

The Treasure Principle

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Matthew 6:19-21

Sermon Series:
Gospel in Life

Which comes first, earthly treasure or the human heart?

Which came first, the chicken or the egg? This riddle is as old as Aristotle and Plato.

Scientists, in recent years, have sought to answer this question by appealing to evolution. They have speculated that a precursor to a chicken, a proto chicken, mated with another proto chicken to produce an egg that hatched the first definitive chicken. Thus, the egg came first and the chicken came later.

British scientists are now claiming to have cracked this age-old riddle once and for all. Researchers used a super-computer to zoom in on the formation of eggshell. They determined that the protein in a chicken called OC-17 converted calcium carbonate into calcite crystals to produce the egg shell. In other words, the protein found only in the ovaries of a chicken is necessary in the formation of eggshell. The egg can only exist if it has been created inside the chicken. Dr. Colin Freeman, the lead scientist on this project, writes in the paper Structural Control of Crystal Nuclei by Egg Shell Protein, "It has long been suspected that the egg came first, but now we have scientific proof that, in fact, the chicken came first."

Thus, the chicken came first and then the egg.

A similar chicken versus egg conundrum is posed by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount. Which comes first, earthly treasure or the human heart?

Jesus cautioned his followers, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth" (Matthew 6:19). Treasure appears two times together in quick succession, so literally this verse reads, "Do not treasure for yourselves treasures on earth."

The temporal value of these treasures on earth is underscored by Jesus: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moths and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal" (Matthew 6:19). We don't wear garments made of 100 percent wool anymore. The people of Jesus' day clothed themselves in wool. Moths love wool fabrics; synthetic garments don't have the same appeal. Moths lay eggs in wool, and the resulting larvae chew their way through woolen apparel. In like fashion, precious metals are susceptible to corrosive rust just as mud brick homes are easy prey for would-be thieves.

The way we fawn after money and the people who

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accumulate it would suggest that we are not buying into Jesus' Treasure Principle. When our homes become full of stuff, we rent storage facilities to store our accumulated possessions. Some of us are all about the business of storing up treasures on earth.

Jesus told a parable about a rich man who stored up treasures on earth. He razed his storage barns to build bigger barns. But the very day he finished his new barns his life was demanded of him. Jesus concluded, "So it is with anyone who heaps up treasures for themselves and is not rich toward God" (Luke 12:16-21).

Hoarding treasures on earth is like stockpiling confederate currency. One day all this stuff we're accumulating will become worthless. Either these earthly treasures will leave us or we will leave them.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, toured a vast estate with a proud plantation owner. They rode horses for hours yet still were only able to see a fraction of the man's property. At the end of the day, they sat down to dinner. The plantation owner excitedly asked, "Well, Mr. Wesley, what do you think?" Wesley replied, "I think you are going to have a hard time leaving all this."

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moths and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up yourselves treasures in heaven where

neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal" (Matthew 6:19-20). "Treasures in heaven" sounds so ethereal and other-worldly. Jesus uses the term to convey lasting, permanent treasure.

I officiated at two funerals this past weekend. At both funerals, I urged people to live for things that matter. The only things that endure are faith, family and friends. Earthly treasures will not last, so live for things that matter. William James once said, "The best use of life is to invest in something that will outlast life." Invest in enduring qualities like forgiveness, love and mercy.

Jesus summarizes his message with the words, "For where your treasure is, there will be your heart also" (Matthew 6:21). Which comes first, treasure or the human heart? From Jesus' vantage point, heart follows treasure. "For where your treasure is, there will be your heart also."

Our hearts resemble the needle of a compass. Our hearts always point in the direction of our treasure. Our hearts always go where we put our money.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Jesus' Treasure Principle has implications for our time, our money and our work.

First, Jesus' Treasure Principle relates to our allocation of time. Ask yourself: What do I treasure? What is near and dear to me? What do I value? Be

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honest. Do I treasure Christ and his church or do I value my reputation, my stuff and my obsession about having high-achieving children?

