



The Trinity Pulpit



When All is Said and Done Matthew 6:19-24

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Like so many of you, our family is grieving the passing of a parent. Like so many in our congregation, we have spent the past several years caring and trying to make good decisions in regards to aging parents. Over the past several years, as my father-in law's health grew worse, we were faced with making decisions about his care. As we moved him to this apartment building, this facility, back home and ultimately to a nursing home where he could get adequate care, we would go through his belongings and, little by little, we would give some to family members and other things, like old clothes, we would give to charity. When Bob died a few weeks ago there was very little left to go through: a few boxes of worn our sweat suits, shirts and hats; a few pictures and other small items were still left in his possession. Now, of course, there are some other belongings still at his home yet there is not much. Not much left after a life of living and accumulating. What really lasts? In the end what is usually left is a home that needs to be sold, clothing to be given away, a few awards, diplomas on the wall and pictures of life that has been lived.

Every time I go into my office I look at that wall of books. A pastor's library is one of his or her prized possessions. Yet, since I have been your pastor I have inherited three different retiring pastor's libraries. The books are brought to us in boxes and the staff goes through them and the rest we send to Campbell Divinity students and finally they all are just given away. Even our prized possessions do not last. What really matters when all is said and done?

Jesus tells us that we must not value earthly treasure but instead we must store up treasure in heaven. The Bible has what Richard Foster refers to as a dark side and a light side in regards to its teaching on money, riches or what we will call today, earthly treasure or mammon. Foster suggests that there is a dark side to money and treasure. In fact, if you listen to the words of Jesus,

you would wonder if we should own anything. Jesus says "You cannot serve God and mammon." "Do not lay up treasure for yourself on this earth." "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter heaven." "Sell your possessions and give to the poor." "The love of money is the root of all evil." These are words that cause us great concern. The reason is that they are contradictory to everything our culture teaches us is important and of worth. We are tempted when we hear these words to begin rationalizing and looking for some sort of interpretation with which we can live. Sometimes it is important just to hear them again and wrestle with them, and realize that when they make us uncomfortable, then we need to reflect and wonder why they cause us such discomfort.¹

There is a light side of earthly treasure in Scripture as well. There is the blessing of wealth we find all through the Old Testament. There is also a picture of wealth being used to support the work of the kingdom of God. God's blessing of wealth is found throughout Scripture. There is the reminder that wealth is a gift from God and must be received as such. The Bible does not teach us that wealth is always a sign of blessing and that those without wealth are not blessed. However, the Bible does teach us that some are blessed with wealth and must receive it as a gift from God. How do we reconcile these themes in Scripture? I think that we need to look at the words of Jesus and discover how we are to view earthly treasure or money. What does Jesus want us to understand about earthly treasure so that we will have stored up the right treasure when all is said and done?

Jesus reminds us that earthly treasures do not last. As we make choices about what is important in life, Jesus says "Remember that the treasure of this world does not last." Jesus

says “Do not store up for yourself treasure on this earth where moth and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal.” Jesus is reminding us of the fleeting value of the treasure of this world.

Jesus uses three images for us to consider. In Jesus’ day most things that were of value was made of cloth or metal, much like it is today. The first image is the moth destroying the cloth or clothing. I don’t know if you have ever had moths destroy, but I have had clothes that I wanted to wear, only to discover that there was a hole, or a tear. Some of us have old jeans that we have worn and worn and finally, the day comes when they must be thrown away. I think about the things we buy, and when we buy it, it is something that we have to have. It is new, and it looks good on us and we are excited about wearing it only to have it a few years later in our pile and on its way to North Raleigh Ministries. The moth reminds us that things wear out and become useless.

There is also the image of rust. Rust reminds us that even that which appears sturdy ultimately becomes useless. Earthly treasure is not how it appears. Think about the things that rust. Cars, appliances, and tools are all items that are sturdy when we purchase them and seem will last forever. Yet, all we have to do is take a trip to the local landfill or the junk yard and we can see the graveyard of rust. Automobiles that cost thousands of dollars are now wasting away. Appliances that once were the purchases that made our lives more convenient are now obsolete. Add to this idea the amount of computers, televisions and stereos that simply are obsolete and sent to the landfill. Jesus reminds us that nothing really lasts.

