

God or Mammon?
Psalm 73:25-28; I John 1:5-7; Matthew 6:19-24

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, but in heaven. That's not exactly the message we get when we turn on the television or open magazines or surf the internet, is it? Instead, we are bombarded with images encouraging us to buy new products. We are told that our lives will not be complete unless we visit this restaurant or drive that car or wear those clothes. Although, I must admit that the EggPod really does boil 4 eggs in 13 minutes, just as they say on TV.

But even when we resist the urge to spend our money on all the latest fads and fashions, Jesus' words still give us pause, don't they? I mean, is He saying that it's wrong to work and to earn an honest living? Is He saying it's wrong to put aside some savings in the bank for a rainy day? But how could that be true? Don't we have a responsibility to store up some of the things God has given us so that we can bless the poor around us, not to mention to leave a legacy for our children and grandchildren?

Now, it's true that some groups of Christians throughout history have taken Jesus' words very literally. Medieval monks took vows of poverty, not wanting to be burdened with material possessions so they could devote themselves to prayer and good works. The Amish continue to shun many modern conveniences in order to avoid pride and maintain their spiritual purity. And those who call themselves "Liberation Theologians" have argued that Christian ethics require the embrace of Marxist economics – that Christians are, in essence, called to be communists. Is this what Jesus is saying?

Well, if we look at the passage more carefully, we'll notice that Jesus does not so much contrast the kinds of things that we should save as he does the place where we save them. In other words, He's not so much saying that material things are bad in and of themselves – the problem instead is that the earth is not a safe storehouse. Moths can destroy even the most carefully laid aside garments. Iron or steel that is not oiled will rust. Wood that is not painted will rot. Nothing on this earth is free from the constant need for maintenance and repair – as those of us who worship in historic buildings know only too well.

An even more obvious example of the fleeting nature of worldly wealth is the Ruins of Windsor, located just down the road in southwest Claiborne County. Think of the plans Smith Coffee and Catherine Daniell were making for the future when they built their magnificent mansion. Think of the excitement they experienced when they saw the massive wooden floor joists set in place, and when those cast iron capitals, brought down the river, were raised into position atop the twenty-nine stuccoed brick columns soaring three stories into the sky. They spent \$175,000 dollars on their home and furnishings in 1860 – that amount would be worth about five and a quarter million dollars in today's money.

But go to Windsor today. The stucco is cracked, and the bricks are crumbling. The iron capitals are rusting. The wood of the house has been consumed by fire. Indeed, the entire slave-based cotton economy that made its

construction possible vanished within five years of its completion. The ruins are thus a monument to mankind's inability to preserve any sort of worldly wealth, to store up treasure on earth.

But there is another reason that savings here on earth are impermanent. Yes, moth and rust destroy, but thieves also break through and steal. And no, they don't just do this in big cities like Jackson. Even in little Port Gibson, someone recently tore the padlock off of our supply closet and made off with such priceless treasures as paper towels, toilet paper and cleaning solution. No, the sad fact is that you can never be certain that anything you have saved, no matter how modest, will remain where you have left it. Because there is sin in this world, it makes no sense to lay up for ourselves treasures on earth.

Now, I know none of this is exactly news to us. We know we should not expect material things to last forever. We know that while we must be good stewards of God's gifts to us, we must keep our worldly possessions in proper perspective. We know that we should be generous with those who have less than we do. Moreover, I think we would all agree that it is, in fact, sinful to place our confidence in our money or in our savings, even if we might take a reassuring glance at the size of our portfolios from time to time.

But if we should not place our faith in our money, does it make any more sense to place our trust in other worldly blessings? For if our houses fall prey to rot and rust, don't all of us also get sick from time to time? As time goes on, don't we give up so much of our health, and all too many of our friends and family members as well? Aren't we eventually forced to give up our careers, and so many of our other activities that occupied our time and attention? No, if we try to lay up any sort of treasure for ourselves on earth, whether money or skills, relationships or abilities, we will eventually be disappointed.

In contrast, what does Jesus tell us about Heaven? Moth and rust do not corrupt things there. There is no decay in the presence of the God Who is life, the God Who created everything by the Word of His Power. Jesus says that in heaven, thieves do not break through and steal. In fact, no sin of any kind can come into the presence of the God Who is perfectly holy and pure and just. We would not hesitate to place our funds in a bank that we knew to be immune from theft and decay. Well, Heaven is just such a place, eternally safe for us to entrust our savings.

