

Sermon on the Mount: In Pursuit of Righteousness

by J. Glyn Owen

Jesus teaches that we should lay up treasures in heaven by using our earthly treasures to serve the purpose of the kingdom of heaven and investing them in spiritual and godly ends.

Duration: 43:38

Scripture: Matthew 5:20, Matthew 6:1 - 7:5, Matthew 7:7-11

Topics: "Sermon on the Mount"

Description

During a deputation tour in Missouri, the speaker shared his conversion story and discussed various topics. One farmer's wife, who rarely spoke up in meetings, asked for more information about a tract that was mentioned. The speaker provided additional details about the tract and praised the woman for her contribution to its success. The speaker then shifted the topic to the importance of locking doors to protect against thieves, both physical and metaphorical, such as death. The speaker concluded by emphasizing the need to focus on spiritual treasures rather than earthly possessions.

Transcript

May I simply explain to visiting friends that we are currently meditating during morning worship in the Sermon on the Mount. And we are going to pursue the theme this morning, looking at the passage that begins with verse 19 in chapter 6. I don't think there is need to read the passage again, it has been read for us, but we shall be referring to it in detail as we continue. One of the main thrusts of these great chapters in the New Testament was put by our Lord in terms of His demand for a quality of righteousness in His servants, in His followers, a quality of righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees of His day.

In other words, He was seeking then and is seeking today for a righteousness that excels. One of the predominating principles in our Lord's teaching concerning this righteousness is this, it can only be discovered, it can only be produced, insofar as God personally, directly influences our lives. There is a danger of our producing something which is but a sham, but a shadow of the truth.

And we have been looking at three of them recently, the reference to almsgiving, to prayer, and though we didn't say very much about the third, about fasting, we have been looking at these three. And our Lord's warning is this, He told His disciples there before Him, and He tells us through the word recorded, these

aspects of the righteousness that He seeks in His followers, these aspects are not to be produced by trying to please men, by giving of our alms in order to bring the adulation of our fellow creatures, by praying to please the tingling ears of men, or by fasting in order to show men that we are really a very good godly lot of people. The quality of righteousness that our Lord is seeking is rather that righteousness that is wrought largely in private with God.

It is God Himself embossing upon His people the mark of His image, the evidence of His own likeness, imparting His spirit with its fruit, and its gifts, and its accompaniments, and doing both in us and for us what is necessary, that we should be changed from one degree of glory to another, to quote a Pauline reference. But the overriding principle is this, in order to produce this righteousness, you and I must be in direct contact with and communion with God, so that we can afford to go away to our closet, to our private rooms, close the door, and where nobody sees, there, God and ourselves, we have dealings with Him, He has dealings with us. And it is out of that, says Jesus, that this quality of righteousness is really produced.

Now, a very important question emerges soon as you continue to consider this theme. How does this happen? How can it happen? Our Lord warns us in the lesson we were looking at last week against hypocrisy, against pretending to be or to do what we are not, what we are not doing. How can we avoid that? How can we produce this genuine quality of righteousness? Now, in the second half of chapter six, we have two keys, and I propose looking at them, the first this morning, and the second two weeks hence in the will of God.

In the first place, verses 19 to 24, the verses before us today, the honest pursuit of righteousness demands an unqualified acceptance of kingdom demands. If you and I are to produce this kind of righteousness, then we must, without any equivocation, be prepared to provide what God the King requires of us, what His Son came to declare and to demand of us. Without that, we are in danger of being hypocrites at best, or of doing nothing that is pleasing to God.

And then in the second half, the second part of the second half of chapter six, verses 25 to 35, there follows on something which is very important. Following the acceptance of the kingdom demands, we should reflect an unruffled confidence in God as we seek first of all His kingdom and His righteousness, believing that all things necessary will be provided for us. Now we're looking at the first of these today.

We begin by considering the prohibition and the command that we have in verse 19. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth. Then instead of that, says Jesus, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven.

There's a prohibition and a command. There are two sides of the one and the same coin in our Lord's teaching. We may change our metaphors or use them in that way.

A prohibition and a command. Don't do this, but rather do that. Now our Lord Jesus Christ of course, being the incarnate Son of God, was altogether set against that narrow view of life which thinks of it only in terms of the here and now and of the present time.

