

OpenTheo

Matthew 6:19 - 6:21 (Part 1)



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this segment, Steve Gregg brings us to Matthew 6:19 where Jesus advises against focusing on earthly treasures, which can easily be destroyed or stolen, but rather on laying up treasure in heaven, where it is secure. Gregg shares his own experience of choosing to live in poverty and reads from the Bible passages that discuss poverty's unique set of temptations. He points out the importance of being good stewards of our possessions and using them to serve the interests of the kingdom of God.

Transcript

Our studies in the book of Matthew now bring us to chapter 6 and verse 19, which is a continuation of the Sermon on the Mount, which in the book of Matthew occupies chapters 5, 6, and 7. Beginning reading at verse 19, Jesus said, 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.

Now, this is a very important teaching of Jesus. And as you can see, I'm sure, it is important that we understand it correctly. Because it is very easy for us either to be violators of it, or to go beyond it, it seems to me.

When Jesus said, Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, but lay up treasures in heaven. We could say, well, Jesus is teaching that we need to lay up treasures in heaven. That's true, but he is also saying that we should not lay up for ourselves treasures on earth.

And that is a command of Christ. Now, if we found a command like that, let us say, in the Ten Commandments. If God had said to the Jews in the Ten Commandments, Thou shalt not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth.

Then we would consider that to be a sin, really, to accumulate wealth. Because it would be a violation of a command of God. Well, it's no less a violation of a command of God if we violate what Jesus said.

Jesus' words are the words of God. And when Jesus said, Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth. It certainly behooves us if we hope to be his disciples.

If we hope to be right with God, and not found rebellious against his teaching. That we know what he means, so that we can do it. Now, at first glance, it may simply appear that Jesus is saying that to have any resources accumulated on earth is wrong.

Because he said, Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth. Now, what if we have a bank account? What if we have a home? What if we have more than the clothes on our back? Suppose we have a wardrobe. Are not these things treasures on earth? Of course, treasures, you might think of a treasure as gold and silver and precious gems and so forth.

Such as you find in a treasure chest in a pirate movie. But actually, of course, a treasure is simply something that you treasure. Something that is of value.

Any kind of wealth can certainly be the treasure. And if you have money in the bank, or if you have a car, if you have a house, if you have extra stuff that is not necessary for your life, is this laying up treasure for yourself on earth? And if it is, what are you supposed to do about it? Now, there are some who have taken this verse, like St. Francis of Assisi, for example, and felt like this requires Christians to live in absolute poverty. Because anything that you have beyond your essential needs is the beginning of laying up treasure for yourself.

Something in excess of what you really need. And therefore, if you are going to take this verse seriously, he thought, then you need to live like a pauper, like a beggar. However, begging is not something Jesus ever did, or his disciples even.

And so, it does not seem like living as a beggar is necessarily the Christian norm or standard either. But what does it mean, then, when Jesus says, do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven? Well, there's a couple of ways to understand this statement that would not consign Christians to total pauperism, and which could be legitimate ways of understanding it. Now, before I give them, I want to make this very clear.

Some of you are probably accustomed to hearing preachers take the hard sayings of Jesus and water them down. And take away the offense of anything Jesus said, for fear of offending audience. Believe me, I am not even tempted to do that.

I am not tempted to water down what Jesus said. I have a desire to be as faithful to what Jesus said, as I can possibly be. And I dare say that in the earlier years of my ministry, 30 years ago, when I was in my teens and I entered the ministry, I took this in quite a literal way, that I believed that poverty was the only legitimate lifestyle for the Christian.

And I spent, I would say, more than 15 years in virtual poverty. And by the way, I'm not a

prosperous rich person even now, but I chose to live in poverty, because I believed words like this were to be taken quite the way they sounded on the face of them. And I felt that to have possessions on earth was somehow wrong.

But I'll tell you what moved me somewhat from a strict poverty ethic. And that is that as I read the New Testament, it became clear that some people had houses. John's mother had a house.

There was a prayer meeting there in Jerusalem in Acts chapter 12. There were people who had property. Some of them were selling their property and giving to the poor.