The last image is that of thieves breaking in and stealing our possessions. Jesus reminds us that sometimes the loss of the things we treasure on earth can come in a moment’s notice. A tornado, hurricane, or house fire can steal our possessions in a moment’s time. This image also reminds us of the suddenness of loss and how possessions and earthly treasure are unreliable.

Do you remember the first statement you received from your 401K after the recession began? In this recession, American households have lost \$14 trillion in wealth. Five hundred billion dollars in wealth came from declining home values in the first quarter of this year. Corporate equities chopped another \$300 billion and another \$540 billion was due to decline in pensions. I remember getting a statement and in one quarter the value of my retirement dropped in

half. Where did it go? It was just gone. Like a thief coming in and stealing it, the wealth was here one moment and gone the next.

Jesus’ images remind us that no matter how we try to store up treasure on this earth it is fleeting. We can store it, protect it, hold on to it, and grasp it, but it does not last. It is as one black preacher use to preach “he had it, he used it, he lost it.” Earthly treasure does not last.

Secondly, earthly treasure is meant to be used and not hoarded. Jesus says “Do not store up treasure for yourself.” Now, as the Bible teaches us, there is nothing necessarily wrong with saving and having capital. In fact, one must have some capital if you are going to do any worthwhile project. The problem is the spirit behind the saving and the capital. Jesus’ instruction is to not store it up for yourself. Do not hoard earthly treasure. Christian discipleship demands generosity and giving. In fact, those who are wealthy in the Bible are admired for their generosity. Solomon’s wealth builds the temple. Jesus has wealthy women who support his ministry. Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy man who provided for Jesus’ burial. Barnabas is commended for his selling property and presenting the proceeds to the early church. The early church meets at the wealthy Lydia’s home. Paul engages with successful business people like Aquila and Priscilla. Each of these is found to be people who understand that wealth is not to be hoarded but used.

Dr. Karl Menninger once asked a wealthy patient “What on earth are you going to do with all your money?” The patient replied “Just worry about it, I suppose.” Dr. Menninger said “Well, do you get much pleasure from worrying about it?” “No,” responded the patient, “but I get terrified thinking about giving it to somebody.” Why would we have such a personal response to giving our money? Richard Foster suggests it is because we cannot give our possessions without giving a little of our self. To let it go is to let go of our security and the illusion of our own self sufficiency. Jesus tells us “Do not store it up and keep it for ourselves.”²

The offering in a historically black church is much different than in the service of a historically white church. In a church like ours the offertory is usually beautiful music and a time of some participation. We touch a plate and some of us put envelopes in the plate. We listen, we whisper, your minds wander.

However, in the black church giving tithes and offerings is a participant moment. While the music plays the congregation makes their way to the altar table to give their gifts. Most of the time the money is counted and the congregation are told that the need is greater or that they have given enough. Many times a leader will stand up and say “We need \$15 more. Who will stand up for Jesus and give \$15 more?” The famous black preacher Father Divine preached in Harlem in the 1930s. At the time of the offering he would instruct the throngs of attendees that the time had come for them to “TANGIBILITATE.” They had to learn that giving was more than giving. It was rehabilitating their self. The white church does not fully understand that giving earthly treasure is giving our self to God.³

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Jesus also reminds us that we must have a proper perspective on earthly wealth. Jesus says “the eyes are the lamps of the body. If your eyes are good your whole body will be full of light, but if your eyes are bad your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness how great is that darkness!” What does Jesus mean by this statement, and why is it part of this teaching on earthly treasure? Jesus is saying if your eyes are good then you will have light, but if they are bad there will be darkness. If your eyes – that which are to be light – are dark, then how great is the darkness you are living in. Jesus is speaking of perspective. Essentially he is telling us that if we have the wrong view of earthly treasure, then everything else is in danger in our lives. We don’t believe this. We think that we can somehow separate our view of wealth and our discipleship. Jesus says it cannot be done. If our perspective of wealth is skewed, then our whole lives are skewed.

A.W. Tozer writes in *I Talk Back to the Devil* “Money often comes between men and God. Someone has said that you can take two small 10 cent pieces, two dimes and shut out the panoramic landscape.” Go to the mountains and just hold two coins closely in front of your eyes; the mountains are still there, but you cannot see them at all because there is a dime shutting off the vision in each eye. It does not take large quantities of money to come between us and God. It takes just a little placed in the wrong position to effectively obscure our view.

