

Getting Ready for the Holidays

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Matthew 6:19-21

Today I want to start our sermon in a slightly unusual way. I just want us all to take a deep breath together, in through your nose, out through your mouth. OK now, let me ask: Do anyone know what that was? It was Yoga! No, that was the breath before the plunge. The plunge is coming. We are standing on the diving board, and it's about to happen, because today I want to talk to you about getting ready for the Holidays!

The Holidays are coming! Whether we love the holidays or hate them, whether we like it or not, whether we're ready or not, they are coming! The Holidays are really coming, for the Ulrich family. Most of you don't know this about our family, but somehow, without speaking a word, the entire Ulrich clan got together on a spiritual, subliminal level, in eternity past and decided to do everything during the Holidays! Our whole year happens in the next six weeks! It starts on November 20th - that's Kelley's birthday. Then comes Thanksgiving. Then my dad's birthday is on the 4th of December, both our kids' birthdays are on the 12th of December (two years apart). Then our anniversary is on the 23rd (worst anniversary ever, if you're in ministry). My mom's birthday is on the 24th, Christmas is on the 25th, and my birthday is on the 27th. We do it all in the Holidays! It is a joyful, but exhausting time for us!

So about this time of year, we Ulrichs are asking ourselves a question that we should probably all be asking ourselves: Am I ready? Am I ready for the Holidays? Have I got all my groceries? Stuff for Chex mix, and a turkey, and the whipping cream you can never find at Thanksgiving? Do I have my groceries? Do I have all the trimmings and decorations we need for the tree and the yard? Have I made my travel plans? Have I purged myself of all those silly ideas I had a few months ago, that I was going to get everyone the perfect gift, and that I was going to make my own wrapping paper, and not use my credit card? Am I ready for the Holidays? We need to know that!

In fact, let me just ask, yes or no, are you ready for the Holidays? No! Good! I'm not alone as I look over the edge and into the abyss that is the next six weeks! We're not ready! Now, we can do Yoga breaths! Seriously, we need to get ready, for the Holidays. But getting ready for the Holidays isn't just about groceries, or travel plans, or presents, it's also a heart matter! We need to get our heart ready for the Holidays.

So for the next two weeks (before Thanksgiving, before Advent starts), we are going to look at a couple of passages that help prepare our hearts for the Holidays. Next week Alex Meyer, who is doing a mentored internship at Perry Creek Church and working with our Youth, will be preaching from Psalms 65, a passage that's going to get us ready for Thanksgiving. Today, I want us to look at a passage that helps prepare our heart, really for the whole Christmas Season: I want us to look at a passage about possessions, about what Jesus called, "our treasure." Let me invite you to turn in your Bibles to Matthew 6:19-21.

Earlier this month, as I was asking myself what would be appropriate for this season, I realized that this is a time of year when we think a lot about gifts, about bonuses, and debt, and finances. This is a time of year when we think a lot about possessions. So I thought today we would look at an absolutely foundational passage, where Jesus talks about possessions and how we should view them. This is a short passage, a clear passage, but a passage that does an amazing job of showing us how to regard possessions and a passage that's a great reminder as we get ready to take that plunge into the Holidays.

What we're going to do as we look at this passage today is just two things:

- 1) We're going to look at a promise that this passage makes about our possessions or our treasure, and then
- 2) We're going to look at three practical principles that relate to that promise, three principles that help us put it into practice.

My prayer today is just that this passage will really set the tone for our hearts with regards to possessions, as we head into the holidays. So let's read Matthew 6:19-21. Jesus is speaking in the middle of his most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, when he says these words:

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.

- Matthew 6:19-21

We are going to talk today about our possessions, our treasure. We are going to start by looking at a promise Jesus gives us in this passage, and the promise is this: We can't take treasure with us, but we can wire it ahead. Jesus teaches us here one of the most basic principles in the Bible about our possessions, our treasure, and the principle is this: We can't take our treasure with us when we die, but we can wire it (or if I want to be relevant, I should say "we can Vinmo it") our treasure ahead.