Others apparently held on to their property to either use for God or to sell at a later date when another need would come up. But it seems clear that there were times when people in the Bible did not fall into the category of totally poor. Now, it is true that we don't read that riches are a normal accompaniment of spirituality in the Scripture.

And Jesus made it very clear. It's harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. And I do not believe that the Bible teaches a prosperity ethic any more than I believe it teaches a poverty ethic.

In fact, if it leaned one way of the two, it certainly would lean more toward extolling poverty as a norm than it would toward extolling prosperity as a norm. But I don't believe that the Bible makes prosperity or poverty moral issues or spiritual issues, except in the sense that the Bible makes it very clear that each has its own temptations attached to it. The Bible is very clear on the fact that when men are rich, they often do not sense their need for God.

And they feel like they can take care of themselves. It contributes to pride and toward independent spirit and toward neglect of God. Riches are a very strong temptation in this way, which is why Jesus said it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

At the same time, the Bible acknowledges quite plainly that poverty has its own set of temptations. In Proverbs 30, a man named Agur mentions that he feared that if he were to become too poor, he might be tempted to steal. And that is a possibility.

Lots of times people are faced with temptations because they don't have enough. Nor is it necessarily the case that the Bible says that being perfectly middle class is what the ideal is. Neither rich nor poor, but somewhere in the middle.

What the Bible's teaching on wealth is is well exemplified, I think, in Paul, who in Philippians chapter 4 said, I have learned whatever state I am in to be content. He says, I've learned how to abound. I know how to abound and I know how to be abased.

What he means by that, I know how to have plenty and I know how to have not very

much. But he says, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. So Paul's teaching is that whether he's poor or rich, it does not have to affect his walk with God.

He can be faithful to God in any state of life. So poverty and riches do have their own sets of temptations, but Christians don't have to succumb to temptations. And Christians can have extra money and still be Christians.

They can also have very little money or none and still be good Christians. But the teaching of Jesus, I believe, is not that Christians are not to have anything in their possession. Because if that was his teaching here, then there would seem to be widespread violation of this teaching in the book of Acts and also in the epistles, evidence of this.

Now, let me just understand what this could mean, apart from just saying we shouldn't own anything. When Jesus said, do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, we could have, and I'm not saying this is the only way we could see it, but this is a possibility, we could have here an example of what's called a limited negative. It's an idiomatic expression found frequently in the Bible where the sentence will be constructed as if it says, not this, but that.

Don't do this, but do that. However, the meaning of the sentence when it is using this idiom is don't only do this, but also do that. For example, when Jesus said in John chapter 6, do not work for the food that perishes, but work for the food that endures to eternal life.

Was Jesus forbidding his disciples to work for food? Certainly Christians are told to work for food in the scripture. In 2 Thessalonians 3, it says, if a man doesn't work, he shouldn't eat. But when Jesus said, do not work for the food that perishes, but work for the food that endures to eternal life, this is an example of what we call a limited negative.

It really means don't only work for the food that perishes, but also labor for the food that endures to eternal life. The idea being, do not neglect the one, but do both. Likewise, when Jesus said, do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth, I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.

This is another example. It literally means, I did not come only to bring peace, but also a sword. Although it is stated, I did not come to bring peace, but a sword, we know that Jesus did come to bring peace.

He said so. He left peace with his disciples. He said, my peace I give unto you.

Jesus is the prince of peace, and he is a great peacemaker. He did come to bring peace, but not only peace, but also a sword. This is a typical expression, or method of expression in the scripture.

Don't do this, but do that. Often means, don't only do this, but also do that. Now, in this case where Jesus says, do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, it is possible that here he is using a limited negative, so that the idiom really means, do not only lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, but also lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven.

Now, there is really nothing that would rule that possibility out. In which case, Jesus would be addressing people who already had been concerned about laying up for themselves on earth, but he is saying, now you need to do that thing that you have neglected. You need to be concerned also about your treasures in heaven.

