

THE TREASURE THAT LASTS

Today's Text: Matt. Chap. 6

Extracts:

[Jesus opened His mouth and taught the multitudes, saying], **“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”** [Matt. 6: 19-21]

Bernard Madoff, a Wall Street fund manager, is currently on trial in New York for allegedly confessing to running a \$50 billion fraud that has affected investors and charities around the world.¹ Among those ensnared in Madoff's scam were rich investors, such as the world's richest woman, Lilliane Bettencourt, Spanish billionaire, Alica Koplowitz, top Hollywood producer, Steven Spielberg, and Nobel laureate, Elie Wiesel. On Tuesday, 23 December 2008, New York police reported that a 65-year-old French executive and hedge fund adviser, Thierry Megon de la Villehuchet, had died from apparent suicide, after reportedly losing \$1.5 billion in the scam.

Why did so many smart rich people fall for Madoff's scam? Perhaps his credibility had to do with it. He had previously served as the Chairman of NASDAQ, (acronym for National Association of Securities Dealers Automated Quotations), the largest electronic screen-based equity securities trading market in the United States.² A person like that could be trusted even by any of us too to take care of what we treasure the most.

You have worked so hard and saved so much towards your retirement. But how safe are your investments? Do you trust your bank or pension fund? Financial institutions will collapse as the current global economic crisis has aptly demonstrated. Fraudsters can deceive you no matter how smart you think you are. What exactly do you treasure in life and where are you saving it?

Those and more are the issues that we shall examine in today's study.

¹ Story based on the following sources: “Madoff investor found dead in apparent suicide, police say,” www.cnn.com/2008/CRIME/12/23/madoff.investor.suicide/index.html#cn-STCText, and “Madoff investor found dead,” www.cnn.com/2008/12/23/news/companies/madoff_scandal.reut/index.htm

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NASDAQ>

1. What do you treasure the most?

The words of Jesus give us a good picture of what treasure means to different people when He said, “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” [Matt. 6: 21]. So, anything on which we place top priority is part of our treasures. It may be tangible/material or non-material, earthly or celestial. Material prosperity or wealth is commonly treasured by most people.

Wealth has been defined to include money and property. Silver and gold [Prov. 22:1], lands and houses [Matt. 19: 29; Mk 10: 29], and treasures [Matt. 6: 19] in abundance [Eccl. 4: 12] have been counted as material wealth. King Solomon was so rich that his “drinking vessels were gold, and all the vessels of the House of the Forest of Lebanon were pure gold. Not one was silver, for this was accounted as nothing in the days of Solomon” [1 Kgs 10: 21].

A wealthy person is “someone who has accumulated substantial wealth *relative to others* in that society or reference group.”³ However, wealth is more than material. Think of two people in dissimilar circumstances. Mr. A is homeless and lives under a busy highway bridge where mosquitoes feed on him every night. His meals come from the garbage dumps and for a pillow he uses a cement block picked from a nearby construction site. Yet, every night, he sleeps very soundly. Ms. B, on the other hand, is filthy rich. She is a successful banker who lives in the affluent part of the city. She can eat whatever she wants and drives the latest models of cars. Yet, every night, she needs tranquilizers in order to fall asleep on her feather bed! Which of the two is wealthier than the other?

In general, what we treasure the most in life can be all or some or one of the following:

a) *Net worth*

Net worth is the surplus of what we *own* (assets) over what we *owe* (liabilities). It is measured in terms of the size of our bank accounts or investments or material possessions. Surplus suggests that we have more than we need. Only a few people can attain that. In reality, we know that we live on credit. The homes we claim to own may belong to the lending companies that provided the mortgage loans. Our travels, meals and clothes were bought with credit cards which we have not yet paid off. A well-established economic principle is that our needs/wants will always exceed our means. That is the origin of our greed! Billionaires still work and, without credit cards, the rest of us could starve! Therefore, treasures measured strictly in terms of net worth cannot last because we can never have enough. That was why Jesus asked His listeners, “Is life not more than food, and the body more than clothing?” [Matt. 6: 25].