And the main reason that our treasure is so safe in heaven is that our greatest possible treasure is already there – the Lord God Himself. For what did the Psalmist say? “Whom have I in heaven *but thee*? And *there is* none upon earth *that* I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: *but God is* the strength of my heart, and my portion forever.”

And so, if we would have God as our portion, it simply makes no sense to treasure our flesh or our heart or anything else of lesser value. It makes no sense to hold any other gods near and dear to our hearts. For as the Ten Commandments remind us, the Lord our God is a jealous God, and will not tolerate such unfaithfulness.

And it is this need for faithfulness to God, this need for exclusive devotion to our greatest treasure that forms the connection with the next few verses. For Jesus goes on to say, “The light of the body is the eye: if

therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.” But what does it mean for our eyes to be “single?” We all have two eyes, don’t we?

Well, although it’s true that many modern translations render this word as “clear” or “good,” the Greek word literally means, “simple” or “single.” It is often used in the Old Testament to refer to single-minded devotion to the Lord, especially in contrast to infidelity, or double-mindedness.

And now the connection becomes clear. Jesus is saying that our eyes are to be single, to be focused singly on God, our only true treasure. We are to reject any double-mindedness, turning away from all lesser, worldly attractions and devote ourselves completely to the One Who is our portion forever.

And what happens when we focus on God in such an exclusive way? Well, in his first epistle, John tells us that God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. So, if we look upon God, if we are totally devoted to Him, then what Jesus says just makes sense: our eyes will be full of true light. And as our devotion to God grows, our bodies and minds will be full of light as well, as our actions and our understanding increasingly express our allegiance to our Heavenly Father. More and more, He will be all we desire – as the Psalmist says, He will truly be the strength of our hearts, and our portion forever.

But what happens if we allow our eyes to drift toward the things of this world? What happens if we turn our attention to things that are destined for decay and destruction? Now, we all know we’re not supposed to look at particularly wicked things. We all know the danger, for example, of looking at pornography. We recognize the problems that come from gazing with covetousness on things that belong to our neighbors. And we are right to turn our attention away from such obviously sinful things.

But Jesus is challenging us to go further, not just to avoid what is desperately wicked, but to turn our eyes with single-minded focus on God, to be completely devoted to God. After all, He says, “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.”

Now, I know that sounds extreme. And we might want to find some wiggle room, some middle ground, some way that we can focus our attention in two directions at once. We might want to worship God and focus our attention on Him on Sundays, for example, and then turn our gaze, our attention, and our focus back to worldly things during the rest of the week.

But think again about what Jesus is saying. If it’s true that God is light, then keeping our attention on Him will light up our whole life. If we focus on our hearts and minds on God’s love and truth, we will be able to make sense out of all the rest of life, keeping all our other responsibilities and interests in proper perspective. Filling ourselves with God’s light will help us maneuver through whatever problems and difficulties will come our way, making our pathway clear.

But what if we were to turn our attention away from the God Who is light? What if we try to walk in the light on Sundays and grope around in the darkness of our own reason, our experience, or our cultural traditions

during the rest of the week? Well, what happens when we try to walk through a strange room at nighttime without turning on the lights? We don't tend to get very far, do we? And it doesn't matter how much money we might have in our pockets, or how many relatives or friends or skills we might have – unless we turn on the lights, we're eventually going to do a face-plant in the darkness.

And that's the sobering truth and, really, the choice that faces all of us – you either have the lights on or you don't. You're either walking in the light of God, or you're floundering in the darkness, trying to figure things out for yourself. Yes, the good news is that if we focus on God, He will fill our minds and hearts with His light and truth. But if we let our attention drift anywhere else, if we allow our focus to settle on anything in this world, if we are trying to store up for ourselves treasures on earth, we will eventually find ourselves lost and impoverished, helpless and alone, face down on the floor in the darkness.

So, where is your heart today? What is the most important thing to you? Who is the most important person to you? What do you think about most of the time? What would you die for? What is your god? Where is your heart? For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.