Now, to take it this way would be a great comfort to a lot of rich Christians, because, of course, it would more or less be saying, it is okay for you to lay up treasures for yourself on earth, so long as you are also laying up treasures in heaven. However, I have a feeling that that is not how it is to be understood. Now, my feelings, what good are they? You can have your own feelings.

You should search the scriptures and decide for yourself. But I understand Jesus to be actually forbidding something here. And saying, you need to have your focus elsewhere.

Rather than laying up treasures for yourself on earth, you need to be instead laying up treasures in heaven. Now, the way I understand the verse would lay the emphasis on the word for yourselves. When Jesus said, do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, he is concerned about, again, motivation.

Just as in the previous chapter, or previous part of this chapter, when Jesus talked about when you give alms, or when you pray, or when you fast, don't do it in such a way that is ostentatious so that people will see. He is not saying that it is wrong for you to pray in public, or to fast and have someone find out that you fast, or to give a gift in a way that someone might possibly find out that you did it. What he is saying is you should not do it to be seen by men.

That is specifically what he says in chapter 6, verse 1. The whole idea is motivation here. You should not do these things in order to be seen by man. Likewise, earlier in Matthew 5, when Jesus said, whoever looks at a woman to lust after her has committed adultery in his heart.

Again, it is the reason, it is the motivation, looking at a woman in order to lust. In this case, I believe it may well be that Jesus is focusing on the matter of the heart as well. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth.

Now, in the New Testament, we find Christ calling us to forsake all that we have. Jesus said in Luke 14, verse 34, whoever he be of you that does not forsake all that he has, he cannot be my disciple. In the book of Acts, we read that in the early church, it says, no

one considered that the things that they possessed were their own.

That is interesting. No one considered that the things they possessed were their own. They did possess them, but they were not their own.

Why? Because they belong to Jesus. The believers were slaves of Christ. They have been bought with a price, and therefore they belong to the Lord.

And all that they had belonged to the Lord. They no longer were laying up things for themselves. All that they had were not for themselves, but for the Lord.

Now, that does not mean that nothing could be spent on oneself, if it was believed that this is how the Lord was directing them to use his money. After all, a master does provide for his servants. He does want them to eat.

He does want them to wear something. And therefore, we, as his servants and stewards of his goods, may spend some reasonable amount, as we feel that God is directing, on our own needs and our own accommodations. But, even so, we do so not for ourselves, but to serve the interests of our master, who wants us to be well and to be clothed and to eat and so forth.

The point is that whatever we have is not ours at all. It's really the Lord's. Now, when Jesus said, Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, but you can lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, that is the treasure that will be your own.

The treasure in heaven will be for you. The things that you have on earth are really not for you. They belong to someone else.

They belong to God. Jesus seems to be saying something like that. In Luke chapter 16 and verse 12, after he gives the parable of the unjust steward, he says, And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own? I should have read the previous verse, because it makes it fairly clear what he's talking about.

He says, Therefore, if you have not been faithful in unrighteous mammon, that means money, who will commit to you the true riches? Which would be, of course, treasures in heaven. And then, paralleling that, he says, And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, see, all that you possess is the Lord's, not yours, who will give you what is your own? That would be the treasures in heaven. You're entitled to possess for yourself the treasures in heaven that God has for you.

But the things that you have on earth are not for yourself. And you're not to lay them up for yourself. Now, this does not mean that you can't lay up goods in any sense.

I mean, as I said, in the Bible, there were Christians who had houses and lands and things like that. Some of them sold them. Some of them didn't.

The point was they did not say they were their own. They were the Lord's. And we have the case in the book of Proverbs of the ant, who lays up food in the summertime so that there will be food for the community.

That is, the ant community in the wintertime. And likewise, Joseph, who during the seven good years laid up food so that there would be food for the whole world in the seven famine years. Here we have cases of commendable laying up.

But the ant doesn't lay up for itself, and Joseph didn't lay up for himself. In both cases, they laid up for the whole community. And when Christians have goods, unless they give them immediately to the service of the Lord or spend them on necessities, then it would seem that they lay them up, and this should be laid up for the kingdom of God, for the needs of the body of Christ, for the needs of God's cause.