I had a conversation this week with our children's ministries staff. Our church faces the challenge each week in Sunday School of sporadic attendance. We'll see one collection of kids this Sunday and another group next Sunday. It's hard to gain traction with children if there is no consistency.

This lack of consistency, according to our children's ministries staff, is due to one primary reason: youth sports. Sunday morning was once the exclusive domain of Christian churches. Those days are long gone. Sunday morning is now prime time for youth sports.

Now, I'm hardly indifferent about sports. I played multiple sports in high school, one in college and coached three years at the collegiate level. My daughter is a high school coach, and my son-in-law is a college coach. But let me tell you what I see. I watch parents frantically order family life around organized sports. I see parents being swept along by the popularity of youth sports. I witness parents seduced by a false sense of importance about sports.

Seventy percent of all youth quit organized sports by age 13. That's a shocking statistic. The reasons for this high dropout rate are hardly surprising—kids say organized sports aren't fun anymore and it's too much

pressure. Why do we invest so much time in something that is unlikely to outlast middle school yet invest so little time in something that lasts a lifetime? I'm challenging us to give the same priority to faith formation that we give to sports, music lessons, dance recitals or anything else that competes for our time.

Second, Jesus' Treasure Principle relates to our allocation of money. Some of you knew I would get around to money, since stewardship comes around each fall in every church I've ever known. Why not talk about money? Money represents a tangible expression of what's important to us. Our check books, automatic bill pay and credit card statements express what we really treasure.

What are you doing with your money? Or you can ask it another way: what is your money doing to you? Money does funny things to people. It has a way of clouding our vision and distorting our perspective. One way to disarm the power of money is to give some of it away.

I need your help in conducting an experiment. Write down on an index card ten percent of your annual income. I don't want your name, just a dollar amount.

I chose ten percent because the tithe in Scripture is the recommended percentage to support the Lord's work. What is ten percent of your yearly income? Record this number

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Heart follows treasure every time.

on your card and fold it in half. We'll tally these numbers and share the aggregate total next Sunday.

Next Sunday, we'll ask you to make a financial pledge to support the work of Christ through this church. Our 2012 pledge card consists of two lines: one line to support our Mission and Ministry budget and a second to help reduce our debt from constructing this sanctuary and ministry center.

I don't mean to necessarily imply that ten percent should go to support the work of our church, but I will tell you this church is worth your investment. There is so much untapped potential in this church.

What are you doing with your money? Are you investing only in the treasures of earth? Jesus calls us to invest in the treasures of heaven.

Third, Jesus' Treasure Principle correlates to our life's work. Some of you are paid for your work; others are unpaid. Some of you work for the family; others work for a company. God has work for you to do in this world. Where do your passion and talents address the great unmet needs of this world?

Tim Keller, in the sixth chapter of his *Gospel in Life* book, addresses this subject of work. Keller makes the point in Genesis that God gave us work to do in the garden well

before there was anything wrong with the world. Work is not a curse. God gave us a mandate to work the garden and take care of it (Genesis 2:15).

We do not work merely for a paycheck. There is more to work than monetary gain. Paul urges Christians to work for God. “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord and not for people...It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (Colossians 3:23-24). How can we work with Christian distinctiveness in our homes and places of employment?

Nicholas Herman was born in France in the year 1614. After his conversion to Christ at age 18, he went to work in a kitchen monastery. His work was rather tedious, cooking meals and scrubbing pots and pans. But he used this humble setting to practice the presence of God. The book *The Practice of the Presence of God* is a compilation of 15 letters assembled after his death. It's a story of how an ordinary person doing menial work becomes an extraordinary Christian. He sought to bring God into every aspect of life, whether he was deep in prayer or peeling potatoes in the kitchen.

Heart follows treasure every time. I'm pleading with you to live for things that matter. “Where your treasure is, there will be your heart also.”