

The Threat of the World

MATTHEW 6:19-24

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FOR THE PAST MONTH OR SO, I HAVE PLACED A great deal of emphasis on our need to develop a personal relationship with God through the private devotional life. The **centerpiece** of the devotional life is prayer: God communicates to us, we listen, and we respond. Preceding prayer is our attempt to create an environment conducive for communication. And, flowing out of prayer is a practical effort on our part to help other people. We not only ask that God's Name be honored and His kingdom be established and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven, we actually work to make these things happen. This is the devotional life: *preparation for communication, the communication itself, and a response that goes beyond the words of our petitions.* Our relationship with God grows in proportion to the quality and quantity of time we spend in our devotional life.

In evangelical churches we stress that a relationship with God can only come through salvation in Christ. This is true. But, it is also true that our salvation in Christ comes in the context of prayer. God communicates our need for salvation to us, we hear what He is saying, and we respond by asking for salvation. Salvation comes in the context of prayer.

People who say that non-Christians cannot pray are only right in the sense that they cannot pray to God as their Father in heaven. But they can still pray to God. People who say that God will not respond to the prayers of non-Christians are only right when those prayers being prayed by non-Christians are selfish and self-centered. But, God will not even respond to a Christian's prayers when his prayers are selfish and self-centered. **JAMES 4:3** says, "When you ask (God), you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." That rebuke applies to Christians as well as non-Christians. Many people pray prior to salvation. And, when people do receive eternal life, their prayers usually don't go from being 100% selfish to 100% unselfish. For most people, the change is gradual and continues on for the remainder of their lives.

Since the devotional life is so vital to the growth of our relationship with God, Satan will do everything He can to destroy it. He will attack it directly by persuading us to carry on the devotional life in a way that will draw attention to ourselves. This is why our Lord repeatedly warns us not to practice our devotional before men in order to be seen by them. The

minute our devotional life becomes a public display of how righteous we are, then it is dead. And once our devotional life is dead, our relationship with God stops growing.

NOW SOME PEOPLE MIGHT IMAGINE THAT once we overcome the devil's direct attacks upon our devotional lives, then our relationships with God are safe. But, this is not true. The enemy does not surrender that easily. If Satan cannot defeat us directly, then he will attack us indirectly. He will offer us the world as a substitute. Satan will try to convince us that the practical and enjoyable things of this world are more valuable than our relationships with God.

Today's scripture reading deals with the threat the world has upon a person's relationship with God. The words of our Lord tell us that it is a very serious threat that we must not take lightly. Let's take a close look at the threat the world has upon our relationships with God.

The basic warning Jesus gives us is found in verses 19 and 20, and it sounds like this: "**Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...**" What kind of treasures is our Lord talking about? These treasures must refer to the things or thing we value the most. The very word 'treasure' implies that it is something we value very much.

So what are some of the treasures people consciously or subconsciously store up for themselves? Let me suggest a few to you. Perhaps the most obvious is money. Another is health. Long life is yet another. Then there is physical beauty and education and reputation and emotional happiness. All these things and more have been and continue to be treasures that people work hard at storing up here upon this earth.

In contrast to these treasures, we have the very treasure that we have been emphasizing these past weeks. It is the treasure of a personal relationship with the Creator of the universe. When we work at building our own relationships with God and when we help others to build their relationships with God, then we are storing up treasures in heaven.

Satan is very clever to use the world to attack our relationships with God. He knows that we live in the world and must interact with the world. We must pay some attention to our health and our finances and

our physical appearance and our education and our reputation and our emotional happiness. It can even be argued that it is wrong to ignore these things. And, the very fact that we cannot ignore these things completely makes them a constant threat. There is a fine line between giving these things the minimal attention needed to survive and giving them too much attention to the point where they become earthly treasures that we store up for ourselves at the expense of our relationships with God. Or, perhaps it is more accurate if I say it another way. *Storing up treasure in heaven means using things such as money and health and education to serve us as we work to reach our goal of developing a relationship with God.* But, when we store up treasures on earth the focus shifts from using these things to serve us to us serving the things. And, the shift often takes place without us even realizing it.

Jesus wants us to know how very serious it is to cross the line. If I could use one sentence to sum up what our scripture lesson is saying, it would be this: Jesus is telling us, 'Don't cross the line!' Don't store up for yourselves treasures on earth. Keep your focus on storing up for yourselves treasures in heaven only.

NOW IT SHOULD BE ENOUGH THAT JESUS GIVES us such a warning in the form of a command. If I tell my children not to do something, that should be enough. But, they sometimes ask why. If I am in a grumpy mood or feeling impatient or am not sure why myself, I will answer by saying, 'Because I said so, that's why.' But, sometimes I will take the time to explain to them the reason why even though I don't have to. In our scripture reading, we see our Lord being very gracious to us by explaining to us why we should obey the command. He gives us two general explanations. In the first explanation Jesus describes what will happen to the earthly treasures that people store up for themselves. In the second general explanation, Jesus describes what will happen to us when we store up treasures on earth.