The bad news: We can't take it with us. We are ultimately going to leave behind all the earthly treasure that we accumulate. If we put our hope in earthly riches, they will ultimately fail us. Either our riches will run out at some time in our life, and we'll be poor. Or we will leave our riches behind when we die, and we'll be poor. We can't take it with us. It is said that when John D. Rockefeller, who was the richest man in modern history, died, a newspaper reporter asked his accountant "How much does a guy like that leave behind?" Know what the accountant said? "All of it!" He left it all. We cannot take it with us. That's the bad news.

But the good news is the promise Jesus makes here: We can actually send it ahead. Look at what Jesus says in our passage, in verse 19-20:

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.

- Matthew 6:19-20

Now, we'll talk about earthly treasures in a minute, but what Jesus is saying here is that it is actually possible for us to store up for ourselves treasures in heaven. We can store up resources, treasure, riches, for eternity! We actually can wire it ahead!

Now I have to say, I think that is a foreign concept to many of us as Christians. Many of us have heard this verse before, so maybe we nod our heads when Jesus says this. But if we're honest, we had no idea what He's talking about. Most of us have no idea what treasure in heaven would look like or what we would do with it! I mean, "The streets are made of gold, so what am I going to do with treasure!" Isn't that the way we think?

We think that because when we think of Heaven, we think of something like this (Far Side Slide). We think heaven is in the clouds, doing nothing but playing harps, and that it's the same for everyone, which by the way, eeuw! Who wants that? But isn't that what we think? So we think "What am I going to do with treasure?"

That's not what Heaven is like at all. The Bible teaches that Heaven is on a renewed earth! There will be plants, and animals, and houses and landscapes There will be all kinds of meaningful stuff to do, all kinds of things to explore, all kinds of experiences to have. There will be rewards that better our situation. Not everything is the same!

What will those rewards be? We don't fully know. We do know one reward is life itself. It's described that way. But there's a lot more than just life. There's honor. There are positions of authority. There are houses, and lands we receive, and other rewards. The Bible encourages us to build up heavenly treasure again and again! It's not just in Matthew 6, we're told to do this all over the Bible. Paul says:

Command those who are rich in this world to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation in the coming age.

- 1 Timothy 6:18-19

Jesus tells the Rich Young Ruler (if you've ever heard that story):

Sell everything you have and give to the poor, so you can have treasure in heaven.

- Luke 18:22

In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul tells us all to build the church on eternal things, so that we will receive reward from God. It's all over the Bible! We are encouraged to store up heavenly treasure!

So let me just ask you a question: Wouldn't you want to do that? The Bible says our real citizenship is in Heaven. Wouldn't you want to store up treasure there? Let me give you a little illustration.

The concept for this is from a great little book on possessions by Randy Alcorn called "The Treasure Principle." He says this: Say your home was America, but you were in France for an extended visit, maybe 80 days. While you were in France, you were staying in a hotel. There was just one basic rule: You can't bring anything back to America with you on the plane, but you can ship it ahead. Now here's the question: What would you do with the resources that you gained while you were in France? How would you spend them? Would you spend them fixing up your hotel room? Buy granite counter-tops for your room or a double recliner? Would you buy a Picasso and hang it in your hotel wall? No, you'd make sure that you had the basics and that you were comfortable, but you'd wire the rest ahead, right? Why? Because the hotel room isn't your home. Your home is America. That's where you're going to spend your real time, right? You would want your real treasure in your real home, wouldn't you?

This world isn't our real home. Our real citizenship is in heaven. We're going to be there for eternity. We're only going to be here for about 80 years. Scripture says our life here is like a vapor. I'm not saying we shouldn't have any stuff and that we should live like a pauper, but why would we want to invest all our resources here? Wouldn't we rather send our real treasure to our real home?

The promise is that we can't take our treasure with us, but we can wire it ahead. So that's the promise. Now, that promise raises some natural questions, and Jesus deals with three of these questions in the Sermon on the Mount. He answers the questions:

- 1) How do I wire treasure ahead?
- 2) Why should I wire treasure ahead?
- 3) What is the benefit of wiring treasure ahead?

How do I do it? Why should I do it? What is the benefit of doing it? Jesus answers these three questions and gives us three principles. So let's look at these questions and principles one at a time.

The first question is "How do I do this? How do I wire treasure ahead?" The answer to the question is this:

WE WIRE TREASURE AHEAD BY SACRIFICING FOR THE SAKE OF GOD'S KINGDOM.

