

# “Treasures on Earth and in Heaven”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – January 29, 2023*

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

New Testament scholar Tom Long says, “There are things that Christians *believe* because they are Christians; and there are things people *do* because they are Christians.”<sup>1</sup>

In this 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, in the midst of his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks about three basic practices of the Christian faith: giving money for the poor, prayer, and fasting. These would have all been recognizable to Matthew’s audience because each were visible signs of Judaism – familiar acts of piety.

The audience that first heard these words was a collection of religious folk who knew the importance of these religious acts. Jesus does not instruct the people to begin giving, praying, and fasting. He assumes that faithful people do these things. What Jesus addresses is the proper motivation behind spiritual practices.

The opening verse summarizes this well: if you act in a way designed to secure the notice of others, your deeds of “righteousness” yield no reward. It reads this way in *The Message*: “Be especially careful when you are trying to be good so that you don’t make a performance out of it. It might be good theater, but the God who made you won’t be applauding.” (6:1)<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes, even when we don’t realize we are doing it, our faith can be performative: we use our good works as pedestal to prove our worth. Do we give or pray or fast to inspire or teach others, or to make ourselves feel good? Might we be exploiting another’s bad situation in order to make ourselves look better?

Jesus’ main shift in this passage is in who does the *seeing* of our faith – these practices are intended for God’s eyes. They are interior disciplines – acts of personal devotion.

But if Christian practices are done in secret – how can they let their light shine? These are “interior disciplines,” meant to be done in combination with more

---

<sup>1</sup> Tom Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Commentaries

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, Matthew 6:1

outward spiritual practices. In the previous chapter, Jesus told his listeners to let their light shine, not hiding it under a bushel basket. And in the next chapter, Jesus will offer them what we call the golden rule, saying: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.” (7:12)

But here, Jesus is speaking about private acts of faith: what Christians do to strengthen their relationship with God. Thus, the hyperbole about practicing piety – blowing a trumpet, keeping one hand from knowing the other’s actions, praying aloud on a street corner, praying in utter secret in a closet, and purposely disfiguring one’s face – appear to be over-the-top ridiculous. But the humor intensifies serious warnings. Charity is not charity when the intent is to garner attention and influence behind it. Prayer is not prayer when the one praying is more interested in calling attention to one’s own eloquence or importance than in communicating honestly with God. Fasting, which is enacted to remember humanity’s utter dependence on God, instead mocks that dependence when the fast is poisoned by attempts to impress others with the depths of the faster’s devotion.

Surely, you have never seen Christians distort their faces to highlight acts of personal devotion, or maybe you have. Certainly, flowery prayers are never offered just so we will know that prayer is being made. And, of course, those giving charitably aren’t doing it just for the publicity, or to rehabilitate the image of the giver.

Thankfully, God always begins with grace as the starting point. The world tells us to focus on things like competition, retribution, fear, division, guilt, and shame. Jesus recognizes this and invites us to something better. It is good for us to do good to others – to participate in acts of charity and compassion. And it is also good for us to do good things even if they are not noticed by others – to engage in interior practices of the faith.<sup>3</sup>

To be authentic, an individual’s religious practices must concern a person’s interaction with God. Jesus’ point is not that *only* the private or unobservable spiritual activities count for anything, but that believers should go about their devotion, in whatever forms, as if no one else is watching. Jesus’ humorous overstatements underscore the fact that many religious folks tend – in their piety – towards self-centeredness and ironically become performances of impiety.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> SiriAnna Strommen, Women-Focused Lectionary

<sup>4</sup> Matt Skinner from *WorkingPreacher.com*

In the middle of the verses we read today, Jesus responds to the disciples' request and provides for them a blueprint for prayer. We will be taking a closer look at the Lord's Prayer during the upcoming season of Lent and discussing how its petitions mirror the remainder of Matthew's gospel principles. Here, I simply want to take note how Jesus frames our prayers, saying: "your Father knows what you need before you ask him." (6:8)

Jesus does not actually say what the "reward" for our piety will be, and we probably should not just try to guess. But there is a strong sense that the reward for our good works somehow lies inherently in the works themselves. The more deeply we stand in God's love, the more deeply we live in and towards that which endures forever, and that itself becomes the reward. If our deepest desire is for God and God's love, then there can be no greater reward than to live in God's love. That is its own reward.

And so, Jesus says, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth," (6:19) "but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven." (6:20) We certainly know how to *store up for ourselves*, whether that is data, toys, or clothes; keepsakes, traditions, or securities. But neither deadbolts nor safety deposit boxes finally protect that which we really desire; none of them make secure the treasure that is worthy of our hearts.

Jesus will tell pointed stories about the fallacy of accumulating wealth simply to store away in silos; and the danger of building houses on sand rather than on solid rock. The true value of monetary wealth, therefore, lies not its power to accumulate possessions in pursuit of comfort and security. Wealth is meant to enable generosity, and a generous heart aims to render thanks to God. Jesus says in the final verse, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (6:21) This works two ways. First, our use of wealth displays where our hearts reside. The efforts and organizations to which we put our money identify what we care for most deeply. And second, our hearts can be made to follow where our treasure goes. When we invest in certain causes and people, our desire to care for them will expand. This means that we need not wait until we can muster enough heartfelt concern for the needy before writing a check or sharing from what we have. Giving a gift – putting our resources toward uses that promote God's righteousness – may help our hearts receive a taste of what God desires for the world.

At today's congregational meeting, we will look back over the past year to review where our treasure – material, spiritual, and emotional – has been directed. We choose, as the church, to support certain projects or organizations over others;

some of them we know well and have been giving to for years, others we support out of faith, trusting that God will use our giving not only to help their work, but also to grow within us a deeper connection.

We also know that in order to best live out our calling to love and serve others, we must pay attention to our relationship with God by practicing the type of interior disciplines Jesus is speaking about here. Valley's outward mission and ministry is fed by prayer; not that which is done on street corners and pedestals, but authentically and in private. We do not need to blow trumpets and disfigure our faces in order to be faithful to God; when we do and give what we can, that is enough.

“What our hearts really desire,” Tom Long also says, “is to count for something and to count to someone.”<sup>5</sup> We have been called to lives of purpose and relationship; and the church offers a collective means for storing up these treasures of the heart. Often times, as individuals, we do not have the time, knowledge, resources, fortitude, or faith to act on all the spiritual practices – outward and inward – that would like. The church body can offer the courage and strength, the material and spiritual support, to maintain our disciplines; to *do* what Christians do.

Thus, whether we are checking in on a sick friend or helping to build a school in Africa, whether offering our extra housewares to Pass-It-On or working to house the homeless; whether growing vegetables on an otherwise unused plot of land or seeking to transform environmental policies, the church and its members act from the gospel principles of purpose and relationship. Because we are beloved children of God – and called to love others as we are loved – we can resist simply stockpiling all that we can and, instead, live as if life is not a struggle between the winners and losers over limited resources. In God's economy, there is no lack of regard, respect, and recognition; there is no need to prove our piety to anyone on earth, for our hearts belong to – and find their home in – God. Amen.

---

<sup>5</sup> Tom Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Commentaries