



WESTMINSTER  
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# Treasures in Heaven

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*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:19-21).*

Somebody asked me not long ago what Jesus means when he talks about storing up treasures in heaven. How could a person do that? We can store things in the attic or in a closet or in the basement. If they're really valuable, we can store our treasures in a safe at home, or a safe deposit box at a bank. But how do you store up treasures in heaven? What does that even mean?

It's a good question.

Jesus is always talking about heaven, or the kingdom of heaven, not so much as a travelogue about where we might go when we die, but as a realm where God's will is done and people live in peace and harmony together, because that's the kind of community we were made to enjoy. Jesus says, if we ever want to get to heaven we need to become the sort of souls that are fit for God's kingdom. We can do that only by the grace of God, and by learning to live in ways that reflect heaven's values here and now.

That raises an obvious question for each of us: What do you really treasure? What are the things you value most in this life? Which of those things would make you fit for the kingdom of heaven, and which of them might get in the way and keep you from thriving in, or even entering, the realm we

were made to enjoy forever?

For most people, I think, the answer starts with relationships. The things we treasure most are the people closest to us, the people we love. I've recently joined the ranks of those who pull out pictures of their grandchildren at the slightest provocation, or without any provocation at all. I used to be gently tolerant of such behavior, but now I find myself engaging in it all the time, even though the little guy is just four weeks old and hasn't done much of anything yet. More experienced people told me, "You have no idea how much you're going to love it," and it turns out, they were exactly right.

Children and grandchildren, spouses and lovers and our dearest friends are what many of us treasure most in this world. It's all about relationships, about being connected to other people in ways that bring meaning and purpose and joy to our lives.

Even things that don't appear to be about relationships at first often turn out to be just that, if you look a little closer. So, for example, lots of people are busy accumulating stuff, material things of all kinds, and some of that accumulation is for perfectly good reasons. Young adults starting out in a marriage, or having a family, acquire things because they think they'll need them, and their family and friends shower them with gifts as a sign of their caring and support. Years later, when the children are grown, people pass those same things on to others who can use them. And sometimes we hang on to a few things as keepsakes, prompting fond memories of childhood, or of people we love who are no longer here.

Some of our material things have to do with people we care about, though like every other human activity, our focus on things can get out of hand, and devolve into mere materialism. For some people, then, accumulating stuff becomes a quest for security. People who have nothing deeper to rely on than money and material possessions can become more or less obsessed with having enough. The sad irony, of course, is that the more obsessive they are in the quest for security, the less secure they feel, because there's never enough to satisfy that compulsion in the end.

Some people's acquisitiveness is not so much about security as about status. They accumulate things in order to impress other people. And yet, what are status symbols but another, more oblique sign of craving relationship? Trying to impress people is just an indirect, and ultimately less satisfying, way of connecting with others. Even narcissists who are impressed with themselves imagine that they also impress other people. They're always puffing up their wealth or power or accomplishments, by way of shoring up those slender connections that come from other people's admiration or envy.

Most of the things we treasure in this life have to do with relationships of one sort or another – either the close and deeply satisfying kind, or the more shallow, superficial connections we try to use as substitutes. For all the talk of rugged individualism in our society, the truth is, we're all deeply dependent on one another for our sense of belonging and security and self-esteem. That quest for connection is also what drives the ugly tribalism of our time, where we look to other people not only to define who we are, but who we are not – those who are like us, to be trusted and supported,

and those who are not like us, to be feared or even hated.

We all crave connection and relationships among the things we treasure most in the world, and in the end there is no substitute for love. We all know about parents or partners who are too busy to spend time with their children or others close to them, so they offer stuff instead of themselves, presents with a “t” instead of presence with a “c.” And we know that the one can never truly take the place of the other.

If the things we value most have to do with relationships, then what Jesus says about storing up treasures in heaven starts to make sense, doesn't it? The kinds of things we obviously can't store up in heaven are material things. “You can't take it with you,” as the title of my high school senior play reminds us. What we can take with us is – in fact, the only things we can take – are spiritual qualities, the habits of the heart which, over the course of a lifetime, shape the persons we become.

“Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,” Jesus says. That's absolutely true, because the things we treasure are precisely the things that shape our hearts.

A rule of thumb to guide our living, then, would be to ask at any given moment, what kind of heart am I shaping now, by what I'm thinking, or saying, or doing? What kind of heart am I shaping in myself, and what kind of heart am I shaping in whoever is affected by what I think or say or do?

How different would our lives be, how much richer and fuller and more truly worthwhile, if we asked ourselves these questions: Will what I'm about to say help someone or

harm somebody? Is what I'm doing likely to make things better or only make them worse?

And it isn't just what we say or do that matters. It's also what we think, because thoughts are the wellsprings from which words and actions flow. The ideas we feed our minds, and the kinds of thoughts we dwell upon, drive the rest of the way we live.

It's so much easier to pile up possessions than to cultivate character, which is why our culture is so often rich in things and poor in soul, as the great hymn says. But character is all that matters in the end, because it's the only treasure we can store up in heaven, by the grace of God.

Jesus says, "You cannot serve God and money." It's true that we can use money to serve God. In fact, from a genuinely Christian perspective, money is like every other good thing in life: a gift from God to be used as good stewards. We cannot, on the other hand, use God to serve Mammon, which is what Jesus calls money when it pretends to be God. The Prosperity Gospel, so perennially popular in America, always borders on idolatry because it tempts people to make God the means and money the end, instead of reminding us that there's no good reason to have money at all, except to serve God's purposes in this world.

The only treasures we can store up in heaven, then, are habits of the heart that fit a soul for the kingdom of God. They're the kinds of qualities Paul calls fruit of the Spirit – things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.



Paul was proud of his Roman citizenship, just as we can be proud of our American citizenship, but he reminds us that our citizenship ultimately is in heaven. Many people's god is their belly, he says, which is a colorful way of saying that their minds are set entirely on earthly things. The truth is, we can't even live well here on earth if we are not guided by the principles of heaven. We see all around us the results of people living only for themselves and their tribes, to the neglect of everyone else.

There is an infinitely better way to live, according to the gospel. God expects more of us, because we were made for more. Our citizenship is in heaven. We were made for eternal life, and the only things we can carry from this life to eternity are the qualities of the soul that make this life better too. They're the only treasures we can store up in heaven. And in the end, they're the only treasures worth keeping.



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