

Sunday – August 14, 2011
Pastor – Rev. Walter W. Westbrook
Sermon – **Sermon on the Mount VII**
Treasures

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Matthew 6:16-18

The first section of this part of the Sermon on the Mount is connected to last week's part. We see Jesus use the term "hypocrites" to describe people who fast for show. That is the same term he uses for people who give alms for show and who pray for show. Giving alms, praying and fasting are all very good things to do, but doing them to impress other people is wrong.

The Greek word for "hypocrites" also means "stage actors." These are people who are playing a role. They are not who they want you to think they are. They are doing things that would please God, but they are doing them for all the wrong reasons. They would appear to be motivated by the love of God and love for others, but they are not. We need to remember that motivation is crucial throughout the Christian life.

Now, why fast? What in the world does that do? There are several good reasons to fast: when you fast, your attention is not being diverted by the preparation, eating and cleaning up after a meal. I fasted once, for 5 ½ days, and I found that, without meals to structure my day, I was lost. I didn't know what to do with all that extra time.

Of course, I should have been praying. That's another reason to fast, to give us more time to pray. We deny ourselves our baser desires in order to carve out more time to devote to God. And, if we can deny ourselves something we really need, we can deny ourselves more frivolous things, which takes us into the next section.

Matthew 6: 19-21

Where are our treasures? What are our treasures? Are they tied to the stock market? Are they stored in a vault? Are they safe at home? If your house burned down, and everyone got out safely, would you have your treasures, or would they burn with the house?

The decision as to whether our treasures are on earth or in heaven is a lifelong orientation of setting our priorities, either on material wealth or our spiritual health (which is our whole being). What do we think is more important? If you aren't sure, look at where you spend your time, your energy and your money. Whatever gets the most of those is your treasure.

Matthew 6:22-23

Then we have a paragraph about the eye. In those days, they thought the eye was like a lamp, shining light out into the world so if the eye is not working properly, the result is confusion and darkness outside and inside. In this context, if the eye is not clear regarding money/property, one's whole life is perverted, blind to God's light. This inner darkness keeps us from being salt or light for the world.

Matthew 6:24

Even in Jesus' day, this had been an old, old problem. Every person has to decide whether to serve God or an idol, in this case, money.

Every day, we have to choose whom we serve. As Bob Dylan said in his brief Christian period: You're going to have to serve somebody. Who is that going to be?

John Wesley, who had a much longer Christian period than Dylan, wrote several sermons concerned with the Christian and money. One was very directly entitled The Use of Money. In this sermon, he says that wealth is a hindrance to holiness because

1. It discourages love of God by encouraging love of possessions.
2. It promotes idolatry (worship of idols) by replacing God with wealth.
3. It discourages the love of neighbor, tempting us to exploit our neighbors or to see them as a threat to our financial stability or growth.

So, the love of money and the desire to accumulate more and more money threatens the unconditional love Christ tells us to have towards God and neighbor.

This verse is the hinge of this whole section. It reinforces the request we learned in the Lord's Prayer for God to give us our "daily bread." Jesus did not teach us to ask God for more than we need so we can be secure, and maybe sell some.

I want to restate a very important rule to remember as we read the Sermon on the Mount: it's about YOU. Take it seriously. Take it to heart. Jesus is

talking to YOU.

Matthew 6:23-33

Finally, we get to the comforting section. Don't worry. You're more important than a sparrow. Worry won't change a thing. Trust in God to provide what you need.

Although the tone is very different, this is directly connected to the warnings about treasures on earth vs. treasures in heaven, and about serving one Master.

Serving the Master Money leads one to worry all the time. It's impossible not to worry if we always think we need more than we have, when we hear the siren call of our bank account or our stock portfolio. They want us to feed them, and they are never satisfied, so we are never satisfied. That leads to worry about making sure we have the best food, the best beverage, the best clothes, the best house, second home, boat, car. When our god is money, at some level, we realize that it is not sufficient to save us, and that drives us to keep accumulating until we feel safe. But, we never do. The idol Money cannot support the weight of our existence. It collapses when we demand that it save us. And we are left with rubble and debris where our idol, where we put our faith, had stood.

We are not ignoring the concerns of this life when we decide to listen to Jesus and stop worrying. But, the concerns of this life look a whole lot different if they are not wrapped around what we hold to be most important. Jesus doesn't call us to be lazy or unreliable or habitually idle. Jesus' concern is that we not suffer "worry of the heart," being fearful, burdened with unsettled cares that torment our spirit, expecting bad things to happen ("That figures."), which poisons the blessings of today, making them almost invisible as we focus on our sad state.

Jesus offers an alternative to such a miserable life, and that is a life lived with God, a life with treasures mounting up in heaven, a life in which we feel ourselves being enveloped by the love of God, the same love that created the entire Universe. And, this is how we live that life...

Matthew 6:33 (again)

Strive First. It sounds like the hungering and thirsting for righteousness we heard about in the Beatitudes. It is that and more. It is the fruit of God's

kingdom in our hearts: love being the main one, then the other fruits of the spirit – compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience (Colossians 3:12), along with joy, peace, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22)

Worry is also a sign of the loss of control. We all know people who worry when there's no reason to worry. They are afraid they're missing something they should be worrying about. If they miss something, they might have to settle for less than what they want. They refuse to let God be God in their lives, and they let go of heaven to accumulate things on earth.

Do these poor worry-worts get what they want? Really? Do they find love and happiness? Hardly. Consider all the blights of today's society: the epidemic abuse of drugs and alcohol, promiscuous sex, greed, inordinate ambition. All of these come from the pursuit of happiness and love in the world, rather than with God. These people do not seek the kingdom of God first. They have chosen to worship at the idol of wealth, maybe keeping the altar to God somewhere out of sight, just in case of emergency.

It is a sad thing. God wants to give us so much, and we run after very inferior treasures, that really aren't treasures at all. But we can't see that, we can't be sure of that, so we do our best to pile stuff up, in the hope of it making us happy and fulfilled. Let's turn that around before it's too late.