas Willard says, “*We cannot but serve our treasures. We labor all day for them and think about them all night. They fill our dreams. But it is not uncommon for people to think that they can treasure this world AND the invisible kingdom as well, that they can serve both. Perhaps we can make this work for a while. But there will come a time when one must be subordinate to the other. We simply cannot have two ultimate goals or points of reference for our actions. That is how life is, and no one escapes.*”

As modern day Americans we don’t like to think of ourselves as servants of anyone or anything. We value and celebrate our freedom and autonomy above all else. The only problem is that’s an illusion. To paraphrase the apostle Paul, we are either slaves to righteousness or slaves to sin. (see Romans 6) The questions we need to ask ourselves are: Is God enough for us, or do we want

all that Mammon offers. Does God really have our heart, or is our heart divided? As humans we tend to be experts at self-deception. Whereas we think we are “free”, when in actuality we are slavishly driven by our fears and desires. We can think we are devoted to God, maybe even desire to be devoted to God, yet really place our confidence and security (our treasure) in Mammon.

Or, again, we are called to love the Lord our God with ALL our heart, mind, soul, strength. “All” means there’s nothing left for any competing allegiance or devotion.

So how can we discern our hearts on this matter? Jesus invites us to examine what we worry about. What occupies our minds? What do we focus and fixate upon? This can tell us a lot about ourselves that we ought to pay attention to.

It is important to be careful and clear in this section (6:25-34) to understand what Jesus is saying, and not saying, with His admonition to not worry.

He is NOT saying that we should be reckless and irresponsible. I think James Bryan Smith is helpful here...

*“...I want to distinguish between caution and worry. Despite their similarity, worry is not the same as being cautious or careful. We should be concerned about many things: locking doors, managing our money wisely and driving carefully on slippery roads. This is not the same as worry. Worry is what we do after we have planned, prepared and acted properly. When we continue to stew about something we have crossed the line into the world of worry. Worry is a disproportionate level of concern based on an inappropriate measure of fear. Concern, caution and care are all acceptable and even necessary, but worry is what happens when we go beyond these and fear what we can’t control...When we cross the line from being responsible to being anxious, we have turned our focus away from God and His providence. We do this because we have bought into the lie that worrying helps us.” (See *The Good and Beautiful Life*, chapter 10, Learning to Live Without Worry)*

We live in a world that is constantly churning up fear. The news would lead us to believe that there is danger around every corner. Marketing/advertising would lead us to believe that we’re not enough unless we buy this or that product, or we won’t have enough unless we invest with this or that company. Or everybody is out to get you, so you better protect yourself by every means necessary. It’s a crazy world we live in. Yes, there are dangers to be aware of, and to take reasonable measures against. But after taking reasonable precautions, don’t be preoccupied with all the “what ifs”.

What is the alternative? Jesus is very direct here (and I’d recommend you underline, highlight, memorize this statement, make it a breath prayer...internalize it and always have it at the ready) *“Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness...”* (Matthew 6:33) If we’re going to focus and fixate on something, may it be Jesus and His Kingdom. This is what is worth treasuring.

Interestingly, speaking of “treasure”, later in Matthew’s Gospel he records Jesus saying this, *“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it*

again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.” (Matthew 13:44-46)

Do we value Jesus and His Kingdom like this? Or are we chasing other “treasure”? Do we realize that everything worth striving for is already ours in Christ? Do our lives reflect this? Or are chasing everything the world tells us to pursue, and worrying about everything the world tells us to fear?

Going back to a couple of the key life questions that this Sermon addresses...

- What is reality?
- What is the “good life”? Or Who is “well off”?

The Kingdom is Reality. The narrative of the Kingdom is the one that defines us and guides us. And the “good life” is one that is not consumed with worry. But this will only be experienced as we lean into and rest secure in the reality of the Kingdom. The Church is to be the community of people in the world who “gets” this, who reflect this reality to the world around us. How do you think we’re doing?

Jesus is also NOT saying that we should feel bad or feel shame or feel less-than if we wrestle with worry/anxiety. I’ve heard people say things like “Anxiety is a sin.” Personally I think this is unhelpful and heavy-handed (and this is coming from someone who is prone to be heavy-handed with truth myself). Anxiety, similar to our earlier discussion around anger, is simply a signal that we need to pay attention to. It’s not something we need to place a value judgment on.

Additionally, what we’re learning through neuroscience and biochemistry is that there are different types/levels of anxiety...some of which are controllable and some that’s not. The type of worry/anxiety that comes from spinning, stewing, fixating on something (particularly false narratives), the type that can be addressed through reflection on truth and higher reasoning is the type Jesus is addressing here. But some types of anxiety are a response to trauma or more biologically-based...that is NOT what Jesus is addressing here.