Jesus says "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven." So how do I do that? What is it that causes us to store up treasure in heaven? Is it giving money to the church? Is it giving to the poor? Is it something else? We wonder "How do we store up treasures in heaven?"

Jesus doesn't actually tell us in these three verses. The reason he doesn't tell us in these three verses is because he's been telling us how to store up treasure all throughout the Sermon on

the Mount. As Jesus has preached the Sermon on the Mount, he's mentioned this concept of eternal reward and how to get it, again and again. In the Beatitudes at the beginning of the sermon, Jesus said:

Rejoice and be glad when you are persecuted for me, because great is your reward in heaven.
- Matthew 5:12

When you give, don't give to be seen, give in secret, and you will be rewarded.
- Matthew 6:3

Jesus said:

When you pray, don't pray to be seen, so that people will think you're super-spiritual, pray in secret, and then you will be rewarded.
- Matthew 6:6

Jesus said:

When you fast, fast secretly, and you will be rewarded.
- Matthew 6:16-18

In other words, all these sacrifices, suffering, giving your possessions, wrestling in prayer, fasting, these are all ways that we gain the reward Jesus is talking about here. That's what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount about how to gain eternal treasure.

But it's not just in the Sermon on the Mount. Some of the passages I mentioned a minute ago from other places in the Bible show us other ways we can gain eternal reward. Remember what Paul said to the rich in 1 Timothy: Do good, be rich in good deeds, be generous, and willing to share, and you'll be rewarded. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul talks about building up the church and being rewarded. Look at what Jesus says:

Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake, will receive a hundred times more (in eternity) and will be given eternal life.
- Matthew 19:29

Now when we put all this together, we can see how it is that we wire treasure ahead: We wire treasure ahead by sacrificing for God's Kingdom. Anytime you give up something on this earth, whether it's your time, or your effort, or your comfort, or your possessions, or your status, or your home, or a relationship, anytime you give something up for the sake of God's Kingdom, you wire it ahead. That means when you give your tithes and offerings to Perry Creek Church, and we do need your faithful giving during this time, you wire it ahead. When you serve joyfully inside the church or outside the church for the sake of the kingdom, you wire it ahead. When you give up your vacation to go on a missions trip, you wire it ahead. When you give up your

social status or pass up a promotion, when you say no a relationship for the sake of God's kingdom, you wire it ahead. When you share your possessions with others, you wire it ahead.

I remember in my first ministry in my home church in the 90's, there was a family in our church that had saved up their money and bought a big Christmas present for themselves. They bought a really nice home computer, when computers were expensive. They had saved for months. The kids were super-excited. Then just about Christmas time before they had even opened that computer, they met a missionary family whose computer had died. That family prayed about it, and they gave their new computer to the missionaries. They were sending their treasure ahead! Man, let me say what would it be like to have that kind of a Christmas? To focus not just on the here and now, but to send some of your treasure ahead this year?

Any time you sacrifice for the Kingdom, you wire treasure ahead. Here's the thing you need to know about wiring treasure ahead: Jesus is a really great banker! In Mark 9, Jesus said anyone who gives someone so much as a cup of water in his name will not lose his reward. He keeps track of the little things! And remember in Matthew 19, Jesus you get a hundred times as much in the Kingdom! I don't know what that is exactly, about 10,000% interest. That's pretty good! He doesn't miss a thing, and you get a great return on your investment! So, how do we wire it ahead? We wire it ahead by sacrificing for the Kingdom.

That's the answer to the first question. That's principle one. Now, the second question Jesus addresses is this: Why should we wire it ahead? Why should we focus on eternity, when it's so much easier, when it seems so much more logical, to focus on the here and now? Why should we wire it ahead? Well, I already kind of alluded to one answer earlier. We should focus on eternity because eternity is where our true home is. It's better to have a nice home than a nice hotel room, right?. So that's one reason. But in these verses, Jesus gives us another reason we should wire our treasure ahead, rather than storing it up on earth, and it's this:

WE SHOULD WIRE OUR TREASURE AHEAD, BECAUSE EARTHLY TREASURE CAN OWN US.

Look at what Jesus says:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal.

- Matthew 6:19

Now at first, what Jesus says here might just roll right by us. We might just assume he's basically saying "Don't store up treasures on earth." But if we think about it, Jesus is actually getting at something very important, something we, as Americans, really need to stop and think about. What he's saying is that, if we're not careful, the treasure we own can own us.