Jesus *first* draws our attention to the destructive nature and the ultimate fate of these earthly treasures. He says that "moth and rust destroy them and thieves break in and steal them." Moth and rust lodge themselves in things and gradually destroy them from within. Spiritually speaking, we can say that there is something wrong with the very nature of these earthly treasures. Regardless of how they appear on the outside, there is something about them that cannot satisfy the deepest longing of our souls. Our human tendency to get tired of these things after a while testifies to the fact that they cannot satisfy.

And they not only fail to satisfy us when we have them, but they will eventually be taken away from us. For the person who stores up for himself health and beauty, the thief of old age will eventually come and

steal both of those things away. Diseases such as Alzheimer acts like a thief to rob people from all the knowledge they have spent so many years accumulating. And, the greatest thief of all is death. Anything that is left will be taken away when we die. We cannot take any of these earthly treasures with us.

In contrast, the treasures we store up for ourselves in heaven cannot be stolen from us, because they are protected by God. "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time." Those are the words of **1 PETER 1:3-5**. Perhaps the best passage to emphasize the lasting quality of a personal relationship with God is found in **ROMANS 8:38-39**. "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." No thief can rob us from the relationships we have with our heavenly Father. And, no thief can rob this relationship from others whom we have helped to know God. They will greet us in heaven some day.

So, with this first explanation of why we should obey His command not to store up treasures on this earth, Jesus is appealing to our common sense by telling us what is happening and what will ultimately happen to these treasures. We all know that these things are true. We see it so clearly as we live in this world. We see how these things fail to satisfy other people and us. We watch people get old and die. It is not that hard to comprehend the truth spoken by our Lord. It is logical, and it matches reality, as we know it. So, why do we lay up treasures on earth when we know what is happening to them and when we know their final fate?

We do it because we become deceived. The moment we begin to cross the line, these earthly treasures start to change us. In His *second general explanation* of why we should obey His command, Jesus goes into detail describing this change.

Look at verse 21 of our text. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." These earthly things have a way of gripping and mastering our emotions. We fall in love with them. We pretend that we only like them, but we love them.

Then look at verses 22-23. There, we read about the eye that is the lamp of the body. Here, we will see, is a reference to the mind. These earthly things eventually affect the way we think so that the obvious no longer seems obvious.

And then, we have verse 24 which states that

we cannot serve two masters. We will choose one over the other. This is a picture of the will being brought under control of one of two possible masters. The final change that comes over us as we store up treasures on earth is a loss in our ability to make the right choices. Our wills become mastered by the treasures we store on earth.

THUS, WE HAVE THREE ILLUSTRATIONS ALL telling us the same thing. When the things of this world become our treasures, they end up affecting our entire personality; not merely part of us, but the whole man. Their ability to change us for the worse is powerful, and it is also subtle. So many young people begin their careers full of idealism that is pure and good. Then they begin to experience the power that comes with money and prestige. Slowly but surely they begin to lose the pure spirit they once had as they fall in love with the things of the world.

People I have married in the past were once so excited about pursuing the Biblical vision of marriage to help each other and other people grow in their relationships with God. For the majority of people I marry, at the time of their wedding, pursuing this vision is more important than anything else; otherwise, I am reluctant to marry them. But, not all the couples I marry maintain their passion for the vision.

There are many practical things to consider after we get married, aren't there? Do we rent or buy a house? Can we afford to have children right away or do we wait? Work and recreation and keeping up the house take a lot of time, don't they? Can we really afford the time to attend Sunday school or attend a fellowship group? Early in our married lives we begin to plan and we begin to calculate in a way that will guarantee—guarantee what—guarantee that we lack none of these earthly treasures or guarantee that we fulfill our vision of helping one another and others grow to know God more? Which is it?

Those who choose to pursue storing treasures on earth often do so without realizing what they are doing, but the change will come. As gradual as the change might be, their whole being will be affected in a negative way.

The order in which our Lord teaches us about this change is extremely insightful. God created us with spirit, soul, and body. When the spirit of a man is in tune with his Creator, he will naturally obey His commands. When he hears His master say, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures upon this earth," he will respond by saying, "Your will is my command. I will obey." When reminded why this should be so, there is no problem at all. It makes perfect sense that the things of this earth cannot fulfill our deepest desires and they are sure to fade away. With a clear command from the master backed up with unquestionable logic, the spirit-controlled person has a will that is resolved to

obey regardless of how he feels.

Satan knows our weak spot, so he directs his attack at our hearts. He arouses our emotions with the treasures of the world. He uses beauty and power and prestige to excite us. Long before advertisers discovered the power of human emotion, Satan already knew that he could win people through the heart. We may be able to resist the emotional tug at our hearts for a short period of time, but it is next to impossible to resist for a long period of time. Sometimes I hear people who are trying to diet referring to some fattening desert placed in front say, "Take it away from me." They know that they cannot resist forever. The emotional tug is too strong. We eventually do what our hearts crave to do. Our hearts will eventually determine what our treasures are. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

When we begin to feel our hearts crossing the line and yearning for things that destroy our relationship with God; *we must work at changing our emotions*. There was a Christian man who, although he was married, was very attracted to another woman. Satan used that attraction to attack his emotions. The emotional tug to develop an inappropriate relationship with the woman grew stronger with each passing day. The man tried to ignore and even suppress his emotions, but it did not work. Finally, he came to the conclusion that the only way to defeat the attack was to change his emotions. He worked hard at using Biblical truth to convince himself that the best way to treat the woman he was attracted to was to help her grow in her relationship with God. So he began to pray for her. He prayed that she would grow to love her own husband more and that her family would become a strong Christian family. Over time his emotions were redirected and He had victory over the devil.

