

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.”²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

Where is Your Treasure?

When I was in college, I saw a skit on *Saturday Night Live* in which John Larroquette plays a man who’s just died and he asks all kinds of questions in heaven. He asks, “What’s the biggest mistake I made in life?” Interestingly, the first answer was, “Well, you left the church.” But the next answer was that once when he was on vacation in Bermuda, he walked over a \$40 million treasure buried just four inches under the sand. Of course, it was a comedy skit and so it was way over the top. But it underlines the idea of finding a treasure. That’s a staple in literature and TV shows. In fact, even Jesus told a parable about a man who found a buried treasure. Today, Jesus talks about treasure again. But this time, he doesn’t talk about finding a treasure so much as about working and saving and building up a treasure. And his words pose an important question for us: **where is your treasure?**

I.

Where is your treasure? That’s the key question for what you do with your life. Obviously, if we really could dig down four inches into the sand and find a \$40 million treasure, we’d do that. Then we’d be home free, right? Not necessarily. For years, I’ve heard that many people who win the lottery die poor. So I did a quick internet search this week and I found a website called, “Top 10 Lottery Horror Stories.” It lists ten cases where people won millions of dollars and lost it all. Some of them spent it so fast it just disappeared. Some of them were ripped off – one was even murdered by a family member hoping to inherit the fortune. Some established businesses and went bankrupt.

If you could win millions of dollars in the lottery and still lose it all, what about treasure that you spend a lifetime saving up? What about retirement plans and bank accounts and pensions? Most of us won’t amass millions of dollars, but we hope to reach a level of comfort that will last us for the rest of our lives. Jesus warns us today, **“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.”** Could that ever happen to you? You bet it could! One catastrophic illness could wipe any of us out. Remember all those people who worked for Enron? Their company president ripped off and lost their pensions. The truth is, nothing that we have here is safe. No matter how hard you’ve worked to earn it, no matter how much care you’ve taken to make it secure, moths and rust and thieves could take it all away. Even if you manage to keep it for as long as you live here, you can’t take it with you. All that effort and all that accumulated wealth will do you no good in heaven.

Instead, Jesus tells us, **“But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.”** Treasure in heaven is the ultimate retirement plan: we’re going to live forever with Christ. We will have a quality of life that the richest person on earth today can’t imagine. We will have perfect hearts and perfect joy and perfect bodies for all eternity. So how do we store up treasure in heaven instead of treasure here on earth? It begins with attitude. God is not saying here that you shouldn’t work hard or save for the future. The Bible says that he who will not work, will not eat. Jesus isn’t saying that it’s a sin to be wealthy. But the purpose of life here is to reach heaven. If you fail in that purpose, you failed at life, no matter how much money you racked up.

You store up treasure for heaven when you put eternal life first in your life. That’s the real trick because most of us don’t expect to die tomorrow. We plan to live for years. We plan to retire and enjoy our grandchildren. We plan for so many things to come and, yes of course, at the end of it all, we plan to go to heaven. But that’s not going to happen any time soon – or so we think, without saying it quite that crassly. So the other stuff comes first. Working and piling up cash reserves and pouring money into our house and all the other things of this life. Do you see the problem? Money very easily becomes a false god in our hearts. Now, you might protest and say, “Look, pastor, I’m here. I know who the true God is.” But it’s easy for us to say the right things. The challenge is to live them. Can any of us claim that we never let money become the most

important thing in our lives? I can't say that. There're times when I think more about my standard of living than I think about God. Don't you have to admit the same thing? Jesus was talking to us when he issued this warning.

Our sinful hearts worship wealth and comfort. They love money. That's why Jesus warns us today. At best, the treasuring wealth will leave us with a pile of money next to our coffin – treasure that will do us no good when we appear before God. At worst, it will betray us and leave us with nothing and then we'll die miserable and bitter and face God. Either way – whether we die rich or poor – if we die worshipping money, we die worshipping an idol instead of Christ. And we go to hell. Jesus' warning does apply to us today because the sinner inside us desperately wants to drag us back to worshipping that idol.

So what is the answer? You already know. It's Jesus. He died for the sinner we were born with. He died because even we Christians keep falling back into treasuring the wealth that we can see here. He died because our faith isn't strong enough or pure enough to keep us focused on the real treasure: eternal life with him. Jesus died and he paid for all that sin. Then he rose and said that it's all wiped away forever. It's all gone. God doesn't see that idol worship any more. God came to us in holy baptism and he applied that death and resurrection of Christ to each and every one of us. He washed us and gave us faith and promised that we will live. He has kept that faith alive ever since, through the word and the sacraments. Jesus will come to us again in communion today and give us his body and blood to reassure us that we are loved, that we are forgiven, that we are his. Every time he does that, he leads us to treasure the right thing. He leads us to store up what really matters: eternal life in heaven. And he promises that nothing can take that treasure from us.

