

Matthew 6:19-34: Wealth

Prayer:

Placing Ourselves:

Today's passage makes no sense if we ignore what Jesus told us last week, which is that his followers will be rewarded for their acts of piety, their "acts of righteousness:" The giving, praying, and fasting that we do both as a response to God's love for us, and a desire to experience more of God's love.

We talked about these acts of piety, and the way they create space for God in our lives, draw us into deeper relationship with God, and remind us of God's loving providence for us.

But Jesus makes it very, very clear in the first part of Matthew 6 and elsewhere that those who do things for God will be rewarded--if, of course, they're doing them for God and not for themselves, to be celebrated or gain influence or work out their own insecurity.

God, the good parent, rewards us for our integrity the same way we reward our children when they show integrity, character, and virtue.

And a major metaphor for these rewards, one that Jesus uses in the passage that was read to us today, is to think of these rewards as "treasures in heaven." He

says this:

A First Warning:

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

Jesus isn't saying here that, when he returns, and heaven--that unseen Spiritual realm where all God's power, will, and character are at play--comes on earth, and the dead are raised back to life, and the world resurrected, he's not saying when God's Kingdom comes on earth as it is in Heaven that we'll all be loaded, just have all the cash we want and can shop all day. I'll finally be able to buy that one thing that I've been wanting to buy. Two of them, just in case, you know?

First Warning: Redirection, Re-prioritization:

What Jesus is doing here is inviting us--demanding us, if we believe that he's telling us the truth--to examine and adjust what we're prioritizing in our life. Are we prioritizing the rewards that God has promised us, whatever shape those might take, or are we prioritizing the stuff of life, now? It's hard to pray, "Give us today our daily bread," "Give me what I need

for living today,” when what we really want is, well: whatever we want. You know.

This is the first thing we’re challenged by in today’s passage: Our priorities. We’re invited to ask what it is we’re treasuring.

First Warning: Treasures On Earth:

Luke, when he takes this principle, combines it with a parable Matthew doesn’t give here, and a scene in which Jesus says, “Life does not consist of an abundance of possessions.”

And I think that’s helpful not as a way to ignore what Matthew says here, but as a reminder that “treasures on earth” can take all forms, and we can lose them all at any moment, whether they are destroyed, stolen, or simply lost.

And we should wonder, for a second, what can be a possession. It’s that stuff we can touch and feel and lock away--“treasure”--of course, but there are other kinds of things we get greedy for, wish we could store up, that are less, oh, tangible.

We’re greedy for followers, maybe, on our twitter feeds and our blogs, or hungry for Facebook friends or being in the loop on this or that thing. This is a greediness for influence, for attention, for being included. Maybe we don’t care about the influence, as

long as we have the information, which we're lusty for: to be someone in the know, someone who "already heard that" when another person confides in us. Maybe all we want is a little more pleasure, or a little longer high.

And it's easy to talk about these, because it's very few of us who are going to stop feeding the never-ending hunger for intangibles, because it's hard to outgrow intangibles, right? A little more influence, a little more praise, a little more information--there's always room for more in that bottomless hole of a heart we've got. In fact, it's hard to leave behind storing up treasures on earth, possessions in abundance, whatever it is we "treasure" at the moment. Greed itself can easily become, in the sneakiest way, the fundamental way we interact with the world.

What I mean, of course, is that we are a nation of wanters--newer or older, more or fewer, holier or better; we want. And for most of us in this room, what we want we can get, if we put enough effort into the getting. We're good at getting, and we're pretty good at finding reasons for the wants and reasons for the acquisition. Beyond this, we're used to wanting and we're used to getting. We're marketed to constantly, as much inside the church as outside. We're taught, from a very young age, to seek an upgrade, and it is our patriotic duty to consume, and ensure that in consuming, our capitalism--which demands ever more

production and purchase, and comes with it's own often-idolatrous demands on our lives--won't slip, falter, be somehow proven wrong. Our context is to consume and praise consumption, and there is no one, no not one of us, who is really free from the cycle of it.

And if a person is taught from cradle to grave to want other than what they have, to treasure whatever it is they see on tv or learn about out in the world, greed becomes second nature, and can even gets called a virtue now and then. And greed leads to hoarding--not reality TV hoarding, not piles of stuff that we don't need, but just one or two extra, just a little more, just storing some stuff up. And our hearts are stuck here, in earthly, worldly things, with what we've treasured.

