

Jesus' Thoughts on Wealth

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Introduction.

According to the economic reports that came out at the end of last quarter, the recession is officially over. Thanks largely to a massive increase in government spending, our economy expanded for the first time in a year and a half. Of course, this particular economic factoid isn't much comfort to the millions of Americans who are still out of work and still face a bleak financial future. In fact, many analysts are predicting a "jobless recovery", in which the economic growth doesn't trickle down to workers for several years. If we're struggling right now, it's easy to hear such pessimistic forecasts and feel resentful about it. After all, here we were, working as hard as we could, doing the best job we could, when wham! along comes some impersonal economic force that knocks us flat.

Sadly, there's nothing new about any of this. In fact, 2000 years ago, in the days of the Bible, things were considerably worse than they are now. Back then, there was no government safety net for the poor or the unemployed. Most people were farmers, and they were totally dependent on the fickle forces of the weather for their livelihood. If there was just the right amount of rain, they prospered. If they had a flood or drought, they suffered. Worse still, in the bad years, the tax man didn't let up. He would come and take whatever he had to to satisfy his quota from the Roman government, and if that meant you and your family losing everything you had and starving on the streets, too bad.

In such a brutal first-century setting, the logical, obvious thing to do was to work as hard as you possibly could to the exclusion of everything else. That's what human wisdom says, but it's not what Jesus said. Look with me at Matthew 6:19-24. He urged his audience to focus their attention not on money and its uncertain protection, but on God and His certain promise. In days like these, we have much to learn from His words. Let's look, then, at Jesus' thoughts on wealth.

Treasure in Heaven.

Jesus' opening words on the subject appear in Matthew 6:19-21. As Jesus so often does, He's using an elliptical statement to make His point. Jesus isn't telling us that we are to make no provision for the future whatsoever by laying up treasure on earth. That would be foolish, and it would contradict a number of other Bible passages. Instead, He's telling us that we should put our focus on laying up treasure in heaven, rather than laying up treasure on earth.

It's not terribly hard to figure out what laying up treasure on earth means. We don't bury money in the backyard like people thousands of years ago did, but there are still all kinds of amazing things we can buy, and all kinds of different financial vehicles we can use to save money. Laying up treasure in heaven, though, is a more nebulous concept. Scripturally speaking, this can be very literal. Look first at Jesus' words in Luke 12:33-34. When we give to the poor, that stores up treasure in heaven for us. Likewise, when we contribute to the Lord's work, that also is credited to our account in heaven. However, laying up treasure in heaven can be more indirect than that. Any time we invest our time and effort in serving God or in doing things that are righteous, that too is something that God is going to know and remember.

Jesus identifies two main advantages that come with laying up treasure in heaven. First, the treasure that we put in the hands of God is secure. Not so with the treasure we lay up on earth. We may not have the same problems with moth and rust today, but earthly riches are just as uncertain as they were in the time of Christ. How many millions of Americans spent years diligently saving for retirement, only to get their savings trashed in last year's stock market collapse? How many people in the first part of this decade bought their dream home, only to find out now that they owe more money on it than the house is worth? Those things didn't prove to be wise investments, did they?

Now, on the other hand, how many Christians who gave their money to the Lord lost a dime on that investment? How many of our sacrifices and acts of service in the past 10 years have been forgotten by God? In our lives, we may well lose every material possession we have. At death, we are certain to lose it all. However, if we remain faithful to the Lord, there is no force in heaven or on earth that can deprive us of the reward for our service to Him.

Second, Jesus also tells us that where our treasure is, there our heart will be also. I have to tell you, friends, there are a lot of reasons why I'm a disciple of Jesus, but one of the big ones is that He was just so perceptive and so wise. There are times in my study when I find myself awed by the clarity of His understanding, and this is one of those times.

The problem with laying up treasure on earth isn't just that earthly wealth is fleeting. The real problem is that as we dedicate ourselves to storing up that wealth, it changes who we are. The more we give our time, our attention, and our focus to material riches, the more those things become the center of our existence. We think about them instead of God, we serve them instead of God, and ultimately, we come to look for our reward now on earth, not later in heaven. Ultimately, it is the things we care about that define us, and if we care about the things of earth, we lose everything else.