If you think of life only in terms of the present time and of the present age, you're out of focus, says Jesus, all the while. Man was not made for 60, 70 years on earth, then period. Any more than birds were made to be in cages.

Man was not made to be encased within a couple of years and to perish. Man was made for eternity. God set eternity in our hearts.

And those who try to talk of life as if it were all contained within the few brief years of our human span, they do us a great disservice. That is hardly the narthex, the entrance, the vestibule to life as biblically envisaged. When Jesus speaks of life, he speaks of it against the back cloth, against the canvas of eternity.

Men and women, whether you and I realize it as we ought to, you and I are going to live beyond death. You and I are going to live beyond our funeral day. And we have to prepare accordingly.

And our Lord Jesus Christ everywhere calls men and women to come to terms with this. It's a disastrous philosophy on many counts. I can't pursue that thought this morning, but it is a disastrous philosophy.

And especially when people try to bolster it with scripture, they certainly move away from the Christian tenet, properly so called. This present life is important. It has a very particular importance.

But it is not all. Eternity needs to be considered. Now says Jesus, you and I are not only living for the present, we are living for eternity.

And what is more, we must make quite sure that we do not lay up our treasures in this scene of the present life. There's a very real danger for us, says our Lord Jesus Christ, if we go through our present life laying up our treasures all confined within the scene of the present. Now the first question that comes to us there is this, what did our Lord mean by treasures? And we need to be clear about this.

Well if you look at the passage, I think you have the key. The reference to moth, or moths and rust, and to thieves, I think sells the past, tells us immediately what it's all about. I would suggest that Jesus had such things in mind as clothes, which moths love to destroy, utensils which easily rust, and particularly silver and gold, they also of course, pardon me, among others are what thieves are out for.

So our Lord Jesus is saying something here which really has never been popular in any age. What he's saying is this, don't lay up your treasures in wardrobes or in utensils of silver or gold or copper or any other kind. It's really foolish.

I think of course that this is just a synonym for material things in general, and I'm sure you will agree with that. But the question is this, assuming that that's what is implied by treasure, I don't know what else it could be, how can we lay up treasures in heaven? We are very material, we live in a material universe. We know what it is to lay up our treasures here.

We can't often do it perhaps, and we can't do it as much as some of us would like to do it, maybe. But how do we lay up treasures in heaven? You notice the background here is the kingdom of heaven, the rule of heaven, the reign of heaven, and ultimately the region of the heavenly rule. That's in the background here.

But how can anybody like you and me so much in the flesh lay up treasures in heaven that we don't see? Well the answer of course is not as difficult as might at first appear. The point is we lay up treasures in heaven when we use the treasures we have in order to serve the purpose of the heavenlies and of the kingdom of heaven. When you employ your earthly treasures for heavenly use, when you invest what you have in material terms to spiritual and godly ends, then this is exactly what you're doing.

You're laying up treasures in heaven. An Italian was shipwrecked many years ago at sea and picked up by a ship down for Brazil. A gospel tract written by a Baptist missionary fell into his hands and it led him to the first Baptist church in Rio de Janeiro, where he was converted to Christ.

He became a missionary to Italians in the United States of America. During a deputation tour in Missouri, he spoke of his conversion and a number of other things, and everybody was listening intently, but one farmer's wife, very especially, not commonly known to intrude in a meeting, she put her hand up halfway through and she says, please tell me a few more facts about this tract that you read. And the gentleman explained a little more about it, who had published it, about the Baptist minister who was responsible for it.

Praise the Lord, she said, I gave of my attempt to publish that tract and I didn't know anything about it till now, about its success until now. See, that's what it is to lay up treasure in heaven. She'd never seen the man, she wasn't there, she wasn't on high seas when he was in danger, but the Word of God she had provided in part, and so her treasures had been used in the employ of the sovereign King and Savior Jesus Christ.

Now, says Jesus, this is the only way really to protect yourself against hypocrisy on the one hand, that's a negative side, on the positive side to produce the quality of righteousness which is greater than the righteousness of the Pharisees and the scribes. What is it? It is first of all not to lay up yourselves treasures here upon earth, but rather in heaven. See my friends, this needs to be told again this morning, because the current philosophy, the current understanding is really this, that the whole meaning of life is to get as rich as you can in this present time and hold it and keep it for yourself.