This is where we often are. Of course, we all might be outliers. But many of us feel a little guilty when Jesus says what he says today. We're reminded of how much our heart is in our stuff after all. But we can also feel more or less impotent to do anything about it.

Treasures On Earth: Solution?

So if this is a problem we have, what's the solution? Is there one? I mean, I've painted a pretty sad--maybe we think a little extreme--picture of things, right? Cradle to grave, all we do is want, want, want, and upgrade and buy and eat more until we die. Life as a greedy pursuit of whatever we don't have, and if we do take pleasure in what we have, we take way, way

too much pleasure, give it too much attention, treasure it in a way that's entangled with our hearts, our thoughts, the strength we use to protect and get more of it.

I think there is a solution, of course. I actually think it's embedded here, a lock with a key still in it, but I want to talk about what else we see today before we come back and unlock this. I think it might be good for some of us--at least, say, me--to own how broken my priorities often are.

Jesus goes on to talk about eyes and lamps and things, he says this:

Second Warning:

22 "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. 23 But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!"

Some of our newer translations will point out that "healthy" and "unhealthy" here aren't, in greek, words about illness and physical health, but words that relate to questions of generosity and stinginess.

How we see the world around us reveals the state of

our hearts. He's inviting us to see that it's not just our habits of getting, storing up stuff, acquiring things that reveal our hearts; we have to also care about the posture we take with the world around us. What do we see when we look around? Do we go around wanting, appraising, desiring for ourselves, or do we go around, oh, doing whatever the opposite is: Seeing opportunities to be generous, considering that the world around us the Lord's, not ours, and what we're called to do is "seek first his Kingdom," not ways to increase our material gain.

Jesus suggests that if our eyes are always wanting, always looking around and seeing what we can get for ourselves from the material world around us, then the light they are giving us is in fact darkness. We're self-deceiving ourselves about the true nature of things. And that self-deception reveals in us a darkness that is so, so great. A darkness in which the light of God doesn't shine.

This is Jesus' second warning against a way of living that is full of self-protective appraisal and desire for material things, a way of life that can't pray "give me the stuff I need for living today," because, of course, today is all we've got. He gives us a third warning for good measure:

A Third Warning:

24 "No one can serve two masters. Either you

will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

Jesus just tosses out another truth here; he's lining them up, you know? "A person can't serve two masters."

But as Bob Dylan put it, you "gotta serve somebody." One of our most pervasive, tightly held myths in America is the myth of an utterly free person who no one is in charge of. Someone who no one can tell what to do. There are no strings on them, no one's the boss of them. They can do as they please. We love this character, and hate anything that gets in the way of him or her.

But a fully free person is a lie. It's always been a lie. We gotta serve somebody. Intrinsicly--something that's essential to being human--is that we enslave ourselves. We were made for service, to be under authority. And we bind ourselves to others, to ideas, to causes. It's just what we do.

This gets twisted, and evil people can use this to justify their destruction of others: whether that's outright slavery and human trafficking, or abusive patriarchy, misogyny, or parenting. In a world broken like ours, using people is too easy.

But serving a master is part of what it means to be human. We were meant, of course, to serve God. Made to be stewards over all creation, nurturing and blessing it. The devil and sin broke that; but Jesus reinstated it for us who trust him. And when we're serving God, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we're as free as people can be. There are limits to human freedom; if they weren't we wouldn't be human. But when we're serving God, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we're as free as people can be.

And Jesus implies here that one of the biggest threats facing us is that we might make money our master. Trade our slavery to God for slavery to money. We see it in the other things he's already mentioned: our hearts become turned from God's Kingdom and its priorities to the world around us, the appraising way we look at the world begins to cloud our judgment so that we're blind to God's priorities for us.

Third Warning: Diffusing Money's Power

The very fact that we won't do anything to get a big old pile of cash...but we'd do an awful lot, maybe more than we think, points out just how much a knife-edge we're balancing on.

Money doesn't have power; money is a power, it has weight and influence in the world, and controls it, and we have to play carefully around it. The easiest way to diffuse its power is to use it to provide for the needs of

others, to make friends—give of our resources freely, without expecting return, and yet at the same time knowing we'll be given to if we need it. Letting, as Paul says, "no debt remain outstanding except the constant debt to love each other."