Consider the scene in Luke 10 of the sisters Mary and Martha. Mary is sitting at Jesus’ feet while Martha is scurrying around trying to be a good hostess. When Martha gets upset and tells Jesus to tell Mary to help her, Jesus replies, *“Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things...”* (Luke 10:41, emphasis added) The type of worry/anxiety that Jesus is talking about is the type in which truth and perspective can generally take care of. While truth and perspective are powerful “medicine”, sadly, some worry/anxiety runs deeper than that. If you struggle with anxiety on that level, may I encourage you to seek help. There is no shame in that, and there is certainly nothing deficient about your faith.

It’s important to keep this entire passage in mind (6:19-34). Treasuring things like money, or the things that money can buy, can only lead to worry because these things can be lost, or stolen, or

simply don't last. And spending much effort (and more money) in trying to protect and maintain such things only adds stress to our life. In contrast, Jesus and His Kingdom cannot be lost. Someone who seemed to understand all this was the apostle Paul. In one of his letters to his apprentice Timothy he wrote...

“But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” (I Timothy 6:6-10)

Godliness and contentment...those sound like heavenly treasures, don't they?

As mentioned at the outset, “treasuring” is a natural human activity, it's part of what makes us human. And humans were made to be like God. In other words, we treasure because God treasures. What does God treasure? God treasures His creation...He treasures us. The crux of this entire section raises the question for the hearer/reader—Do you trust that God treasures you, and has your best interest in mind? Look at the birds of the air and the grass in the field, Jesus says...isn't it clear that God takes care of them? And aren't people more important, more valuable, more treasured than them?

To sum up: A good/righteous person will treasure the right things and consequently experience/enjoy the “good life”...with life and treasures safe and secure in God's Kingdom, trusting that God treasures them immensely.

Possible Discussion Questions

- What do you treasure? Why do you value that? How did you acquire/attain that? How do you protect/secure that? What does God think/feel about your “treasure(s)”?
- Since the beginning of this year, what have you noticed about your desires? Have you been able to more clearly identify them? How do they affect your life? Have they changed at all?
- Since the beginning of this year, what have you noticed stirring in your heart? Running with the assumption that God is always present and active, what is God doing in you? (It may be helpful to think in terms of fears, desires, perspectives, character development/formation.)
- How have you become more aware of God's Kingdom among us? How are the various aspects of your life becoming more and more incorporated into the Kingdom?
- In light of the love and lordship of Jesus, how are we to understand and use money?
- What may need to change in your use of money in order to reflect Kingdom priorities/values?

- In your experience, what has worrying accomplished? What do you find yourself worrying about? How do you deal with worry when you recognize it in your life?
- What tends to spark fear in you? What is Jesus inviting you to do with that? (Be as specific as possible.) Or, we live in a culture of fear. How does the reality and presence of God's Kingdom help us deal with that?
- How are you seeking first the Kingdom? What vies/competes for your attention, affection, allegiance, your love, loyalty, and devotion? How do you go about keeping your priorities straight?
- When people see the Church, do they see a community that embodies Kingdom values and priorities, and a community that is not swayed by the same fears and desires of the world? Explain.
- How would you describe your current level of peace and contentment? If it is high, what contributes to that? If it is low, what is hindering it, or what would it take for it to be higher?
- You are loved and treasured by God. Do you believe this? How do you go about reminding yourself of this truth? What do you do to make sure you are functioning from this reality? How does this cultivate confidence and security in you?

Soul Training Exercise ~ De-accumulation & Giving

I suspect that most of us have more stuff than we need. One way to keep possessions and money from having too tight a grip on us is to let go of it, to give them away. (And giving money or things to people who really need it is a way of storing up treasure in heaven.)

So this week you're invited to de-accumulate. Get rid of some stuff. If you don't need it, or if it's just taking up space and collecting dust, consider giving it away (even if it's just to GoodWill).

Another good, and long standing habit of Jesus followers, is to regularly give a set amount of money each month. (It's also helpful to have enough financial margin that we can give spontaneously if/when the occasion arises.) There are many good causes out there. The two-pronged effect is 1. to make sure money doesn't have a grip on us, that we control it, it doesn't control us, and 2. To help others.

This is also an opportunity to draw close to God as we seek His guidance who to give to. With a regular practice of being open-handed with money and possessions we guard our hearts and contribute to the Kingdom.