

“Treasures in Heaven” Matthew 6:19-24

Series: Counter-Culture Christianity (Sermon on the Mount, 9 of 14)

City Church–Eastside

November 15, 2009

The Sermon on the Mount is about God re-shaping us, we have been saying, and one of the primary ways Jesus seeks to re-shape humanity concerns money. Now, before we jump into what Jesus says, a couple caveats. First, I am treating this as part of a two part sermon on our relationship to money, because this is essentially what Jesus does, speaking about it from two slightly different vantage points in vv. 19-34. Second and most significantly, it is hard to talk about money. It is hard enough for individuals and families to talk about money, but people especially don't like it when pastors talk about it. Images of televangelists selling holy cloths or using emotional manipulation to squeeze money out of unsuspecting religious people dance in the head.

But we need to talk about money. More verses are dedicated to the subject of finances and resources than for any other subject matter in Scripture. And for good reason: more problems arise over this issue than any other. Let me be blunt: until you and I develop a relationship with money that is God honoring, our spiritual growth will be severely limited. Imagine you go to see a counselor and you say, “Counselor, I feel depressed and I don't know what to do. Can you help me?” The counselor, as part of their initial evaluation, will ask you about your personal (diet), social (relationships), economic (money), and spiritual life. But what if your response was, “No, counselor, we're not going there, I need help with depression”? The counselor would rightly

respond, “Well, then I can’t really help you because it is all connected.” If you want God in your life but you don’t want to talk about money, you are asking for the impossible.

This is a big deal because Christians are called to use their money to be radically generous. Some surveys suggest that 1/3 of all Americans claim a “born again” experience and therefore identify themselves as Christians and yet, by and large, our faith has not changed our culture, city culture or otherwise, which leads me to believe there is much for us to understand about money and how it affects our relationship with God, precisely Jesus’s point in the text. *So here’s what I want us to see: how money enslaves us, why it does so, and how we can be liberated from its power. Ready to jump in?*

First, how it controls us. We all know the power of money. “Money is what makes the world go around.” And, yet, while that power itself can be benign, it can also be enslaving. To get there, I am going to do something a little backwards and begin with the end of the text (v. 24) because it is the linchpin to what Jesus says here. In vv. 19-24, Jesus uses a series of three juxtapositions, between a godly, kingdom-centered view and an earthly kingdom view (“closed universe” view where there is only the material world). And in verse 24, Jesus says this, “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.”

I want you to see something: in a passage on “masters,” Jesus says money is a master. You know what Jesus does here? He says that money has essentially been deified—given a power and ability to control people. In the ancient world, a servant

working for a master was controlled. You were not a contract employee with certain rights like we enshrine today, you were in servitude, at the mercy of your employer. And you were a servant to but one master. The control was total.

Do you see what Jesus is saying? The question isn't, "will there be a lord in your life" but "who and what will they do to you?" Now, let's go back to the beginning and see how Jesus frames the money issue with this and notice two things. First, how an "earthly" view keeps us hungry. In v. 19, Jesus says there are two kinds of people: those who store up "treasures on earth" and those who store up "treasures in heaven." And in v. 20, Jesus warns that if your treasures are bound to the earth, they will perish. The Greek word for "rust" in v. 20, means more than the chemical process on metals, etc, but, "to perish." It meant anything that could be consumed and destroyed, whether through ingestion or thievery. We can probably pretty quickly make sense of this but just consider the victims of Bernie Madoff's fraudulent scheme that bilked hundreds and thousands out of their life savings and investments; virtually over night, everything that their lives had been built on was snatched through the actions of one crooked investor.

You see, here's what's true when you build your identity on stored up perishable items: Jesus says your heart (your soul) feels the need to keep consuming resources, storing them up, because they can be taken from you quickly. If you know anything about addiction, you know this about how an addiction operates. An addict lives in constant fear. There is a deep, unmet need that constantly has to be satisfied but can

never be satisfied and so addicts become constant consumers of people and things. They are incapable of other-centered love because they are always filling a self-centered void.