On the other hand, though, if we put the things of heaven first, that too changes who we are. When Lauren and I put money in our checking account, it's because we expect to spend it soon. When we put money in our retirement fund,

that's because we hope to spend it a little later in life. When we give to the work of the church, though, we know that we aren't going to see that money back this side of heaven. As a result, the only way that we can see a return on THAT investment is if we remain faithful to the Lord and lay hold of the crown of life. It's the spiritual equivalent of a sunk cost. The only way we get our money back, or our time back, or our effort back, is if we succeed in gaining eternal life, and we aren't willing to let what we've already given go for nothing, so we persevere in doing good. The treasure that we've already invested in heaven transforms us into people who desire nothing more than to go to heaven.

The Eye.

Once He finishes that thought, Jesus progresses to a discussion of the eye in Matthew 6:22-23. I'll admit, brethren, that this is a passage that has always confused me. For years, I was never quite sure what Jesus was talking about when He was talking about the eye, or what this particular idea was doing in this context. In truth, though, it's the context of this comment that gives us our best clue about its meaning. In the preceding verses, Jesus is talking about wealth and materialism. In the verses that follow it, He continues to talk about wealth and materialism. That makes it extremely unlikely, then, that Jesus is talking about anything other than wealth and materialism in this section too.

When we consider this and other contextual clues, the idea that the eye is the lamp of the body becomes much clearer. In this two-verse chunk, as in the rest of the tail end of Matthew 6, Jesus is talking about what we value, what we want. It is our eyes that consider the world around us, that pick out the things that attract us, and, by extension, that determine our goals and dreams. Jesus' point, then, is that just as our treasure shapes who we are, so too the things that we want shape who we are. Our eyes, that is to say, our desires, illuminate our bodies, that is to say, our lives.

As Christians, the most important thing about us is our desires. God doesn't count me as His faithful child because He looks at the things I've done and says, "Wow, what a righteous person you are." Instead, He accepts me because He looks past all the sins and failures in my life, sees that I truly want to serve Him and go to heaven, and on the basis of that desire, sanctifies me as His child. That's the point of Hebrews 11:6. Furthermore, because of my hatred for sin and desire to be righteous, bit by bit, I do become more righteous. Because of my eye, my body is full of light.

On the other hand, though, let's say I fall prey to materialism. I devote my life to the mirage that if I get enough stuff, I'll be happy and content. Is that the kind of goal that is going to ennoble me and exalt me? Is that the desire that is going to make me precious in God's eyes? Absolutely not! God can still look at my life, see all kinds of failures and sins, but if my goals are not good, there is nothing in me that makes me redeemable. The only part of me that could be good—my spirit—has now become just as corrupt as my corrupt flesh. In every part of my being, I reject God, and that rejection only makes my actions worse than they were already. Because my eye is bad, my body is full of darkness.

That's where we end up when we serve the god of our fleshly appetites, whether for wealth or for anything else, instead of serving the Father of spirits. Our will to serve God and become more righteous, the part of us that can lead us to Him, instead is leading us away. That's why Jesus says that when the light is dark, the darkness is great indeed.

Two Masters.

The final passage that we're going to look at tonight is Matthew 6:24. This is a very stark statement, and it's not a popular one. We see the reaction Jesus got by repeating this to the Pharisees in Luke 16:13-14. They mocked Him for saying something that to them was plainly ridiculous. They thought they were still serving God when in reality, it was money that ruled their hearts. There are plenty of "religious" people in the same boat today. Maybe it's that religion is just a hobby in their lives when their real interest is making money. Maybe they've fallen prey to the gospel of health and wealth, so that they view service to God as a way to bribe Him to bless them financially. There are all kinds of folks who send money to TV preachers only because of the promise that they'll get three times as much back.

Brethren, we need to ask ourselves what the primary motivating force in our lives is. Is it greed, or is it God? What does money mean to us? Obviously, money is important even to Christians. We need it to provide for ourselves and our families. We need it so that we can help others in need. We need it so that we can support the work of our church. It's even OK for us to satisfy our wants. Consider the words of Solomon in Ecclesiastes 8:15. There is nothing better for a man in this life than to enjoy the fruit of his labors while recognizing that it is God who has blessed him.

It's important, though, that we never allow money to assume more importance in our lives than that. Money is not God. It is not going to protect us from the ravages of life. It is not going to fill our lives with people who love us. It is not going to bring us happiness and contentment. It is not going to lead to a better tomorrow. However, there are millions of people in America today who believe in the power of money to do exactly those things, and they are the true worshipers of Mammon. Instead of placing their faith in the power of God, they have chosen to believe instead in the power of the almighty dollar. If we do that, if we place our faith in money, it is a sign that we no longer place our faith in God. As we have seen already in the stock market crash and the housing bubble collapse, and as we will all see at the end of our lives, money will disappoint. Only those who set their hope on God will not be disappointed.