I knew another Christian man who was also married but attracted to another woman. The same thing happened to him that happened to the first man. At first he knew his emotions were wrong, but he felt he was strong enough of a Christian to resist the temptation to act inappropriately. Instead of trying to correct his emotions, he decided to live with them, confident he would always have the strength to make the right choices.

But, he eventually made the wrong choice. He got the other woman pregnant and it destroyed both his family and the woman's family. When I talked to him, I was shocked to discover that the strong convictions he once had about what was right and what was wrong were no longer there. He was a deacon in the church, and he knew better. But, now there was no one who could get through to him. The change that began in his heart had moved to his mind. The way he looked at things had totally changed.

IN **MATTHEW 6:22-23**, JESUS USED THE FIGURE of an eye to illustrate the way we look at things. And, according to our Lord, there are but two ways of looking at everything in this world. I will now read to you **MATTHEW 6:22-23** from the King James Version of the Bible, which I believe, in this case, more accurately reflects the original language. While I read, see if you can pick out the two ways that people look at the world.

“The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!”

Did you notice the two ways a person can look at the world? The one way is with a ‘single’ eye. That is the good way. It is seeing things as they really are. The other way is to look at the world with an ‘evil’ eye which is a kind of double vision. It is vision that is blurred. It is vision that is controlled by prejudice and lust and desire. Truth has been rationalized to the point where it is no longer pure, and the mind is confused with twisted logic.

A person who stores up treasures on this earth will eventually experience this double vision. He will condemn the man who breaks into his home to steal his possessions. But, he will not think twice about lying to the government when he fills out his income tax forms. The apostle Paul spoke about people who had undergone such change. In **2 TIMOTHY 4:10**, he talked about a man named Demas who, “because he loved this world, deserted him.”

When we store up treasures upon this earth, a change comes over us. It begins with the heart, moves to the mind, and eventually controls the will. In verse 24 Jesus said, “**No one can serve two masters.**” When we are talking about serving, we are moving into the realm of action, the actual decisions that we make. Once the change has gone that far, then our spirits are once again enslaved. The freedom to choose what is right is no longer ours. We become slaves to our emotions and our twisted logic, and our enemy, the devil wins his victory.

And, we need to remind ourselves again what the devil is really after. He is after our relationship with God. He will destroy it any way he can. If he can’t do it directly by attacking the devotional life, then he will do it indirectly by persuading us to store up treasures on the earth instead of in heaven. All of us must take heed to the warning that “no one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other.”

In evangelical churches we emphasize the importance of being assured that you are saved and are

going to heaven. If, by that, we mean that when you store up treasures in heaven, you will not lose them; then our doctrine of assurance is good and helpful. God will protect the treasures that we store in heaven. We can be assured of that.

However, if the doctrine of salvation means that, while we are storing up treasures in heaven, we can also store up treasures on earth without fear of going to hell, then it is an evil and destructive doctrine. We cannot serve two masters. We must either focus on building our relationship with God or focus on serving the treasures of this world. We must either use things like money to serve God, or we must serve the money itself. We cannot serve both at the same time.

Our Lord is so gracious to explain why it is so important to obey His command. He knows that understanding will help us obey, so He explains it to us. He tells us what will happen to the treasures we store on earth, and he warns us what they will do to us if we store them.

Today’s scripture lesson needs to serve as a strong warning for those of us who have a relationship with God and who are presently being tempted to store treasures for themselves on this earth, and I believe we all fall into that category. And, today’s scripture lesson needs to serve as a wake up call to those who are not storing treasures in heaven. I am actually more concerned about those of you who began to store treasures in heaven (maybe when you were a child), but you have stopped so that you can spend time storing treasures on this earth. You once looked at things with a single eye, and there was light in your mind. There is a sense in which those who have never before attempted storing treasures for themselves in heaven are better off than those who started but have given up. Jesus said, “**If the light within you is darkness, how great is the darkness.**” In a sense, it is even darker than the ones who never had the light to begin with.

If you have never been serious about pursuing a personal relationship with God, perhaps the words spoken by our Lord have been a wake up call for you. Maybe the call has even reached the hearts and minds of some of you who started but have yet since stopped trying to build your relationship with God. You still have a chance to turn around. The earthly treasures you have been storing up will not last. Some kind of thief will eventually break in and take them away. And, these treasures will grip you and become your master. Has the Holy Spirit been able to get through to you today? If so, I urge you to take this opportunity to call upon God for salvation.