It is possible that God would tell you that you are to contribute a certain amount or a certain item to some ministry or to some missionary or to some church, and yet you would have to save up in order to do it. And so you lay that money aside until you can purchase the thing itself. Now, would that be laying up treasures for yourself? No, that's laying up treasures for the kingdom of God.

And therefore, it is not so much that Jesus is here saying that it is wrong to have money put aside or to have laid up treasures, but he says do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth. And that, of course, should cause us to examine our motives with everything that we have, because most of us, most of you within the range of my voice here, are probably in North America, probably rather prosperous, since almost everyone in North America is prosperous compared to most of the rest of the world. And therefore, you probably have more things than you really need.

Now, I'm not here to tell you, and I don't think Jesus was saying that you can never have more things than what you really need. But the question is, whose are these things? And are they really yours, or are they really God's? And are they really available to him? What you have laid up, can God have them today if he asks for them without you complaining, or do you really think of them as your own? That's really the issue. Jesus, always in his teaching, is getting to the heart of the matter.

He's not so much concerned about the balance sheet in itself. Now, the balance sheet can be a symptom. If you have a lot of money and it's just sitting there, and there's needs in the body of Christ, and there's poor people around you who have needs, and your money's just sitting there, and it really isn't being saved up for anything for the kingdom of God, and the needs of the kingdom are glaring you in the face every day, and your money never goes anywhere to serve the interests of the kingdom of God, well then, your balance sheet may very well be an indicator that something is wrong in your Christian life.

But it needn't be, necessarily. You may have a great deal of money, but all of it is the Lord's. I have a relative, actually, who's been a millionaire twice in his life.

He's made a million twice and given it away each time, but not instantly. He didn't give away the money as soon as it came into his hands. He would accumulate the money, and then he'd, in some cases, make very large contributions to certain missionary organizations and so forth.

Eventually, he essentially gave everything away, but there were times when he had lots of money in his bank account. But he was not laying up for himself on earth. He was laying up for the kingdom of God.

This, I take to be Jesus' principal meaning when he said, do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth. He said, if you do that, that is where they are vulnerable. They can be taken from you.

Moth and rust can cause them to lose their value, or thieves can break through and steal. But he said, 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.

There's quite a bit more here than we'll be able to get into in this session, but let me just observe that Jesus said that if you keep your treasures here on earth, if you store them up for yourself, they can lose their value or they can be taken from you. They are at risk as long as they are on earth. You can bury them in your backyard.

You can put them in a safe deposit box, but a war or your own death or whatever can take them from you, or a thief can find them. And so they're not secure there. But if you lay up your treasures in heaven, they are secure there.

They never lose their value there. They won't rust or corrupt, and thieves won't get to them. Now, how do you lay up treasures in heaven? If someone said, well, lay up your treasures in such and such bank, it'd be easy to know how to do that.

You simply take your money to the bank and make a deposit. But if someone says, lay up your treasures in heaven, well, where do you make a deposit there? How do you get there from here? How do you take the money or the things that you have right now and get them laid up in heaven? Now, that is a matter which obviously needs to be addressed because Jesus commands us to do it. If we stand before Jesus on the Judgment Day and we have not laid up any treasures in heaven, but we have laid up treasures on earth, we will have to answer for our disobedience, and it will not be a pretty sight.

Therefore, I think we need to take a little bit of time and talk about how do you lay up treasures in heaven. It's actually told us in the Bible how this is done. Unfortunately,

though, we're almost out of time for today's broadcast, and therefore, next time, we will discuss this question.

But suffice it to say, we are commanded to lay up treasures for ourselves in heaven, and we are commanded not to lay up treasures for ourselves on earth. And I would urge you to look at your own financial life, your own lifestyle, your own standard of living, and ask yourself, are you obedient to what Jesus said here? And if not, how important is it to you to stand before God on the Day of Judgment and have him say, well done, good and faithful servant, and how important is it to avoid having him say, depart from me, you cursed, you never were one of mine, because you never obeyed. We'll talk about this next time.