

Treasure

Psalm 73:23-28 | Romans 12:1-8 | Matthew 6:19-21

MATTHEW 6:19-21

¹⁹Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

INTRODUCTION

One of the more interesting insults to emerge in Christian circles these last few years—as even the Christian faith has polarized around issues of race and social justice and socioeconomic disparity—has been that of *Marxist, socialist, or communist*. To the theologically conservative, the liberals are either naïve communists or, worse, dangerous proponents of an economic system that has, without exception, driven countries into devastating economic collapse under despotic dictators. To the theologically liberal, Jesus *was* a communist who stood for economic equality and the overthrow of an oppressive system. And the apostles created a peaceful, proto-communism and religious socialism in which all things were held in common and for the common good (as our Acts reading two weeks ago suggests).¹

Both sides, however, fail on this front: Neither of them understands actual economic theory. Concepts like socialism and communism have definitions, and we simply don't have the data from the New Testament to determine anyone's political or economic affiliations in modern terms.² But both sides succeed in this: They agree that how one views economics, especially the personal economics of one's own material possessions, and how one sees God, are intimately and inextricably connected. It was Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian dissident and philosopher, who, in his remarks upon winning the Templeton Prize in 1983, sought to explain why Soviet communism was so ruinous. He said: "Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened."³

There's always been an uncomfortable relationship between God and money, between the Christian faith and how one approaches finances, between personal wealth and personal discipleship—from the way the early church looked out for one another, in a way contrary to that of the Roman Empire, to the strange excesses of the church in the medieval period, to the destructive disease that is the prosperity gospel in our age. Some of you were quite relieved when I started talking about political philosophy—having heard the Gospel reading and knowing we're on about stewardship as a church right now, you feared that I was going to enter the pulpit like a robber enters a bank, ready to politely ask you to empty your wallets and valuables into the collection plate. Don't worry, that will happen later in the service. For

¹ See Acts 4:32-35. See also Acts 2:42-47 and 5:1-11.

² In the same passages in Acts, for example, there's both affirmations of private property and concern for the community's wellbeing. See above.

³ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "Men Have Forgotten God": Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's 1983 Templeton Address," National Review, December 11, 2018. See [nationalreview.com/2018/12/aleksandr-solzhenitsyn-men-have-forgotten-god-speech/](https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/12/aleksandr-solzhenitsyn-men-have-forgotten-god-speech/).

now, let's take a look at this Matthew reading and ask the question: What does money have to do with discipleship? How are these things connected?

1. TREASURE

The Matthew passage begins: "*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth.*"⁴ We hear those very familiar words and we are confronted with the question: What are the treasures we are meant to be storing up? The answer is not apparent from passage, as the verse only refers to *treasures*. Yet, the answer is clear from the context. It has an obvious material dimension. Jesus continues a few verses later: "*You cannot serve God and wealth.*"⁵ But more than just disposable income, the passage goes on to refer to food and clothing—essential goods.⁶ This statement by Jesus, then, is getting at the very basics of material wealth, the foundation, all that is necessary in a material sense to sustain life. This isn't just post-tax funds used for entertainment, but it pushes us to think about all material resources.

But is it only the material? The first part of this chapter in which our passage is found addresses the practicing of righteousness—what we might call piety or spiritual disciplines.⁷ Jesus starts with a proposition and then gives three examples that all follow the logic of the proposition—three examples of practicing disciplines: giving to the poor (which also has to do with money), but also praying, and then fasting. In each, the point is repeated in nearly identical terms. This suggests that *treasure* does not have just a material dimension, but also a moral dimension. And the concern in Matthew 6 is whether a person is practicing these disciplines to be seen by others here in this life—what our passage calls storing up treasures on earth—or out of a relationship with God who is heaven—what our passage calls storing up treasures in heaven. In other words, how we understand our material wealth and our moral behaviour are inextricably linked.

2. IN HEAVEN

But another question arises. Where are we to be storing treasure? As our reading tells us, we have two choices. Here on this earth, or up in heaven. We can store our treasures here on earth. We can invest in property and purchase goods. We can put our trust in the almighty Euro and trust it to secure our wellbeing. But Jesus tells us plainly of the disadvantage of that. Rust and moths and thieves. This world—our world of material goods—is temporary. It is destructible. Material wealth on earth is temporary and always tarnishes, stains, and depreciates. But this is, again, more than just a statement about material goods though—there is a moral dimension here as well. The depreciation of our material lives, our physical lives, is very much because of our fallenness, our sin. Our selfish ways always result in our destruction—this was, in part, Solzhenitsyn's point about communism. Just like rust and moth destroy and thieves break in and steal, human sin robs this life of any eternal value.

And so, what's the alternative? Investing in a different way. Store your treasure with God by investing in things eternal. Make your focus those transcendent things of the faith—of love and charity, of faith and obedience, of truth and the gospel. In short, become a disciple of

⁴ Matt 6:19.

⁵ Matt 6:24.

⁶ See Matt 6:25-34.

⁷ Matt 6:1-18.

Christ Jesus, a follower, one who believes, one who gives himself to the community of the faithful and the mission of the church. Where do you put your trust? In the security of wealth or the generous provision of God? Where will you focus? Where will you direct your attention? Your efforts? Your resources?