When a person is hungry and doesn't know where the next meal will come from, it leads to great fear. Do you see how enslaving this attitude of the heart can be? Do you see how living in hunger, constantly consuming empty calories (by comparison, earthly treasures, Jesus is saying, are worthless to the treasure heaven offers), is a thief to the soul? But Jesus is not done with the imagery because, second, in vv. 22-23, he compares slavery to money as blindness. In these verses, Jesus describes the eye, which is a synonym for the heart throughout Scripture, as a lamp onto the soul. When the lamp is working, it is good but when the eyes do not work, the lamp is turned off, leading to blindness. When I initially read this, I didn't understand just what exactly what Jesus was getting at but I think it now makes sense: He is talking about a blindness of the heart that keeps us from seeing our enslavement.

If you were to break into a home and steal something, you would know you were stealing but what about greed, would you know when you were greedy? I want to suggest to you that this is much more difficult. You see, we live in a very affluent culture predicated on material wealth. We have constant messages thrown our way that tell us we will be dissatisfied until we consume more and we can quickly get sucked in. Not only that, we tend to have a myopic understanding of affluence. We tend to compare ourselves to those in our socio-economic class, typically middle class, and look for ways to assure our hearts, "I don't have as much as so and so, I am living humbly" when, at the

same time, any visitor from the Third World would view most of us as extremely wealthy. Creature comforts we take for granted here are luxuries elsewhere.

None of those comforts are in and of themselves the issue. But I say this to say, we often don't really *see* about what we spend and how we spend it. The adage that our checkbooks say more about what we value more than what we say we believe makes us uncomfortable but probably rings true as we think about it. I have people come talk to me about myriad issues as a pastor but I don't think I've actually had anyone come to me and tell me they thought they were materially greedy, enslaved to money. And I think it is because when money is deified the way it operates is to keep us from seeing. And Jesus underscores that very thing in these verses.

But if we are controlled by money, always consuming, not seeing our enslavement to money, the real question becomes, why does money control us, my second point. In verse 21, Jesus says something remarkable. He says that "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." What does He mean by treasure? A treasure is something of great worth and value and the word itself best meant "ultimate value." If you and I were to put the majority of our investments in Apple stock, do you think you might put a lot of energy into following Apple's performance? Of course. And you probably spend your time bashing the name of Bill Gates! If most of your money was invested here, there is a great likelihood that it would dominate your attention. It has captured your heart. V. 21 and v. 24 tell us why money can become so enslaving: it is because we make it into an idol. Turning any created thing into an ultimate thing is what we call idolatry. Some

might say, “I thought idolatry was something an ancient, pagan culture did, bowing down to little statues.” But anything can become a god. It is whatever exists in your life that you draw ultimate worth and value from. “Scott, how do I know what I have idolized?” Ask yourself this, “What is it in my life that, if it was taken from me, would leave me feeling devastated?” You see, if success, reputation, beauty, sex—any created thing—is a good thing in your life but not an ultimate thing, when you lose it, it will make you sad but it won’t devastate you. But if it is an idol and you lose it, you feel absolutely crushed and you do everything in your power to get it back. In each case, the real idol is not the “surface” issue (money, beauty, success, etc.) but the root need: approval, power, comfort, trust. Money is simply the conduit for our search for these deeper needs that consume us but escape our control. We are like Smeagol from J.R.R. Tolkien’s masterpieces, *The Hobbit and Lord of the Rings* where, in both stories, we are told of a hobbit who finds the One Ring (that rules them all) and for 500 years, lives his life completely based upon his “precious”; when he loses it, he goes on a mad quest to find it that ultimately consumes and destroys his life.

So ask root questions of yourself like this: “Do I look to my bank accounts to give me security or trust that I will be OK?” “Do I seek to make money not as a means of benefiting others but to gain power for myself?” “Do I spend money as a means of gaining the approval or affections of others?” “When I lose money, does it make me feel empty or dissatisfied with life?” If “yes,” you are being mastered by money. **Not binary.**

Colossians 3:5 specifically warns against greed as idolatry: “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.” The thing about idols is, though they promise us satisfaction, meaning and fulfillment, they can’t deliver and instead of idols serving us, they master us. But you and I were not made to be enslaved and we know it. Jesus says that when God is the Master over your life, including your finances, money receives a demotion and serves us, and when we have a kingdom-centered vision for the world, acts to serve the needs of others too.