Jesus gives the lie to it, and he says what God gives you, employ it for the kingdom of God, invest it in the kingdom of God, and you're laying up treasures in heaven. Now, that's the command, and there's the prohibition. Let's come to the next thing, some reasons for the prohibition and the command.

Why did Jesus say that? Why not lay up treasures on earth? Why lay up our treasures in heaven? Oh, our blessed Savior has a way of answering our questions if we are prepared for them. And if you really want to know this morning why this should take place, Jesus has the answer for you. You can switch off.

I'm sure some of us will be tempted, but the Lord has got the answer for you and for me if we take it, and if we don't take it, we shall be eternally impoverished. Eager to get this message across, Jesus enlarges upon the subject, first arguing, now he argues from two points here, first arguing from the point of view of the safety of the treasures themselves. And what he says is, your treasures are not safe upon earth anyway, they're only safe in heaven.

And then the second way he argues is from the safety and the well-being of your own person. If you hoard up treasures here upon earth, those treasures that become to mean so much to you will influence you as a person, and they can so influence you as a person that you become incapable of being the man or the woman who knows righteousness greater than the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees. You see, that's the background to such daring utterances of Jesus as that when he said that it is more difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle.

Now we don't say a lot about that today. It's as difficult as that, but with God he says it is possible of course. You can deflate the camel and you can bring him down to size, but you see it's very difficult to bring a rich man or a rich woman down to size to enter the straight gates and walk the narrow way and the humble road of the cross.

So this message is not one which is greatly loved, but it is absolutely vital to our Christian faith. Now let me try and represent our Lord's teaching as best and as brief as I can. First of all, the argument based upon the safety of our possessions.

I'm going to let you brood more on these words than I'm going to say, because certain things don't need to be said, they're so evident. The first thing to say, however, is this. Your treasures and mine are not safe on earth.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break through and steal. They're not safe here. It's a fool's game really.

In biblical usage, the moth is described as devouring houses and human lives even in the book of Job. But of course, as I've indicated earlier, the speciality of the moth is to devour through devour clothes. Some of you ladies and gentlemen will know that.

Something you've stored away for the winter and you go to take it out in the springtime or the summer or vice versa and you find, oh my, moths have been using our wardrobes as their dining room. And there they are and they wreak havoc. I don't think that those of us who don't read the Old Testament, and there are so many people who don't, who are not familiar with the Old Testament, realize that many of these pictures, as here in the Sermon on the Mount, probably come from the Old Testament.

You see the prophets said the same things, almost identically the same things, not quite, but they said something similar. And in Isaiah chapter 3 verses 22 and 23, the prophet Isaiah is really trying to persuade the women of Jerusalem to see that you do not, you do not become important because of the clothes you wear. And he talks to them about their fine robes and their capes and their cloaks and their purses and their mirrors and their linen garments and their tiaras and their shawls.

You know, that's way back in the book of Isaiah. Such clothing may well be symbolic of worldly treasure. Jesus says they are not safe here upon earth.

They're too easily destroyed and you're wasting your money and you're wasting your time and you're living in a fool's paradise. If you think that your importance in part or in whole resides in a quality of clothes you wear. If we take a passage from James chapter 5 and verses 1 to 6, dealing with this general subject as our key, then the rust very particularly is said to devour both gold and silver.

James says your garments are moth-eaten, your gold and your silver is rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you. James is taking our Lord's argument a step further. Not only, not only is your gold rusted and your silver rusted, but the very rusted gold and rusted silver will be an argument against you in the day of judgment that you've not used what God gave you for the purpose for which he gave them.

That's serious. Earth is no safe place then for your gold and silver any more than for your wardrobe, extensive though it may be. There's too much rust around, too many moths around for these things.

Moreover, thieves covet and eventually steal anything that has material value, whether it's a garment or is maybe capable of being exchanged into money, whatever it is, there are thieves around. We have them. We have to be careful, you know, that those doors are watched when you are worshipping.

It's all right as someone on duty, that we're not safe on the Lord's day here. And whenever we open these doors, there are thieves around. I don't want to frighten anybody, but don't leave valuables in your

pockets.

Someone's on guard. But wherever you are, your car's not safe. On the street, your home is not safe.

