

Scripture Reading

Matthew 6:19-24

¹⁹*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

²²*The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. ²³But 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!*

²⁴*No one can serve two masters. 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 both God and Money.*

Message

“The Good and Beautiful Life: Life through Generosity

The term is **AVARICE**; **the excessive desire for money**. While most people would equate this term with greed, Avarice is specific to money. A greedy person desires more of something than is needed. It could be money, but also things like attention, food, pleasure. Avarice desires money. It may be evident in a person's no-holds-barred approach to obtaining money, or in a person's thriftiness in hanging on to money they already have. AVARICE is the excessive desire for money.

And this is a problem.

Donald Trump may not say so....

Wall Street investment houses many not say so..

The “big banks” many not say so... they may even tell you that Avarice is an important motivator in retaining their top employees,

but, **avarice is a problem because our Lord Jesus says it is a problem**, because it keeps us from loving God and our neighbors; and it keeps us from fully discovering the “good and beautiful life” God wants us to experience.

1. Two Treasures

While this morning’s text is familiar to those who grew up in the church, my guess is that the imagery of two treasures; earthly and heavenly treasures, are not totally foreign to those who are new to Christianity.

²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

This is wisdom for life, even a life lived apart from Jesus. One does not need to call Jesus their Lord, and live in obedience to Him, in order to appreciate the truth that our passions, emotions, time, energy and our love; in short, our hearts indeed reveal which we treasure the most; the treasures of earth or the treasures of heaven. Are we busy building our own earthly kingdoms, or are we doing what it takes to build God’s Kingdom on earth? **Where is your heart these days?**

Your heart is with what you treasure the most; that which you make time for, that which you focus upon.. that which you consider most important..

This is truth... shocking or disturbing as it may be.

But Jesus is asking about more than what we treasure, He is warning us specifically about the sin of avarice; an excessive desire for money.

2. Two Eyes

For in addition to talking about two treasures, Jesus also talks about this excessive desire for money when He contrasts two eyes, the “good/healthy eye” and the “bad/unhealthy eye”.

These verse will confuse us unless we recognize that Jesus is using cultural idioms (a then-common turn of a phrase) that makes little sense to us today. For you see, in Jesus' day a person with a good or healthy eye was a generous person, and a person with a bad or "unhealthy eye" referred to a stingy, envious, jealous person.

James Bryan Smith suggests a different metaphor Jesus might have used if He were speaking in our culture. Perhaps Jesus would say:

If you're tight-fisted, your soul begins to shrivel.

If you have an open hand, your soul will be vibrant. –Smith, *Good and Beautiful Life*, p. 160

So perhaps we need to think about two hands, rather than two eyes.

- A tight-fisted hand, grabbing and holding on to money, and
- An open hand, able to receive from God and generously give to others.

It reminds me of that old analogy of a lake graciously fed by a mountain stream. If the lake is dammed up soon the water become stagnant and the lake dies, but if the water flows out, it not only promotes life outside the lake, but the lake itself stays healthy; teaming with life.

What is the condition of your eye; or what is the shape of your hand. Is it clinched, hanging on to worldly treasures, or is it open, allowing the unending flow of God's blessing to pass to you and through you, so that others might have real life?

When we live outside the Kingdom of God, money has power over us. But when we chose to live in the Kingdom of God... recognizing that all that we have is blessing from a God whose desire is to keep that blessing going, then money loses its power; the sin of avarice is nailed to the cross of Christ. And if that happens, you have already made your choice between

3. Two Masters

²⁴*"No one can serve two masters. 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 both God and Money.

Now His teaching becomes clearer. Jesus' is talking about an excessive love for money, so excessive that it competes with God.

- It wants to be our heart's treasure.
- It wants to define us as stingy as Ebenezer Scrooge, and
- it wants complete control over us.

Jesus knew that a person with an excessive love for money cannot also embrace God as their Master.

This is the truth behind Jesus' encounter with the Rich Young Man (Luke 18:18-23) who asked Jesus "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life".

After pointing to the law; listing the Commandments of God and finding that this young man has kept God's law since he was a boy, Jesus asks him to do what he has been asking all of us to do through His Sermon on the Mount teachings; Jesus asked this Rich Young Man to recognize LIFE beyond the law.

²².... "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

As in all people, Jesus could see the specific sin that kept this man from coming to God and experiencing all the blessings and receiving all the promises God has in store for those who seek Him with all their heart. And **the sin that kept this law abiding young man from God was the sin of avarice.** The gospel writer Luke records the end of this encounter with these heartbreaking words:

²³When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth.

It was not because this man had great wealth that he was sad. He was sad because of his excessive love for money.. his sin, which separated him from God was avarice. For while he loved God enough to keep his commandments, he still loved money more;

- he could not unclench his fist.
- he could not serve two masters.

As Paul wrote to Timothy:

1 Timothy 6:10

... 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.

Can you imagine what this rich young man could have accomplished with his riches if he had chosen to open his hand in generosity rather than to make his fist even tighter? He had no clue of the blessings he would experience, indeed the whole new life He would have if he had chosen to yield himself to Jesus' teachings that day; a life showered with God's blessing when he allows God's Spirit to develop within him a generous heart. For you see:

Generosity is the antidote for avarice; it is the remedy for the "love of money"

When people have been blessed by God with riches, as Paul continues to instruct Timothy:

1 Timothy 6:18-19

¹⁸Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. ¹⁹In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

I hope we can all agree that there is a life greater than a life defined by the money and treasures of this world inevitably lost to moths and rust. We see this in the reality that money never fulfills our deepest desires. Money lovers pursue ever more riches, but are never be satisfied... never find contentment.

