

Treasure in Heaven

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Texts: Matthew 6: 19-21

[Jesus said] “Do not store up treasures for yourself on the earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves dig their way in and steal; rather, store up for yourself treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves neither dig their way in nor steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will also be.

When I was a child, I got an allowance. It was ten cents for every year of age, once a week. Age 5, 50 cents a week. Age 8, 80 cents a week, and so on. It wasn't much – that 80 cents would be \$6.14 per week today – but it was my first experience with my own money. I also walked to school (uphill, both ways!), with no adult supervision, when I was eight, and I mostly spent my allowance at a candy store on the way to school. I got my allowance on Saturday, so I had to learn not to spend it all on Monday morning, but save some for each day of the week, lest my friends be able to buy candy the other days, while I had none.

Chores were another feature of my childhood: sweeping the kitchen floor, cleaning up dog poo in the backyard, picking up my room, and the like. Now I'm not sure why I remember this, I guess because the fate of my allowance lay in the outcome, but I recall my parents having a serious disagreement about whether or not my allowance was tied to the performance of my chores. My dad, characteristically old-school, certainly thought the two were connected, and I should not get my allowance if I didn't do my chores. My mom believed that my allowance should not be connected to my chores and was simply for being part of the family. For my dad, an allowance was a way to teach responsibility and consequences, but for my mom, that kind of moral education implied that a parent's love and approval was conditional – that a child had to do something to be valued in the family and earn a parent's approval.

I remember thinking when I was eight: “Gee, that moral disagreement perfectly reflects two strands of Biblical tradition reflected in the unconditional Abrahamic covenant on the one hand and the conditional Mosaic covenant on the other.” Alright, maybe I was a little older than 8. But anyway, it boils down to this: Does God love us because we do stuff, or does God love us just because we are?

Now, before you jump too quickly to affirm the latter, that God loves us just because we are, let me challenge you with today's scripture readings. You heard all those ancient proverbs:

Be assured, the wicked will not go unpunished, but those who are righteous will escape.

If the righteous are repaid on earth, how much more the wicked and the sinner!

I don't think the book of Proverbs would be big on my 8-year-old self getting my allowance if I didn't do my chores. Clearly actions have consequences there in Proverbs. But, “Oh, but that's the Old Testament,” someone might say: “things are different in the New Testament.” Leaving aside the latent antisemitism imbedded in that sort of idea, I just have to remind you of the words of Jesus himself in my reading earlier from Matthew:

Do not store up treasures for yourself on the earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves dig their way in and steal; rather, store up for yourself treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves neither dig their way in nor steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will also be.

Jesus seems to be on team Dad. No chores, no allowance. My allowance could, be a useful spiritual lesson, it could prepare me for a life of faith. Being rewarded for little things, like sweeping the floor, teaching me that I will be rewarded for big things, like serving God. My allowance could teach me how to store up treasure in heaven.

Now, the very idea that something we do here on earth could lead to treasure in heaven is not well received these days. Whether you associate it with medieval Catholicism, with good works leading to heavenly credit, or with modern fundamentalism, with individual moral (usually sexual), purity leading to the approval of God, or with the idea that an 8 year old's allowance could teach him something about the hope of heaven, we don't like the idea that good actions, or even worse, giving money, make a deposit into a heavenly treasury with our name on it, spiritual funds to be cashed in when the time comes.

Worse yet, Jesus doesn't seem to be speaking metaphorically here. The surrounding verses make clear he's talking about money. Just a couple verses later he says, "You cannot serve both God and money." Later on, Jesus tells a rich young man that to have life in the age to come he must sell all his possessions and give to the poor, for thus he shall have a treasury in the heavens. Yikes.

At this point, I feel like full disclosure is necessary. You see, I too am rich. In fact, I am one of the world's wealthiest people. As calculated by www.givingwhatwecan.org, based on line 4 of my Form 1040EZ, I fall in the top 1% of the world's population for income. My income is 25 times the world's average income. Just so you know, if your family income is more than \$98,819 per year, you are also in the top 1% of the world's population. Also, just so you know, the annual median family income in Cambridge is \$134,000. So, most of us are richer than 99% of the world's population.

So what's going on with this idea of building treasure in heaven? I mean, do we believe in God's grace and mercy or not? Is God really a god of love, or simply some heavenly accountant? Is God really on "team Dad" when it comes to allowance and heavenly admittance?

Well, what I want to claim is that it's complicated. On the one hand, God is love. Full stop, no doubt, end of story. God is merciful and gracious and abounding in steadfast love. But on the other hand, mercy and grace and love are relational terms. They only make sense in a relationship. You can only be gracious and merciful and loving to someone in the context of a relationship. And relationships are, by definition, two-way deals. God loves every single one of us – full stop, no doubt, end of story. But that doesn't mean much if we are not invested in that relationship. And what the notion of treasure in heaven is getting at is whether we are invested in that relationship. Invested in that relationship. And as is clear to anyone who has spent five minutes trying to live on their own income, money is a sign of whether we are invested in something and whether we are committed to a relationship. That's why the very word invested is so closely associated with money.

Storing up treasure in heaven is not about God rewarding us for doing good deeds or for making donations to the poor or the church or whatever godly donation we might make. God loves us: full stop, no doubt, end of story. So it's not about earning God's love, but rather storing up treasure in heaven is about whether we are interested in being in a two-way relationship with God, and thus discovering the fullness of God's love. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Now, obviously this is not primarily about objective amounts – our good deeds and good giving are going to vary depending on a huge number of variables, including ability, life commitments, income, and so much more. But the thing that does matter is that we recognize that relationships are two-way. Grace and mercy and love are relational terms, and throughout scripture the message is the same: it matters that we are invested in our relationship with God.

And this is obviously why stewardship is a spiritual matter. Making your pledge, as we will all be asked to do next week, is a spiritual matter. Does it make a difference for the life of the church how much your pledge is? Absolutely. Give all you can. Give until you notice it, maybe even notice a little pinch. Your giving will determine what we can do together to participate in God work in the world. But even more, your giving matters for you. It is a sign, not the only sign by any means, but it is a sign of whether we are actually invested in a relationship with the God who always leads with love, and mercy, and grace, and who looks for us to respond, to be invested in that relationship so that we might discover the fullness of that love.

You know, I don't even remember the outcome of that argument my parents had about my allowance. In a sense, of course, they were both right, because being part of a family is also a matter of two-way relationships. I knew both my parents loved me, and I learned a little responsibility along the way somehow. Maybe the argument even primed me to understand what it means that Jesus calls us to not waste our time on building up earthly treasure, but instead store up treasure in heaven.

In the name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Mother of us all. Amen.