Jesus is saying we must have the right perspective when it comes to earthly wealth, for if we do not then our view of life will ultimately be skewed. We will be in danger of valuing the things God does not value and disregarding the very things God values.

The fourth point Jesus makes is that money or earthly wealth is not just neutral but is a god that must be subordinate to our God. Our translation is money but the older translation is Mammon. It is a personification of money. Many people say that money is neutral and has no power or value in and of itself. It is just how you use it. Yet, the Bible teaches us that money or Mammon should be included in that list of powers and principalities that must come under the rule of Christ. Jesus says it plainly “You cannot love both God and Mammon.” The word *love* has the connotation of choice. We have to choose who we will follow. Will we order our lives after Mammon or Christ?

Foster writes that Mammon has a power that seeks to dominate us. Mammon is a power that is seen in scripture as a lesser god. It has the ability to create a desire and longing for it. It promises to solve our problems. It claims it can give us freedom from other powers that might enslave us. It can give us status, success and admiration. It claims to be that which is lasting. It can even create a sense of guilt and demands commitment. This is why the stories of people overcoming their sin of Mammon loving are spoken of in evangelistic terms. The rich young ruler is told to go and give away everything and come and follow Jesus. It is not enough for him to give a little and adjust a little. No, what he needed was a total abandoning of one god to follow another God, namely Jesus. When Jesus came to Zacheus’ house and challenged his love of money, we are told that Zacheus has a change of heart, and the commentary is that salvation had come to his house.⁴

Martin Luther said “A person requires three conversions in their life, a conversion of the heart, the mind and the purse.” The love of earthly treasure or mammon requires repentance that we might truly follow Jesus.

Jesus instructs us that we must not love money and store up earthly treasure but we must store up heavenly treasure. Jesus comments that this treasure is truly lasting, unlike earthly treasure. What is treasure? It can be interpreted to mean anything that val-

ues the Kingdom of God. Let me mention three to you.

Store up treasure in heaven by valuing your relationship with Jesus. There is only one lasting relationship we experience in this life and that is our relationship with Jesus. Now it is true that we will be reunited with our loved ones who have placed their faith in Jesus in heaven. Yet, we know the Bible teaches us that the relationship we have in heaven with those who have gone before us will not be quite the same as it was here on earth. Yet, our relationship with Jesus is the one that is lasting. So, it only makes sense that if we want to store up treasure in heaven, spend time with Jesus. Work on your relationship with Jesus.

Second, leave a legacy of faith on this earth. I do a lot of funerals and have the opportunity to share a lot of information about those who have died. I share about trips, hobbies, and desires. The one thing that really matters at the time of death is whether they had a faith with Jesus Christ. What do your family and friends think about when they think about you? Do they think, among all the other descriptions, that you are a person of faith in Jesus? Would they describe you as a follower of Jesus? Leave a legacy of faith.

Thirdly, value your relationship with others. As I told you, we have been going through Robin's dad's things. I came across a cap in a box the day after his funeral. It was a baseball cap and the only thing it said was Alaska. When I saw the hat I first thought about keeping it. It was a cool cap. Then I thought about when Bob bought it and wore it. He bought it on a cruise to Alaska. I remember seeing pictures of him and his wife Carolyn smiling, kissing, taking in the beauty of Alaska. They were also surrounded by friends from church. These were people with whom they had shared life and invested their lives. I thought about that hat and thought it really is not what is important but what it represented was priceless. It represented time invested in a marriage, friends and the lives of others. The hat is on its way to Goodwill, the pictures will be stored in boxes until they fade, but the memory of a life invested in others and the church will last. Store up treasures in heaven.

Emerson Drive sings a song entitled "Good Man." The chorus says "I want to be the one when all is said and done, that lived a good life, loved a good wife and always helped a friend in trouble. On the day they lay me down I want everyone to gather around and say he was a husband, father, brother and friend. He was a good man."

I like that song but I don't think it goes far enough. Being a good man or a good woman is just not quite enough. When all is said and done I want others to say he was a man who followed Jesus, left a legacy of faith and cared for others... he stored up a treasure in heaven. You cannot love both God and Mammon. We have to decide where and what we will treasure. Remember, it is the treasure in heaven that matters when all is said and done. ❁

¹Richard Foster, *The Challenge of the Disciplined Life* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1985) 20-23.

²Foster, 43.

³Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book* (New York: William and Morrow Company, Inc., 1996) 286-287.

⁴Foster, 24-31.