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/wealth>

b) *Self worth*

Self-worth is the favourable impression that we desire to make on others through our words and deeds. The word of God says, “a good name is to be chosen rather than great riches; loving favour rather than silver and gold” [Prov. 22:1]. Therefore, our self worth exceeds our net worth in that debtors can still command respect for their integrity.

A good number of us are pretenders or hypocrites, while some of us exhibit empty pride, since we may never know what we do that can impress others. Without the power to reward or punish, many of us will not be noticed in a crowd of two! That is why the word of God says, “to seek one’s own glory is not glory” [Prov. 25: 27]. Instead, “let another man praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips” [Prov. 27: 2]. Therefore, treasure defined in terms of self-worth cannot last nor increase because it is anchored on selfishness and self aggrandizement for “he who lays up treasure for himself ... is not rich toward God” [Lk 12: 21].

c) *True worth*

True worth is how God sees us “for the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” [1 Sam. 16: 7]. The only true treasure is the one that comes from God for “the blessing of the Lord makes one rich, and He adds no sorrow with it” [Prov. 10:22]. It is God who gives us power to get wealth for His purpose [Deut. 8: 17-18]. Writing to Gaius, an elder in the church, John said, “I pray that you may prosper in all things, and be in health, *just as your soul prospers*” [3 Jn 2]. Therefore, only God knows our true worth, and the treasure that lasts is the one that is based on true worth. That is the one emphasized by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

2. Finding the safest place to store your treasure

At the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught us not to lay our treasure on earth “where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal.” Instead, we should lay it in heaven which cannot be accessed by thieves or destroyers [Matt. 6: 19-20]. Therefore, Christ was not condemning earthly treasures per se. Instead, He was warning us *not to rely on them* because they cannot last and “where your treasure is there your heart will be also” [v. 21]. So, how can we ensure that the pursuit of material wealth does not prevent us from attaining eternal salvation in heaven?

To answer that question, let us examine how some people save their treasures:

a) *The Hoarder*

The hoarder attributes his/her success to own efforts and spends it on own lust. Hoarders are quite selfish and would prefer to hide their treasures even away from tax authorities! In the process, hoarders tend to lose their treasures to fraudsters, “moth,” “rust,” and “thieves” [Matt. 6: 19].

The rich young man who had boasted of faithfully keeping the Ten Commandments went away sad when Jesus asked him to sell all that he had and give to the poor and come follow Him [Matt. 19: 16-22]. The Parable of the Rich Fool was told by Jesus to illustrate the point that we should “take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses” [Lk 12: 15]. The man’s estate produced much abundance and he became very rich, to the extent that he had no more storage room. Instead of *sharing* his abundance with the needy, he decided to pull down and enlarge his barns. Thereafter, he would sit back and enjoy himself, telling his soul, “Eat, drink and be merry.” God said to the man, “Fool! This night your soul will be required of you” [vv. 16-20]. Apart from going to hell, his estate went to others! The hoarder’s treasure cannot last.

b) *The Squanderer*

The squanderer is a person whom God has blessed (through, for example, inheritance or hard work) and who then goes to waste it on sinful ventures. For example, in the Parable of the Lost Son [Lk 15: 11-32], the younger son obtained from his father his inheritance. Soon after, he “gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there *wasted his possessions with prodigal living*” [v. 13]. We know what happened to him. Famine came to the land and hunger struck the young man. He returned home to his father in shame and disgrace.