BUT you can understand your problem but be powerless to fix it. I want to read a fascinating note from Andrew Carnegie, one of the wealthiest men in the world at the time and the founder of U.S. Steel. By age 33, Carnegie was already very successful and had unusual insight into the power of money in his life. He once noted this:

Man must have an idol—The amassing of wealth is one of the worst species of idolatry. No idol more debasing than the worship of money. Whatever I engage in I must push inordinately therefore should I be careful to choose the life which will be the most elevating in character. To continue much longer overwhelmed by business cares and with most of my thoughts wholly upon the way to make more money in the shortest time, must degrade me beyond hope of recovery. I will resign business at Thirty Five, but during the ensuing two years, I wish to spend the afternoons in securing instruction, and in reading systematically.

That is amazing self-awareness and insight but despite that, Carnegie could not resign his business and listen to the effect he had on others, engaging in the very practices he feared would overtake him:

Although Carnegie built 2,059 libraries...a steelworker, speaking for many, told an interviewer, “We didn’t want him to build a library for us, we would rather have had the higher wages.” At that time steelworkers worked twelve-hour shifts on floors so hot

they had to nail wooden platforms under their shoes. Every two weeks they toiled an inhuman twenty-four hour shift, and then they got their sole day off. The best housing they could afford was crowded and filthy. Most died in their forties or earlier, from accidents or disease....

It can so easily control us. If, this morning, you sense that you are working more for money than money is working for you *and you want to be free from its enslaving domination, my final point*, you can't simply remove it—nature abhors a vacuum after all. You don't have that power as Carnegie's life proves. It has to be replaced with not just something but Someone. The holes in our souls we seek to fill are shaped in such a way as to only be filled by Christ. Paul, in 2 Corinthians 8:9 says, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich." In Ephesians 1:18, Paul prays for the church and says something that sounds similar to this Matthew passage when he says, "I pray also that the **eyes of your heart may be enlightened** in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the **riches of his glorious inheritance** in the saints."

What is Paul saying in both passages? "Can't you see that Jesus gave up His treasures to make you His treasure (the Cross), bringing you out of spiritual poverty. Can you not see that when you know the heights and depths of His love for you and how He has secured your real worth and dignity, you won't need to make money your god?"

As I close, what does this mean practically for us? It means you seek treasure but the kind that does not perish. The first treasure, then, is Christ: meditating on what He has done for you until His Gospel becomes your everything. When the Gospel—His perfect life and obedience in place of your sin, that you might be reconciled back to God,

experiencing the life satisfying relationship you were designed for—permeates your whole being and secures your identity, it frees you to enjoy life. You experience the profound paradox of servitude to God: He demands everything of yours be placed under His Lordship which liberates you to live the life you were intended to live.

And here's the second treasure: you then make your money work for you, for God's kingdom ends, which do not perish. As an example, I am sometimes asked about tithing: should I give and how much? In the Old Testament, people gave a tenth of their income back to God. But think about this: you know much more about the depth and breadth of God's grace than they did. I think what it means to live as a Christian is to say, "God, have it all." Rather than contractually viewing tithing ("10% for you, 90% for me), you realize that if Christ gave His life to bring you to God, everything you have belongs to Him. It doesn't mean He will necessarily ask you to give all your possessions away—He may instead make you wealthy—He only wants your heart and its willingness to be His conduit of kingdom mercy to those in need of it and that can only happen if your ambitions and highest affections are so caught up with the beauty of life with God, you find yourself telling God, "These are your resources—use me and my resources to build your kingdom," whether we're talking about tithing, a family budget, your business practices and more. More than anything else, you want to see lives, including your own, changed eternally, by your kingdom resources. And Jesus says, if you put your money in kingdom places that are protected from rot, your heart will naturally go there too and what is that but a life of joy and gratitude for His gracious giving first to you.

Jesus says more about this—that's next week. Know His freedom. Let Him be your Master and you will Master money rather than money mastering you. Pray with me.