



Treasure Hunt

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Matthew 6:19-21

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Ten years ago, there was a media frenzy over the release of the final Harry Potter book. Within the first 24 hours alone, book seven, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*,

sold 15 million copies. Its publisher paid big bucks to keep its contents secret until the scheduled release date.

Since the series began in the late 90s, there has been considerable speculation about the religious themes in Rowling's books. She showed her cards after the release of her last book. She admitted to being coy about talking candidly about the Christian allegory in her earlier books. She thought the religious parallels were somewhat obvious, but she refused to talk openly about it until the final installment was written.

Rowling blows her cover in book seven. Harry Potter visits his parents' grave. A verse from 1st Corinthians is etched on their tombstone, "The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Corinthians 15:26). Harry also stumbles upon the Dumbledore's family tomb, which also has a Biblical quote etched as an epitaph: "Where your treasure is, there will be your heart also."

There are seven books worth of backstory to explain the meaning of this tantalizing quote from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Suffice it to say, that the Harry Potter series sees value in eternal treasures like love and hope. Temporal treasures, like blind ambition and unchecked pride, simply do not last.

J. K. Rowling was interviewed shortly after book seven was published, and talked about the two Biblical quotes at

the end of her series. She said, “These two quotes he [Harry] found on the tombstone at Godric’s Hollow, they sum up—they almost epitomize the whole series.”

“Where your treasure is, there will be your heart also” (Matthew 6:21). This verse ranks as another in a series of classic one-liners spoken by Jesus. Harry Potter was confused about its meaning. Maybe you are also. The secret to this Biblical maxim is tied to the meaning of two little words, “treasure” and “heart.”

Treasure (Greek *thesaurus*) represents something of value. Jesus identifies two kinds of treasures in his sermon: treasures on earth and treasures in heaven. We’ll say more about these treasures in a moment.

Heart (Greek *cardia*) describes the core or essence of a person. Our hearts resemble something of a command center, functioning like a clearing house for our decisions and shaping our wills.

Notice, Jesus doesn’t say, “Where your heart is, there will be your treasure also.” Our hearts follow what we treasure more than treasure follows our hearts. Our hearts resemble the needle of a compass. Just as a compass needle points north, so our hearts point in the direction of whatever we treasure. As our treasure goes, so go our hearts. Money leads; hearts follow.



Jesus identifies two types of treasures in his sermon: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...but store up

for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Matthew 6:19-20). The language is even more striking in the original Greek.

Treasure appears twice in each half of the sentence—once as a verb and once as a subject. So, literally it reads, “Do not treasure for yourselves treasures on earth...but treasure for yourselves treasures in heaven.”

“Treasures on earth” constitute temporal things such as food, shelter and clothing. Please, Jesus is not saying we have to get rid of all our stuff. Jesus orders only one man in Scripture to give away everything he owns. Rather, Jesus advises us not to give inordinate attention to our possessions. Be careful not to let possessions possess us.

Jesus elaborates on why we shouldn’t give undue attention to temporal pursuits. “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moths and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal...” (6:19). Temporal pursuits do not last.

Apple tells us the average lifespan for our cherished iPhones is all of three years. Our enchantment with technology is something of a bottomless pit. It also has disastrous consequences for our environment, I might add.

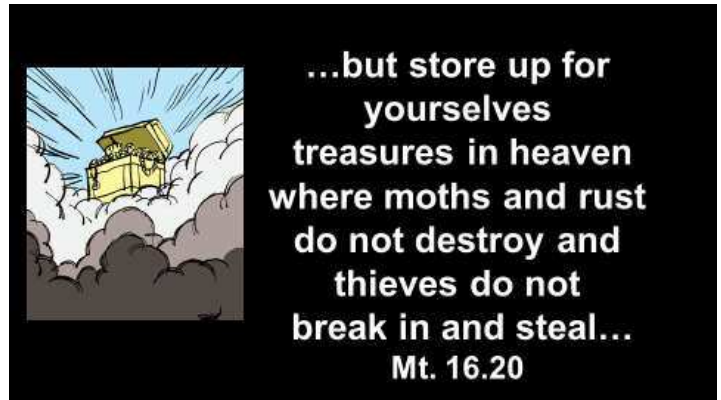


I visited the Fairfax County transfer station recently to recycle our old TV. This is what I saw. Wasn’t it only a few years ago that we coveted all this stuff?

Clothes wear out and go out of style. I invested lots of money in wide ties. Who determined that ties now need to be skinny? Cars rust and break down. Our investments ebb and flow with the market. The ephemeral quality of earthly

treasures is a recurring theme in Scripture. Earthly treasures are strictly temporal.