Solomon is a classical example of a squanderer. God had blessed him with wisdom and material wealth beyond measure. All the kings of the earth came to Jerusalem to hear of his wisdom and brought him expensive gifts [1 Kgs 4: 29-33]. He spoke three thousand proverbs, some of which today constitute the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon. He also built the temple for which his father, David, had gathered the materials. In the end, he squandered his prosperity on foreign wives and worship of false gods [1 Kgs 11: 1-15]. The kingdom of Israel went downhill from that point on. Solomon had squandered his spiritual gifts by allowing material blessings to rule over him. Squandered treasures cannot last.

c) *The Distributor*

In English folklore, Robin Hood was an outlaw who lived in the woods to escape arrest. Occasionally, he would attack the rich and oppressing elite

and distribute his loot among the needy. Consequently, it was difficult for him to be caught because the needy did not provide information on his whereabouts! That is an example of a distributor that gives away what belongs to others.

A good example is in the Parable of the Unjust Steward [Lk 16: 1-11]. There, Jesus tells the story of a smart servant who was about to lose his job. His master had told him to render an account of his stewardship before leaving. What did he do? Knowing that he was too old to dig and too ashamed to beg, he went to his master's debtors and got them to reduce how much they owed, with the hope that on his dismissal, they would fund his pension scheme! His master caught him in his act!

The modern Robin Hoods may be white-collar criminals, that is, highly placed people in business, the civil service or politics who use their positions to enrich themselves, family, friends and supporters. They pay tithes on their loot and make fat offerings, including building places of worship for their denominations. They champion causes and set up charities or foundations for the poor and the needy. As a result, they are seen as the leading lights of the community and people would do everything to protect them! However, they cannot deceive God because "getting treasures by a lying tongue is the fleeting fantasy of those who seek death" [Prov. 21: 6]. Since the earth and all its fullness belong to God [Ps. 24: 1], distributors are actually stealing and throwing away God's property! Therefore, "as a dream, when one awakes," so will God "despise their image" [Ps. 73: 20]. The telling conclusion is that you cannot build lasting treasures by evil means, that "you cannot serve God and mammon" *at the same time* [v. 10].

d) *The Investor*

The investor is a God-fearing person that uses honest and God-sanctioned means to make his/her wealth and uses it to glorify God for "the blessing of the Lord makes one rich, and adds no sorrow with it" [Prov. 10: 22]. In addition, "the fear of the Lord leads to life, and he who has it will abide *in satisfaction*; he will not be visited with evil" [Prov. 19:23].

There are numerous examples of people in the Bible who placed God above their earthly wealth. For example, Barnabas "having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet" [Acts 4: 36-37]. Cornelius, a Gentile and a Roman officer, was called "a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, *who gave alms generously to the people*, and prayed to God always" [Acts 10: 1-2]. Therefore, it is possible to be materially rich and still put God first. When Peter asked Jesus what the disciples would receive for giving up everything to follow Him, He replied that they would "receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life" [Matt. 19: 27-29].

From the forgoing, we can conclude that treasures, even if honestly pursued, cannot produce lasting satisfaction on earth or salvation in heaven unless we subordinate them to the will of God. That is why Jesus warned His disciples to “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, (and) all these things (material wealth) shall be added to you” [Matt. 6: 29-33].

3. Conclusion: The treasure that lasts

The following lessons should be noted:

- God gives us the power to get wealth. How we treasure that wealth is, however, our *responsibility*. The God-fearing person “leaves an inheritance to his children’s children, *but the wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous*” [Prov. 13: 22].
- Those who trust in their material treasures are stuck with mere *property*, that is, real estate, bank accounts and other assets, all of which are perishable, the works of human hands [Ps. 115: 4-8]., “for the *love* of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with *many sorrows*” [1 Tim. 6: 10].
- Those who place God above and over their earthly treasures will be blessed with. *prosperity*, that is, peace of mind, good health and longevity here on earth, and eternal salvation in heaven when they die [Matt. 19: 27-29].

As you begin a new year with new resolutions, may God make what you treasure in life last to eternity by Christ Jesus.

Related Readings

1. Property or Prosperity? Vol. 5, No. 21: 25 July 2004
2. Material Wealth Cannot Satisfy, Vol. 6, No. 11: 15 May 2005