And of course, it's protecting ourselves from worry that is one of the greatest places that our money goes. I mean, we can pray as Jesus taught us earlier in chapter six, "Give us today our daily bread," or, "Give us what we need to make it through today." We can pray this, but we'd rather pray, "Thank you that I have nothing to worry about today when it comes to the stuff I need."

God's Provision:

Jesus goes on, of course, to talk about worry and providence, which is handy.

And the worry he's talking about is the most reasonable thing: If we aren't going to store up for ourselves what we think we need, if we're not going to walk around looking out for our material good, and if we're going to reject serving money, and really try to serve God, the creator of everything and our own loving Father to boot, then, you know, what's that mean for how we take care of ourselves? Especially when all the world is scrambling around for as big a pile of stuff as they can get?

This is what Jesus says to that:

25 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? 27 Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

28 “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. 29 Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. 30 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31 So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32 For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. 33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Our Worry:

Out of all the things we could say about this passage, let's begin here:

We live lives of providence. There is no self-made Christian. There is no one who will triumph by looking out for number one. Death comes to everyone, and we'll all give an account to God.

I think it's awesome that Jesus says "You can't even do a tiny thing like add an hour to your life by worrying about it." Because extending my life span doesn't seem like a tiny little thing to me, but it is to God. It's not a big deal.

But worrying about it--that is, obsessing about it, having our thoughts captivated by it--worrying doesn't accomplish anything in this life. Anything. In fact, and we all know this, worrying does less than something, it takes away from anything we could positively do when it comes to getting ourselves fed, clothed, sheltered. Worrying disables our ability to achieve.

Our dogs worry their bones. You're familiar with the phrase? They gnaw them, gnaw them, gnaw them, and eventually, the bones just disappear, you know? They're gone, worried into nothing. This is exactly what worry does to us; whittle us away, until we're nothing. And we know that most of our worries, maybe all of our worries, come back to basic question of if

we'll be well, if those we love will be okay, if we'll have enough, just enough.

Everyone of us has worried about something, and we all have experienced what it means to end up disabled by worry--unable to use our resource, our treasure, time, talents, excellently, for our good and the good of those around us. We're just too worn out, too unfocused, too distracted.

Little Faith, Revealed in Actions:

And in today's passage Jesus reminds those around him, and us, that our faith is too small.

Big faith takes into account that this life is passing away, that death is coming, that God will see us through right now, today, and the needs we have in it, and will see us through death and resurrection. Big faith prays for God's providence. It cares about where our hearts are, cares about how we consider what our eyes see, cares about living our lives for God, and resting in his power for us instead of the never-death-defying power of cash. Our hearts need to be directed toward God's provision for us, because unlike everything else we experience in life, it's lasting, it's relevant for right now and relevant when we die. Does that make sense? God's provision for us lasts past death; but everything else we store down here does not. God provides for us now, and rewards us for our faithfulness on the other side of Christ's return.

Actions do speak louder than words, or at least reveal what people really believe, and if in our actions we reveal to God that we're just going to take care of ourselves--you know, free up God to provide for others--then we may very very well get that.

We may get what our actions reveal we really want, and our worry--our distraction about how to provide for ourselves, how to preserve our wealth and ensure our comfort--it'll end up being what defines us. Our life will consist of a long string of self-interested efforts, and from a distance, will look like just one long run after some temporary, unsatisfying, "better." A life worth overlooking, or lumping into the group that missed "it," what it meant to live well for the God who made us and carries us. We'll live little faith lives, and with little faith impact and little faith meaning.

But nothing that we can provide for ourselves will ever be as good for us and those around us as what God provides for us. We muster up weak fill-ins for the blessings and gifts God wants to give to us when we decide that we'd rather have what we can provide than what God can provide.

Reassurance:

And Jesus here isn't saying "Don't worry" as a command. He's not saying it ready to punish us if we do, withhold compassion from us if we can't sleep. He doesn't want us to muscle down our emotional lives

with all our strength. Just the opposite.

