



Treasures in Heaven

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

October 16, 2016

Today's sermon is all about money. I've preached count-less times on the topic of money. This is going to be a different kind of sermon on money.

I need to come clean with you right from the outset: I've had an uneasy relationship with money through the years. It doesn't seem to matter whether I have too much money or too little of it. Money generates strong emotions in me; some of which are detrimental to my spiritual life.



Let me start at the beginning. I decided in my growing up years that things went better with people who had money. While I knew money couldn't make people happy, it sure

seemed to help. I resolved early on to make enough money to live comfortably. I didn't aspire to become fabulously wealthy, but I wanted to live the good life.

I went to college and declared Economics as my major. I took courses on macro and micro economics. I was only mildly interested. I figured a business degree was my best shot at making money.

Yet, something happened that changed the trajectory of my life. At age 19, I became a Christ-follower. I've talked about my conversion in previous sermons. I attended church and Sunday school in my early years, but it didn't take. This time, the call to open my life to Christ seemed irresistible, so I followed.

I had learned the story in the Bible about the rich man who was asked by Jesus to give away everything he owned. I asked whether this was something I needed to do. Mature disciples reassured me that Jesus only said these words to one person.

Well, then, how much should I give? Veteran churchgoers told me about the Biblical concept of the “tithe.”

That’s tithe with a “th” at the end of the word; not a tie that men wear around their necks. Others I respected in the church

insisted Jesus didn’t proscribe a fixed percentage. What was I to do?



I began to entertain the thought that perhaps God was calling me into full-time ministry. Chris and I married at this season in our lives. Since neither of us had grown up around people in ministry, we were clueless about what to expect. We knew ministry wasn’t a lucrative profession, so we were anxious about our economic future.

For the first three years of our marriage, we served together in campus ministry. We were paid modestly (I’m being generous when I say that!). We were expected to raise both our salary and ministry expenses from donor friends and family. My parents could never quite get their heads around the idea that we had to raise our own salary.

From there, we went to seminary, which is a graduate school for people like me. While I attended seminary, Chris worked two jobs to make it happen. I did my part also. I sold women’s shoes at a local department store. I’m not making this up!

After seminary, we came to this church with no savings and zero money. We soon discovered it takes money to make it in Northern Virginia. Lots of money!

I was only three months into the job when I realized it was my responsibility to lead an annual stewardship drive. For those new to church life, stewardship is a code word for raising money. What

a shame, really. We've taken a perfectly good word and reduced it to mere fundraising.

Since it was now my job to preach about money, I decided to investigate what the Bible says about money. It turns out Jesus has plenty to say about money. He tells parables about money. He preaches sermons on money. He recounts all sorts of stories with underlying money themes. It turns out Jesus had more to say about money than heaven and hell put together. Since Jesus could hardly be considered materialistic, I found his multiple references to money to be surprising.

Jesus is not primarily concerned with what we do with our money. He's interested in a far more important question. What is money doing to us?



We're reading what Jesus says about money in *The Treasure Principle*. Four people in this church think so highly of this book that they bought a 1000 copies as a gift for you to read. This

is not a hard read; it's all of 86 pages. The author, Randy Alcorn, puts forward six treasure principles. Principle number one: "God owns everything. We are his money managers." Remember the word stewardship? Jesus taught that we are stewards of the resources God has entrusted to us.

While I appreciate that God owns everything, this principle is hard to get into my thick skull. I identify with the little red hen in the children's story. Do you remember the little red hen who asked for help in making bread? She asked for assistance in planting grain, but nobody came to her aid. She harvested it and baked it without help from her friends, so when it came time to eat the bread, she did so herself. I have a similar attitude with regard to my money. Since I've done all the work to make money, I tend to

think of it as mine. I own it. I can do with it as I please because I earned it myself.

But who am I kidding? I've officiated at enough funerals to know that we don't take this stuff with us. I don't own anything. Everything I own is on loan from God.