As we read in:

Ecclesiastes 5:10-14

¹⁰ Whoever loves money never has money enough;
whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income.

This too is meaningless.

¹¹ As goods increase,
so do those who consume them.
And what benefit are they to the owner
except to feast his eyes on them?

¹² The sleep of a laborer is sweet,
whether he eats little or much,
but the abundance of a rich man
permits him no sleep.

¹³ I have seen a grievous evil under the sun:
wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner,

¹⁴ or wealth lost through some misfortune,
so that when he has a son
there is nothing left for him.

The good news is that we don't have to be Warren Buffet or Bill Gates to experience a life defined by generosity, for this new life is not measured by decimal points, but by a practical realization that we are but stewards of all God has given us; great or small, all we have is from God, and **fullness of life and salvation come to us as we gratefully receive and generously share God's blessings.**

Remember the OT story of the Widow of Zarephath and the Prophet Elijah. Recall that after God brought a drought on the land because of King Ahab & Jezebel's sins, Elijah, along with many others, was starving.

1 Kings 17:8-16

⁸ Then the word of the LORD came to him: ⁹ "Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food." ¹⁰ So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?" ¹¹ As she was going to get it, he called, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread."

¹² "As surely as the LORD your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die."

¹³ Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. ¹⁴ For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land.' "

¹⁵ She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. ¹⁶ For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah.

At first blush one might assume that such extreme poverty would inhibit acts of generosity; just as one might assume that extreme wealth would make generosity much easier. But in fact, it is just the opposite; it is counterintuitive.

- Studies on charitable giving reveal that middle-income to lower-income families give more than those who have higher-income levels.

- Studies show that those who live with “less” have a greater empathy for people who are in need than those who have “more”,
- And as we just read in Ecc. 5, God’s Word confirms this “counterintuitive” dynamic in numerous places when speaking of the tug of money toward more money, and not toward more generous giving.

This past week I was tremendously blessed by God to attend an International Conference on Leadership, put on by Willow Creek Ministries and fed through satellite to hundreds of sites around the world. One of the speakers was Daniel Pink, a highly respected author to the business community. His latest book, based on 50 years of social research, a book entitled “Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us” is overturning assumptions our consumer-driven society has long believed.

For **while traditional financial rewards or the avoidance of financial loss have been seen as the prime motivating forces in our culture**, Pink describes **an even more powerful motivating force shaping our future**; and that force is **an opportunity to make a difference**. In other words, there is something greater than money which motivates and stimulates the best from people.

In truth, the opportunity to make a difference has always been the primary motivating force in the Church from day one; although some people still primarily seek the “carrot of praise” or the “avoidance of Hell” to keep them active in the Church.

But when we truly own the reality that the Church’s work is God’s work; that together with God we’re participating in the cosmic work of redemption and salvation, we will never lack motivation to participate: to grow closer to Christ’s image, to offer ourselves more fully in praise, to love God with every ounce of our obedience; including His call to be a generous people, freed from the love of money that limits the experience of life for so many people.

Another person we heard from this week at the Leadership Summit was Blake Mycoskie, the founder of Tom's Shoes. Have you heard of him? If not, you soon will. A young entrepreneur, who had started 5 companies by the time he was 30. Four years ago Blake found himself in South America, helping a friend distribute slight used donated shoes to the poor. He began to think of ways he could help His friend get more shoes to needy people, when the idea of creating a for-profit shoe company came to mind, a shoe company which would give away a pair of shoes to the poor people of the world for every pair of shoes sold. "One-for-One"

So far Tom's Shoes has given away over 600,000 pair of shoes, which not only saves the poor from foot diseases and preventable infection, but allows multitudes of children to attend school; area schools which require shoes on their student's feet.

What was interesting was that Blake's motivation to start Tom's Shoes was not monetary. His primary goal was to change the world for the better by giving away shoes. The only reason it was developed as a for-profit company was because this allows more shoes to become available to be give away.

Tom's Shoes has tapped into that stronger motivational level; stronger than simply selling the consumer a good shoe at a good price. People know that they are making a difference in the world if they buy a pair of Tom's Shoes. And that feels great... And that feeling is but an inkling of the blessing God wants us to feel... to experience, when we stop grasping at money, and open our hands to pass on God's blessings and to make a difference in the world.

This morning, in this teaching, Jesus is crying out:
DON'T BUY INTO THE LIE! Don't let monetary motivations limit your experience of "life".

and

DON'T BUY INTO THE LIE: that when you're financially better off, you will heed Jesus' call for generosity. Because you won't!

NOW IS THE TIME TO EXERCISE OBEDIENCE to Jesus' teaching;

- during the recession;
- while you are underemployed or unemployed. NOW is the time to let His Spirit develop a generous heart in you.

Perhaps your generosity will initially look like **two** very small copper **coins**, worth only a fraction of a penny. But Jesus will notice and will praise your generosity.

Perhaps your generosity will be seen in a handful of flour and oil, but through that gift you will discover the power of God's salvation working through you, as bread feeds those who are starving.

NOW IS THE TIME to hear anew this familiar teaching of our Lord, and to obey. God wants you to experience all His blessings. God wants you to discover fullness of life. Our Lord Jesus wants you to discover exactly what He proclaims, that:

Acts 20:35c

'It is **more** blessed to give than to receive.'

Are you looking for a "good and beautiful life"? Then let Jesus free you from avarice; from the love of money, by asking God's Spirit to help you to live a generous life.

AMEN

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