Jesus, for his part, is clear. Invest in heaven. God will provide for his people as he always has done.⁸

3. DIRECTS THE HEART TO GOD

Jesus then concludes the matter with a simple statement: *“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*⁹ It’s a somewhat surprising statement, though, and one that is often misunderstood. It’s the mirror of what we expect. Jesus has just told us to store up treasure in heaven and not on earth, so we expect that to be the result of faithfulness, our loyalty to God. That is, we expect the statement to be diagnostic—where our money goes will tell us what our heart desires. And that is true, to be sure. You can learn a lot about what a person cares about, what they think their life is about, in how they invest themselves. It *is* a good diagnostic. To what end does a person commit their material resources? How does a person spend his or her time? What do they talk about? These are all pretty good indicators of to what a person has given their heart.

But Jesus actually flips the statement. *“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*¹⁰ Did you hear it? Your heart will actually follow your money. Store your treasure in heaven, invest your life and resources in the things of God, and your heart will follow. In other words, if you want to be a disciple of Christ Jesus—if you want to follow him—it not only involves how you view your piety and your property, but it actually follows how you use them. Matthew’s Gospel, more than the other three Gospels, concerns itself with true discipleship—what it means to grow as a believer and mature as a follower of Jesus. So don’t miss this, how you understand your personal finances is something that, apparently, needs to be dealt with, and at a fairly early stage.

4. AND RESULTS IN DISCIPLESHIP

Practically, of course, you might be sitting there thinking: ‘This is all well and good, but it sounds like a hard challenge. I need my money to live and take care of my family, I don’t think I can spare much to give much to the church or help the needy. Praying is fine, and I can make a church service occasionally, but I’m rather busy. Time is in short supply.’ Fair enough. But let’s think about it numerically for a moment. The longstanding historic tradition amongst Christians has been the tithe—a word that literally means 10 percent. It goes back to the Mosaic Law as well as the Prophets.¹¹ In Austria today, most people give according to the church tax, which is far less, between 1.1 and 1.5 percent. This is low compared to the American average of 2.5 percent, which is, by the way, down from the average of 3.3 percent during the Great Depression.¹²

⁸ This is actually the point of the following verses in Matt 6:25-34.

⁹ Matt 6:21.

¹⁰ Matt 6:21.

¹¹ Lev 27:30-34, Num 18:21-32, Deut 14:22-29, Mal 3:8-15. See also 2 Chron 31:4-5, Neh 10:35-37, and Amos 4:4-5.

¹² See the statistics at [nonprofitsource.com/online-giving-statistics/](https://www.nonprofitsource.com/online-giving-statistics/). If you want it in very practical terms: if we assume just the people on our electoral roll (~150 people) donated to the church, we assume that every single one of

Now, I'm not suggesting that everyone needs to give 10 percent—though that would secure the witness of this church for this year and many years to come—but I am saying that you should think about what your approach to money says about your approach to discipleship. Or think about it from a different angle. We invest in health in so many other ways—from buying organic foods to spending, on average, €41 per month for gym memberships. These are good things. Absolutely keep doing them. But maybe also consider what the material cost of investing in your spiritual health might be? Maybe it's taking a class, or buying some books, or yes, even giving to the ministry of this church.

If we look only or even primarily to ourselves, if we look out primarily for our own good or pleasure, we will have hard and impenitent hearts. And what we store may be treasures in this life, but it is far short of what God has for those who love him, who give all they can to living in a way that honours him, out of a penitent heart—a repentant heart. In the end, where will you direct your heart? Where will it be found? Do you really want to grow in your faith, to mature as a Christian? Then it might be time to consider what role your finances play in your discipleship—and how you participate in the mission of God. Do you want Christ Church to be here for generations to come? Do you want to share in a vision of discipleship and spiritual maturity for this community, and for those who have yet to set foot in these doors? Then let's not neglect the role of finances. An Associate Rector, a Youth Director—these things cost. Mission and discipleship cost. Invest in the treasure of heaven.

CONCLUSION

Now of course, none of us can actually do it perfectly. I'm not telling you that all you have to do is behave in a certain way and live a life of humility and give an extra 5% to the church. We don't actually have resources of our own or a righteousness of our own to practice. But Christ Jesus died on a cross to save us. He bore our wrath. And he gave us righteousness.¹³ We are but stewards—stewards of the righteousness and resources he has given us. So, store your treasures in heaven. Invest in the eternal. If you love Jesus Christ, then put what he has given you to work for him, out of love for him, and gratitude for what he has done. As an old Irish hymn goes:

Riches I heed not, nor vain, empty praise,
Thou mine inheritance, now and always,
Thou and thou only first in my heart,
High King of heaven, my treasure thou art.¹⁴

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, may we who have been blessed by your Son, seek to direct our hearts to you, laying up for ourselves not treasures on earth, but treasures in heaven. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

them made the Austrian minimum wage and gave 5 percent (not 10 percent), the total annual income would exceed what we predicted our 2020 giving income to be by nearly €10,000.

¹³ This concept of *imputed righteousness* comes from 2 Cor 5:21 and other such passages as 1 Cor 1:30 (see also Rom 3:21-22, 4:6, 10:3, and Phil 3:9 on the righteousness of God as the means of salvation for mankind).

¹⁴ "Be Thou My Vision" is attributed to St. Dallán Forgaill in the 6th century, although scholars often place it in the 8th century. The first manuscripts of the poem date to the 10th or 11th centuries. The common English version was translated by Eleanor Hull and published in 1912.