I tell you a little secret. We went for, I'm sure, the first six years of our sojourn here in Canada. I don't think we ever locked the back door, but then we learned it was best to do it.

And we've discovered since it's necessary to lock the doors, haven't you? But listen, even if the thieves don't catch up with you, there is a thief that will rob you of all your gold and your silver and your garments. That's death. Death is the great disrober.

It takes the most magnificent garment of you. Or if you take it with you to the grave, it'll become but dust. Like Tutankhamun of Egypt, you may take your very desk or your very very throne with you into your vaulted grave.

But my friend, it can do you no good if you would have it serve the purpose of God for you to produce the kind of righteousness that Jesus is after and God requires of us. Then employ all those things in order to lay up treasures in hell. That's what he said.

The second thing to say is this. Your treasures and mine are, however, safe in heaven. Whatever you invest in the kingdom of heaven, you will never, never lose.

The capital will be safe. I don't know much about money matters, but I think I'm saying it the right way now, aren't I, son? Yeah, the capital will be safe and so will the dividends be greater and whatnot. You'll do better.

Lay up your treasures in heaven and God will be no man's debtor. Spiritually, you will grow. Spiritually, you will know his peace and his grace and fellowship with him that is not possible otherwise.

The second thing, Jesus' second argument is based upon the well-being of our persons, ourselves, verses 21 to 24. Now at this point, Jesus introduces three reasons why we should not live for the present life and lay up our treasures on earth. That on the score of its adverse effects upon our persons.

Let me briefly refer to them. Treasures laid up on earth tend to distract the heart's affection and this is fatal to one's relationship with God. The crucial word is verse 21.

Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. Now you and I know that, don't we? What's precious to you? A person? A thing? You're always thinking of that person. You're always thinking of that thing.

Of course you are. You're dreaming about them because what is precious to you, what you think is really precious, steals your heart and your heart follows your treasure and where your treasure is, there will your heart be. There will your heart be.

Earthly treasures have an unusual capacity of stealing our hearts away from God and his will and his kingdom and his rule and his purpose and his righteousness, of stealing our hearts away from God to lesser things. Haven't you found that out? Haven't you found that out? You see, when you're in process of getting rich, you're never satisfied. I have known people and they've said that when they get their first quarter million, oh my, that'll be marvelous.

But when they get their first quarter million, they want a second. And when they get a second, they want a third. Well, you know, it's like that.

You just get drunk on it and you think more and more of it. And you see, as you do that, it diverts your soul from God, the only true object of worship, the giver of life. Scripture abounds in examples of this.

I can't go after them. Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. So if your treasures are on earth, your heart will be on earth.

They are treasures in heaven. And your heart will be there. And you'll become more and more heavenly minded in the true sense of the term.

Treasures laid up on earth tend to distort not only your affection, your heart's affection, but treasures laid up on earth also tend to distort your eye's vision. Verses 22 and 23, the eye is the lamp of the body. Now, this is a difficult passage to translate.

And I cannot be dogmatic and I'm not attempting to be. But the picture would seem to be something like this. Light gets into the body via the eye and possibly into the soul from what we see, look at.

Maybe that thought is there too. But the point is, anyway, the condition of a window can either distort the incoming light or, in extreme cases, stop it altogether. Dirty windows keep out light.

Windows with shutters leave no light in. And you know there is something about material prosperity that all too easily makes us blind to the world of the Spirit. Now, this is awful and we don't realize it, brothers and sisters.

Let me tell you a little illustration I heard of a Christian friend who was visiting in New York. And he was a dear man of God and very, very determined to speak of his Lord wherever he went. This part of the afternoon, he was visiting a Jewish friend of his.

They were up on the seventh or seventeenth floor, I don't quite remember, of this particular block. And they'd been talking about spiritual things and they were looking out through the window. And this good man turned to his Jewish friend and he says, Samuel, he says, what do you see down there? What do you mean, he says, by asking me what I see down there? It's evident, isn't it? Crowds of foolish people, he says, milling around the street.

I don't know where they're all going to. I don't know what they're all doing. Ha ha, he said.

Now he says, will you do what I ask you? Don't ask any questions. And he brought out a little mirror from his pocket. And he held a mirror in front of him and he said, what do you see now, Samuel? Yes, stupid man, he says, it's a mirror.