Jesus is saying “Don’t worry” in reassurance. He’s challenged us to deal with our priorities, but in turning from ourself to God, giving up our constant pursuit of our own material comfort, our wants, we’re going to wonder, we always wonder, will I be okay? Will I be cared for? Is God trustworthy?

Jesus is telling us that if we listen to his three warnings, and shift our priorities to the Kingdom of Heaven, if we can just turn away from treasuring things that can be lost at any moment, and instead treasuring all of God’s concern, we’ll realize that we are treasured by God, and his heart lies with us.

It’s God’s active, engaged concern for us that has brought us this far in our lives, brought us to this morning, this moment, this pause right now...God is the one who makes good out of all things for our sake, who loves us with a love that we can’t be separated from. God is love, and for us not against us, “with us until the end of the age,” the Holy Spirit at home in us, in the middle of our joys and, our sorrows, persistently present in our heartbreaking indifference and faithfulness.

If it’s true that where your treasure is, there’s your heart, too, then we’re what God treasures.

Self-check:

Today's passage points out our basic problem, that we're insatiable in our wanting, in our desire to store up for ourselves a little more, all the time, of whatever it is we desire--cash or influence or security or comfort or certainty. Self-interested wanting becomes the fundamental way we interact with the world.

If this is our basic problem, as far as today's passage goes, the solution is straightforward, but not simple. We want simple solutions, right? I mean, that's how we package Jesus "Come to the Lord, and all will be well!" We want pills and shortcuts, and that's not immoral, it just is, and reasonable, given how hard the world can be. There's a reason that we people have always sought oblivion in some drug or another. Life is hard.

But the solution to this greedy way we interface with the world--wanting a little more for ourselves, a little more often, all the time, wanting a little more in the bank, a little more in the pantry, a little more influence, power, attention, whatever it is, and as we go, we become a little more enslaved to cash, calculating and self-interested appraisal becomes the darkness that fills us up, and our hearts plant their flags into the kingdoms of the world, instead of the kingdom of Heaven, I think the only way to change this begins with generosity, the littlest bit, and then more and more all the time.

Generosity

I think generosity starts the way out.

Seeking the Kingdom of Heaven first means first renouncing our citizenship in the Kingdom of Ourselves. It means learning to trust God more and more, and to give more and more control of our lives into God's hands. It means that we take up the rights and the responsibilities that come with the privilege we have as citizens in God's Kingdom, and we trust our Father in Heaven who loves us.

And giving things away--our time, our cash, our talent, our influence, power, certainty, whatever it is we're storing up--giving it away forces us to face what we really value.

Conclusion:

So. What do we do? What will we do?

I'd ask us to do this: consider what your life is consisting of lately. What is your life consisting of lately? Be honest with yourself.

Is it worry? Some sort of ongoing mental distraction over something--your stuff and how to preserve or maintain it? Your life and how to even keep it going?

Is it greed? Do you find yourself wanting all the time? Fundamentally discontent and unsatisfied with what

you have right now?

In what ways have we neglected Jesus' warnings, and instead, strolled right into a way of life that's poisonous to us, one that diminishes our capacity to do good in the world? Are we becoming a little more enslaved to the pursuit of cash than we ought to be? As we go around the world, are our eyes filled with appraising desire? Where is our heart and our attention and our concern these days? Are we looking for God's activity in the world and our lives, or are we looking elsewhere?

If any kind of greed or any distracting worry is what we discover when we consider our hearts, then we need to do something really basic, something that requires an enormous amount of effort.

We have to begin to shift our focus away from ourselves and toward God and his activity in the world. And the easiest way to do that is to practice generosity, give to the ones that Jesus always ended up caring for: the poor, the sick, the needy, the dying. Those who reveal to us the dead places inside our souls.

In quiet moments, I think we realize that to be a king or a queen of a place where life is basically worry or want is terrible. It's broken. God wants to make us people who depend on Him and are agents of his

providence to those in need. He wants us to seek first His Kingdom and the way of life that comes with it. We have to decide if we're willing to trust God with our needs, or if we'll just take care of things on our own.

The special grace is that if we choose to just take care of ourselves, when we fail, and find out that our time, our treasure, our talent wasn't enough, and all we've treasured and worried about fails us, God will direct someone who has chosen the more Christian path to help us. We can pray that when that time comes, we receive God's help as the gift it is and try again for faithfulness, rather than resent the help.