II.

Where is your treasure? That is the key question for what matters to your heart. That's what Jesus is really talking about today: our hearts. That's where we treasure. In 1911, Thomas Edison made predictions about this year, 2011. He was reasonably close on some things. But he was way off on others. He believed houses and furniture would be made almost entirely of steel. He also thought that gold would become worthless – because steel is so much more useful. He envisioned taxis made out of gold because it would be so cheap. Way off, right? Edison was on to something, though. He recognized that what makes gold valuable is our attitude toward it. We treasure it so it's expensive. When we treasure other things, they become expensive. Jesus is telling us that treasure is what matters to you. He's asking us to think about what we value most in life. In fact, he's telling us that we have a choice about what we make the most important thing in our lives.

Whatever you choose to be your treasure, that's going to affect everything else, **“For,”** as Jesus says, **“where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”** What does that mean? It means that you belong to whatever you love most. So whatever you choose to make most important is going to determine how you spend your time. It's going to determine what you sacrifice and what you keep. It's going to determine your words and actions in more ways than we can possibly count. Whatever is the most important thing to you will show. That includes eternal life.

Where is your treasure, my friends? Does your life indicate that you are storing up treasure in heaven? If your heart is dedicated to eternal life, that dedication will show in dedication to God's Word. You will want to hear it regularly – not just when the pastor or your parents bug you or the elders call you. You'll want to hear it because you care about it. And you will want that word to be a part of your daily life. You'll take the time to read the Bible on your own. You will want that word to be a part of your family's life. So you'll read the Bible to them. You'll talk about Jesus and show them that open conversation about spiritual matters is a good thing. You will lead them – day in and day out, in a thousand different ways – to understand that we live our faith in everything that we do.

If heaven is your treasure, you will be dedicated to the work of the gospel. That means that you will willingly give a portion of your time and effort to the work of the church. Whether it's serving on boards and committees or planning new member welcomes or cleaning the church, you'll do what you can to advance the mission of the gospel. If you are dedicated to the mission, then you will support that mission. Do you pray for the gospel ministry here? Do you pray that God would lead your pastor and teachers to faithfully proclaim the word of God? Do you pray that God would bless those efforts and strengthen the faith of children and adults here at Peace and that he would bring more people to learn about their Savior? Do you pray that God would provide the material things we need – the time, the talents and the offerings necessary to do the work here and

throughout the world? And do you bring a generous offering – an offering that represents the material blessings God has given you? Where is your treasure? What does your life say?

These are difficult questions. But we have to wrestle with them. On one level, we have to address them because we have bill collectors calling. We haven't kept up our commitments to HVL and the synod. We've been threatened with collection agencies and repossessions. And even leaving the money aside, we struggle to get members to participate in the work of our congregation. That needs to change. But you know what? Even if we had more money than we could spend, we would still need to think about these questions, because God calls us to make our real treasure eternal life. And how we support God's work flows from how much we treasure eternal life and how much we treasure the things of this life.

Don't we all have to confess that we haven't always been generous with the Lord? Don't we all have to confess that sometimes we resent these calls to dedicate more time and money to our congregation? Doesn't part of that resentment come from guilt? We know that we haven't been as faithful as God calls us to be because we don't want to be. We know that God should just say to us, "Fine. No more congregation for you. You don't appreciate it. You don't support. You can't have it anymore." Worse, God should say to us, "No more heaven for you. You don't treasure it. You can't have it."

But God doesn't say any of those things to us. Instead he says, "My Son died for you. He has wiped your sin away – even your failure to treasure heaven and to support the ministry. I forgive you and I love you." Only in Christ could all that be true. Only Jesus could even forgive our unfaithfulness. And in that forgiveness, he gives us power to turn from our sinful lives and sinful attitudes. My friends, recommit yourselves to putting heaven first. Come and hear the word. Make the word a part of your every day life. Come and support our mission, as God has blessed you. Treasure the eternal life that God has given you.

I did not grow up in a pastor's family. My parents are very much like most of you. And one of the things they dislike is a "money pastor." I never want to be that kind of pastor. But I wonder sometimes if that makes me unfaithful in teaching you what God says about these issues. God calls us to treasure the gift he has given us. He calls us to dedicate our entire lives to serving him and reaching eternal life. A part of that dedication is giving back to him a generous part of what he has given us. I pray that he gives us the faith to understand what he's teaching and to live as he teaches us, not because we think we'll earn heaven that way. Not to keep our pastor off our back. Not to avoid hearing speeches from the Board of Stewardship and Outreach. But because we are God's children, bought and paid for with the blood of Christ, and we treasure what he has done for us. Amen.