Think about what Jesus is teaching us about earthly treasure here: First, he's saying that if you own earthly treasure, you have to maintain it, right? He says "Moths and rust destroy earthly treasures."

In other words, if you're going to store up treasures on earth, moth and rust are going to corrupt them. Earthly treasure is subject to decay, to rust, corrosion, weathering, wearing out, breaking down, so if you have it, you've got to take care of it. The more treasure you have, the more stuff you have to take care of.

I know this because at one point my family had four cars with over 100,000 miles on them. Whenever I remember that time, my eye starts twitching! It seemed like something would fall off or break down on those cars every week! It was a constant battle to maintain them. But you know, it's not just cars. Everything you have has to be maintained, right? Food has to be refrigerated, equipment has to be serviced, carpets have to be vacuumed, keepsakes have to be protected and stored correctly.

Just about everything that we have has to be maintained. This includes boats, which is why when it comes to fishing, I have one rule: Better to be the friend of the guy with the boat, than the guy with the boat. So stuff can own us, because we have to maintain our treasure. But secondly, Jesus tells us we have to protect our treasure. Look at the second half of verse 19 again:

- Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where thieves break in and steal.
Matthew 6:19

The word there literally means "where thieves tunnel through." And again, the idea is simple. If I'm going to have stuff, not only do I have to maintain it, but I also have to protect it. And the more stuff I have, the harder it is to protect, and it can enslave us.

I saw how far this can go when Kelley and I lived in Zimbabwe. At the end of our time there, the thieving and violence got so bad that the mission moved us to one of the nicer, safer neighborhoods in Harare. It wasn't ritzy by American standards, but over there, it was pretty nice. Here was what our house was like. We had a seven foot concrete wall around the property, topped by high voltage wires with razor wire wrapped around that. We had a solid iron gate across our driveway with spikes welded on to it. We had an interior fence inside that around the house, and we had two dogs in that fence. In Zimbabwe, they say you want a yipper and a nipper, so we had one to bark and one to bite, We had iron bars on the windows and a cage on the door that locks, and another dog inside the house. Every night when we went to bed, we had doors that blocked off the hallways that we would lock so that if thieves got in, they couldn't get to us immediately. We had everything but a mote.

And you know what? We still had thieves get in! One night Elisabeth and a friend were sleeping in a little cottage out back, and I heard the dog growl, and I walked through the hallway in the dark to see what was going on. And here were about five guys trying to break into the kitchen. I released the big dog and shot in the air with my 12 gauge, and they ran off, so we were safe in the end.

But listen, think of all the resources that were put into protecting that treasure, all the money for the fences and cages and locks, all the time and attention to feed the dogs, and lock everything up, all the lost sleep wondering if someone was breaking in, the danger of running out there to confront those thieves, and everybody in that neighborhood lived that way!

Now, I know that things aren't that bad in Wake Forest. But Jesus' point still holds true: If you have earthly treasure, you have to maintain it, and you have to protect it. And if you're not careful, the treasure you own can end up owning you! That's why just a couple of verses later. Jesus says "No man can serve two masters. You cannot serve God and money." He's saying "Earthly treasure can become a master. It can own you."

Can I just say very gently that "Some of you might know what it is to be owned by your earthly possessions." Maybe it's a piece of earthly treasure you own: a nice house, or a fancy car, or a vacation home, or a big boat. I don't know! But you worked so hard to own it, and now it owns you! You have to make payments. You have to take care of it. You have to use it to prove that you really want it. You have to have all the stuff that goes with it to prove you can afford it, and it owns you.

Or maybe for some of you, it's debt. You weren't careful. You lived beyond your income, and now the credit card company owns you. Or maybe for some, it's that gerbil wheel of keeping up appearances: Gotta maintain that façade! Christmas is coming up and you're stressed. You're stressed, because you know you're going to spend more than you have and go into debt. And you know in your heart that the main reason you're doing it is so you don't look cheap! You're enslaved!