Randy Alcorn's second treasure principle follows naturally from the first: "My heart always goes where I put God's money." This lesson comes



straight out of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount read earlier as our Scripture lesson. Jesus places treasures on earth and treasures in heaven in parallel relationship. Treasures on earth have only temporal value. Jesus said earthly treasures eventually rust and wear out. Consider this Proverb, "Don't wear yourself out trying to gain money. Cast but a glance at riches and they are gone. They will sprout wings and fly away" (23:4-5).

Here's the challenge with treasures on earth. They have a way of binding us to what is physical and temporal and blinding us to what is spiritual and eternal. Treasures in heaven, such as forgiveness, love and mercy have enduring value. Jesus urges his disciples to invest in things that have lasting value.

The capstone to this treasure principle in this Sermon on the Mount is what Jesus says in verse 21: "For where your treasure is, there will be your heart also." Notice, he doesn't say where our heart is, there will be our treasure also. Rather, heart follows treasure every time. Our hearts follow wherever we put our treasure.

Let's suppose I buy GE stock. Once I invest in GE stock, I have a vested interest in how it is performing relative to the stock

market. So, I begin to track its performance. Don't you see? My heart follows my treasure every time.

Randy Alcorn likened our hearts to the needle of a compass. Just as a compass needle points north, so our hearts point in the direction of our treasure.

I admitted at the outset of this sermon that I've had an uneasy relationship with money. Now that Chris and I are older, we finally have discretionary income, yet I still have an uneasy relationship with money. I chose the word "relationship" deliberately to represent our personal connection to money. Maybe that's why this sanctuary becomes quiet whenever I talk about money. Money, much like sex, is, well, personal.

Yet, personal doesn't mean private. I wish we would talk more candidly about money in this community. Jesus certainly did.



Jesus follows up this "where your treasure is" principle with teaching about worry. Listen up, all you chronic worriers. Some of us worry about money. Whether we have enough of it. Whether our

investments will pan out. Whether our money will run out before our lives are over. Jesus tells his followers, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink or about your body, what will you wear. Is not life more than food or the body more than clothes? Consider the sparrows...They do not worry saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" (Matthew 6:25-26, 34). Jesus directs his listeners to contemplate birds and flowers as a hedge against worry. Most of the things we worry about never happen.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life?

When I was much younger and coming through the pipeline, there weren't many classes about money from a Christian perspective. If I had



to do over again, I would take a class on stewardship principles. The one I hear the most about these days is Dave Ramsey's Financial Peace University. It's often taught in churches. We'll be teaching it early next year. You can also buy the DVD series or take it online. Most of what I learned about money I discovered by trial and error. I was too proud to admit I needed help with money management. I like spending money because it makes me feel in control. What am I thinking? We need to develop healthy habits about money. Most of us would benefit from a course to learn Christian principles about money.

The best way I know to disarm the power of money is to give some of it away. It's one tangible way of acknowledging that we don't own anything.

I've been asked to talk about money again this fall related to our annual stewardship drive. We're asking you to complete a pledge card as a way of estimating your giving so we can set our budget for 2017. I don't want to talk merely about how much this church needs to pay the light bill and drive our mission forward. No kidding, we need your support. But I'm far more interested in talking about giving as a spiritual practice. I've talked before about the importance of adopting a spiritual growth plan so Christ can come alive in us. We emphasize the value of daily prayer and Scripture meditation as well as the weekly practice of worship. We're asking you to consider generosity as a spiritual practice in your life.



John Ortberg writes about playing Monopoly with his grandmother. She used to beat John at Monopoly all the time in his growing up years. John decided at age 12 that he would learn to play Monopoly

so well that he could beat his grandmother. He remembers the day it happened when his grandmother landed on Marvin Gardens. He took everything she had and won the game. But she still had one more lesson to teach her aspiring grandson. John writes, “My grandmother taught me when the game is over, it all goes back in the box. All those houses and hotels, all those railroads and utility companies, all that property and wonderful money, it all goes back in the box.”

Yes, everything belongs to God. We don't own anything. Everything we own is on loan from God.