I can only see myself. Well, that's funny, he says. A mirror is a glass and the window is a glass.

What's the difference between the mirror and the glass? Shall I tell you, he says, behind the glass in the mirror there is one little coating of silver. And that one coating of silver means you don't see anybody else. You only see yourself.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, there is something insidious about material things. Oh, they can be used. And I salute men and women who master all this area for the glory of God.

And we are privileged to know such people. But it's a dangerous commodity to handle. It can make you blind to men and women in their lostness, in their need, utterly blind so that you're careless and you do nothing and you live as if all was well.

You don't see only a reflection of yourself. And lastly, treasures laid up on earth tend to destroy a person's devotion to God as God. You know, there is a kind of devotion to God which is no devotion to God at all, but to the God of our own imagination.

The God that we have made after our own image and we serve him. Sometimes we serve him very well. I'm not talking about that God with a small g. Treasures laid up on earth tend to destroy a person's devotion to God as God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Listen, 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 or mammon.

Now literally, what our Lord said is this, no one is able to give slave service to two Lords. You see, he is talking about a particular kind of service that we owe to God. What is the kind of service we owe to God? Well, occasionally to salute him on the Lord's day morning and say, thank you Lord, you've been with me another week.

I'll go to church this morning and I'll sing with the people and I'll listen to what the fellow in the pulpit's got to say, and I may put something in the collection. Thank you Lord, I've done my bit for a week, but now goodbye till we meet again next Sunday, if it's convenient. No, that's not the kind of mastery that God requires of us.

He requires what the scriptures really mean to be slave service. He is total master, absolute master. He's our creator, he's our sustainer, he's our redeemer, he's the one to whom we are answerable, he is the Lord in truth, and he demands of us a service that corresponds to that.

Now the point is this, you can't give that kind of service to God and anybody else, because God won't share it with anybody else. And the awful thing about material prosperity is this, it wants me to serve it. It devours my time, it devours my thinking, it devours all of me, and I think about it all the time, and I'm planning, and I'm scheming, and you see it's challenging the right of God to the kind and quality of rule that he requires of my life, and that's where it becomes dangerous.

Now where do we come when I'm concluding? Jesus has enforced his prohibition and command by telling us that laying up treasures upon earth can distract the heart's affection, disturb the eye's vision, and destroy our true devotion of God. So we've got to make a choice. You see, the Christian life is not a matter of making one choice at the beginning, as if you were jumping over a hurdle, and you got into the kingdom territory, now all is free, there are no need, there's no need to make any more choices, there are no more crosses, far, far from it.

Oh, there is an initial hurdle that you have to jump over, there is a wicked gate through which you and I must press, but you know there are struggles, and trials, and temptations, and alternatives before us as long as we live in the flesh, and we've got to be decided in our minds who's our master, who are we serving, are we serving to please ourselves, are we serving to please men, or are we the absolute servants, the utter servants of the living God. Now the way to produce the righteousness which is greater than the righteousness of the Pharisees and of the scribes is along this route. You'll never become a

hypocrite if you're walking this route sincerely.

On the contrary, you will become what God made you to be and redeemed you to make it possible. Brothers and sisters, is this the route we're walking? May the God of all grace grant us at this time in his house to reassess our scale of values and to see that to spend our time in laying up treasures upon earth for the sake of laying up treasures upon earth is utterly wrong. What treasures we have and are given to us are given us in order to be exchanged into another currency, and that currency is such that they may all be used to lay up treasure that will await us when we see the King in his glory.

Let us pray. Lord God Almighty, our Father, we confess our sins before you, and they're not only sins of actions, deeds performed by us, but we confess what is deeper than that. We have developed attitudes, and we are persuaded before your word so often wrong, and that especially in this matter of laying up treasures upon earth.

Forgive us, our Lord, any of us and each of us, to whom this has become the be-all, end-all of existence, and enable us to see that in the light of eternity, you have a different plan altogether. Lord, grant us the grace to be investing our money, our silver, our gold, whatever we have with our lives, our service, our gifts in the service of the one who died for our redemption and for your glory, our Heavenly Father, in the extension of your kingdom. Hear us in Jesus' precious name.

Amen.

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