Listen, Jesus is warning us here that possessions, treasure, stuff of this earth, can own us. It doesn't matter whether you're rich or poor. It can become our master if we put our hope in it. He's saying "Don't give earthly treasure that kind of power in your life." Live for the kingdom. Live for true treasure, heavenly treasure, eternal reward. Not only will it never lose its value, but you don't have to maintain it, and you don't have to protect it. It won't wear out, and it doesn't wear you out! Peter calls it "an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade, kept in heaven for you."

Why should we wire it ahead? There are lots of reasons, but the one Jesus gives us here, is that earthly treasure can own us, so:

Principle 1) We wire treasure ahead by sacrificing for the sake of God's Kingdom.

Principle 2) We should wire our treasure ahead, because earthly treasure can own us.

Now the third principle revolves around the benefit of storing treasure in heaven. What is the benefit of doing this? Well, we have treasure in heaven for eternity. That's one benefit! But Jesus gives us another benefit of wiring it ahead in our passage, and it's this:

THE MORE TREASURE WE WIRE AHEAD, THE MORE OUR HEART MOVES TOWARD THE KINGDOM

Jesus makes a curious statement in Matthew 6:21. Right after he tells the disciples to store up treasure not on earth but in heaven, he says this:

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
- Matthew 6:21

Now what Jesus says here is important, because it kind of cuts two ways. First, he's saying what we probably think he's saying: The location of your treasure reveals the location of your heart. Wherever your heart is, your treasure will be. They will pretty much be in the same spot. As one writer said "Show me your checkbook, and I'll show you where your heart is." So Jesus is saying that.

But notice that Jesus is saying more than that. Look at the order he uses. He doesn't say "Where your heart is, you'll put your treasure." He says "Wherever you put your treasure, your heart will be."

In other words, where we put our money doesn't just reveal where our heart is. It also determines where our heart will go. Not only does our investment follow our heart, our heart follows our investment. So if you want a heart for the poor, give to the poor, and you'll develop a heart for them. If you want a heart for missions, give to missions, you'll develop a heart for it, Right? Where our treasure goes, our heart will go.

Think with me for a minute. Think of those who are on our mission team, or especially about Doug and Kathy Starkey. Would there be a difference between them hearing that there was a natural disaster in Mexico City and them hearing there was a natural disaster in Reynosa? Would there be a difference? Absolutely! A huge difference! Why? Is it because Doug and Kathy naturally care about the spot Reynosa happens to occupy on the map? No. Is it because our missions team just randomly chose to care about Reynosa? No! It's because they have invested in Reynosa! Their heart is in Reynosa because of all the treasure (the vacations, the work, the money, the planning), they have invested there!

Not only does our treasure follow our heart, but our heart follows our treasure. That's why Jesus said it's so hard for the rich to enter the kingdom. The more treasure you have here on earth, the harder it is to set your heart on heaven, so that many who have treasure on earth won't actually make it! But the principle works the other way too. If you invest in eternity, you will develop a heart for eternity. That's what this passage is all about. It's about our heart! It's not about God needing your treasure. He owns the cattle on a thousand hills. He doesn't need your stuff! It's not really about you doing specific activities just for the sake of eternal reward (although the passage does kinda teach that). What this passage is really all about is your heart.

It's about you giving, and serving, and praying, and sacrificing, not just as a means of getting things, but doing that out of the overflow of a heart that is set on the Kingdom of God! A heart that wants to see him exalted, to see him reign on the earth! A heart that wants to be part of that, and is willing to sacrifice to see that happen, a heart that is so set on that kingdom, that you will invest your treasure (your time, your money, your effort) so that your heart can be drawn there even more, a heart that is fully invested, in the Kingdom.

That brings us to the Holidays. I just want to ask you: What is your holiday season going to be about this year? Is it going to be about all this stuff you might get? Is it going to be about keeping up appearances? Investing your treasure to make sure you look good? Is it going to be about surviving the expectations of those around you?

What if it was about something different this year? What if you spent some of your time this year investing in eternity? Focusing on eternal reward? What would that look like in your life? Really! I don't know what it would look like. Maybe that would be a great discussion question for your small groups, or even for your family. What would the holidays look like, how would they be different, if we were focused more on the kingdom?

What if this year, we went through the holidays thinking less about what we have or don't have, and more about how we could wire it ahead? We can't take it with us. But we can wire it ahead, by sacrificing for the Kingdom, so that our heart moves toward the Kingdom even more.