Jesus continues, in the second half of his teaching about treasure, “but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven where moths and rust do not destroy and thieves do not break in and steal” (6:20). Treasures in heaven have enduring value. Jesus urges us to invest in durable virtues like forgiveness, love and telling the truth. Jesus offers his disciples a hot investing tip here. The only investments that offers permanent security are things of lasting value.



Jesus’ teaching seems straightforward, yet I’m not sure we are buying into Jesus’ treasure in heaven principle—not the way we fawn over money and the people who have it. I offer three suggestions for taking more seriously Jesus’ “treasure in heaven” principle. These three recommendations constitute the “so what” portion of this sermon. So what difference does this sermon make in my life?

My first suggestion serves as a caution to our upwardly mobile ambitions. Don’t spend all your energies chasing the brass ring. What you have is enough. When John D. Rockefeller, a wealthy tycoon from the early 20th century was asked how much money is enough, he quipped, “Just a little bit more.”

Put a governor on your standard of living. A governor is a device in the engine of your car that regulates speed or RPMs. It monitors the engine so your car doesn’t stall when you go up a hill or rev up when you go down the other side.

If we don't place a governor on our standard of living, our expenses will expand to fill the income.

My second suggestion requires something of an attitude shift. Stop obsessing so much over treasures on earth. Invest more attention to things of lasting value.

Later in Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells a parable about treasure. "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field" (13:44). Once we identify lasting treasures, we invest everything we have in acquiring them.

People didn't have access to banks in those days, so it was customary to bury treasure in a field for safekeeping. In 1992 in Hoxne, England, a farmer by the name of Peter Whatly lost his hammer while working in the field. He asked his friend Eric Lawes to come with his metal detector to locate his missing hammer. Instead, Eric found something else. He



unearthed a silver spoon that looked quite old. Next, he unearthed a few antique coins and gold jewelry. They notified the police and the local archeological society. They excavated the

site the next day and found the decomposed remains of an old oak chest dating back to the 4th century. Carefully wrapped in this box were 15,000 gold coins and 200 items of gold jewelry. In the 4th century, in the British Isles, there was a violent upheaval that resulted in the collapse of Roman authority. Obviously, someone buried this treasure in the ground to protect it from thieves or foreign invasion. This treasure is now in the British Museum in London and is valued well into the millions.

Once they found the real treasure, the hammer didn't matter any longer. Invest in things of lasting value. Incidentally, they also found Peter's lost hammer.

My third recommendation is to engage in generosity as a spiritual discipline. This summer, we're focusing on the classic Christian disciplines to ignite more passion for God. We aspire to be a church in renewal. Lord knows we need it! "Will you not revive us again, O Lord?" (Psalm 85:6).

The people of God practiced three central acts of devotion in Jesus' day. Jesus enumerates all three in the first 18 verses of Matthew 6: almsgiving in verses 1-4, prayer in verses 5-15 and fasting in verses 16-18. I talked about prayer two Sundays ago, as we examined Jesus' famous "Our Father" prayer as a way to teach us how to pray. Last Sunday, we focused on fasting. I not only spoke about fasting from food, but also fasting from things like anger, bitterness, complaining, gossip, self-pity and social media. This past week, three of you told me you fasted from complaining. I found it gratifying that several students took up the challenge to fast from social media.

The last in this trio of practices is called almsgiving. Almsgiving an old-fashioned word. Today, we would use substitute words like charity or generosity. In these three practices, Jesus warns his listeners about drawing too much attention to themselves. He urges us to practice generosity without announcing it with trumpets and fanfare. He advises us not to let our left hand know what our right hand is doing.



3. Engage in acts of generosity

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**Almsgiving Mt. 6.1-4
Prayer Mt. 6.5-15
Fasting Mt. 6.16-18**

My college, much like any university these days, publishes a complete list of donors. Everyone is ranked by giving categories. There is the President's Circle and the Tower Society, the Dean's Counsel and the Founder's Circle. The last magazine from my alma mater featured two people who gave millions to the school. Is that why colleges get the big bucks and churches don't?

Some non-profits feature the names of their donors on plaques and walls and name buildings after them. We don't operate that way around here. We take Jesus' admonition seriously not to let our left hand know what our right hand is doing.

Generosity is huge! Generosity recognizes that everything we own is on loan from God. Every breath we draw is a gift from God. No more complaining! Let's also put a governor on whining. I challenge us to exercise generosity in our attitude about today and our use of time and money. "Where your treasure is, there will be your heart also."

