

Divided Loyalties

Matthew 6:16-24 "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ¹⁹ "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ²² "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; ²³ but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! ²⁴ "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. (Mat 6:16-24 NRS)

Divided Loyalties

As we move through the Sermon on the Mount, we come today to four short statements in the middle of the sixth chapter of Matthew. First, Jesus teaches about fasting - and like his teachings on prayer and giving alms, he continues to talk about motivation, about whether we're doing religious practices as part of our relationship with God, or are we trying to impress other people with our religiosity. It helps to know a bit about the background of fasting, the abstaining from food for some period of time. In the Old Testament, only one public fast was prescribed, the Day of Atonement. (Leviticus 16) Later on, tradition added Rosh Ha-Shanah (New Year's Day) and the ninth day of the month of Ab as a day of lamentation for the destruction of Jerusalem (by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE - and by Titus in 70 CE). By the time when Jesus lived, some, but not all, Pharisees also fasted every Monday and Thursday. Just as some people figured that the longer the prayer, the better, some reasoned that if one or two fasts a year were devout practice, then two fasts a week would be really super devout!

Many of those who fasted twice a week wanted to be sure that others noticed their fasting. In the Greek, there's an ironic play on words. "They make their faces disappear - so that they may appear to other people to fast." We might say, "They disfigure their faces - because they figure on being seen by others."¹ It became a sort of social theater, much like why some people go to the symphony or the opera, not because they like the music so much, but because they want other people to be impressed with their good taste!.

So far as we can tell from the New Testament writings, Jesus and his disciples attracted attention because they seldom fasted, if at all. (Matt. 9:14-15; 11:18-19) Jesus certainly wasn't opposed to fasting, but he was opposed to parading religious practices publicly in order to impress people.

Today, fasting is a spiritual discipline for a few people. It may be particularly difficult for us to consider. "In a culture where the landscape is dotted with shrines to the Golden Arches and an assortment of Pizza Temples, fasting seems out of place, out of step with the times."² Fasting is the furthest thing from our minds - we are an obese nation. We can't seem to fast from anything - food, from entertainment (what? No TV?) - from music or talk radio, from multi-tasking, from "stuff" - from anger, from fear, or from any of our addictions.

Next, Jesus talks about accumulating earthly treasure versus heavenly treasure. Wealth back then was partly held in rugs, garments, and hangings. It's appropriate that consumption by moths is mentioned in that context. Today, we might try to preserve wealth in oriental rugs, fine paintings, stocks and bonds, real estate, antique car collections, or gold. If our self-worth is tied to cash and possessions, then it's always at risk. Cash can be stolen, cars rust and deteriorate, corporations collapse. Clothes, interior decorating, and landscaping go out of style. The price of gold rises and falls, the financial markets are subject both to the business wisdom of corporate management - and to the emotional whims of investors in general. On top of that, every now and then there's someone like Bernie Madoff, who looks so wise but is really so wily - and you find yourself cheated.

Jesus was frank and clear in revealing the power of money and the fascination that it has for people. If we see life as a gift from God, then we can hold our possessions lightly -- but if we see life as winners and losers competing for limited resources, then the dominate attitude is, "How do I get mine - and how do I keep it?"

The phrase about storing up treasures in heaven is often misunderstood. We can easily hear this as accumulating points toward the admission price to get our heavenly reward. But the truth is, we can't earn our way into heaven, we can't deserve a place in the crowd around the throne of God. We don't earn merit badges, brownie points, green stamps, or discount coupons. Those who are in the eternal city in the presence of the Holy One are there by grace. They're there because they're loved and forgiven, not because they deposited the price of admission ahead of time. The idea of mailing deposits to heaven is works righteousness and it is bad theology!

What's more, in this whole passage about treasure on earth and treasure in heaven, there isn't a single word in the future tense. Jesus is talking about the present, not the future. We've talked before about how the Kingdom of God has already begun, about how it is near, how it is within you. As we're transformed by the teachings of Christ, we become citizens in God's realm, God's kingdom. As we walk the path where Jesus leads us, we travel deeper and deeper into the kingdom. Storing up treasures in heaven is about building the transformed relationships that are part of the kingdom of heaven. Heavenly treasure is found in things like mercy, grace, and justice – and we see it in relationships that are made using those gifts from God.

What is lasting treasure? It's the good we've done, not the money that we've made. In one of the Star Trek movies Captain Kirk is contentedly stuck in a time warp. He's challenged to leave that security for a risky venture. He asks, "Will it make a difference?" After being assured that the risks he'll take, possibly involving losing his life, will "make a difference," Captain Kirk plunges wholeheartedly into the venture.

"What our hearts really desire . . . is to count – to count *for something* and to count *to someone*. To come to the end of a day – or to the end of a life – with the satisfaction of having stood for what is good, with the joy of having been loved and having loved well in return, with the memory of having shown mercy, and with the peace of having walked with God – these are the true treasures, the treasures of the kingdom, a fortune no thief can plunder."³⁵ Jesus said that when we feed the hungry, house the homeless, and care for the sick, we're doing those things to him. The heavenly treasures are the relationships we've built with those in pain and suffering - and through them, the relationship we've built with our Lord.

I thought about skipping over what Jesus said about the eye being the lamp of the body. It wasn't that this was a hard teaching to accept. It just didn't make much sense to me. But, I've found that it really helps to understand the context in which it was written, the slang and idiom of that time. In the ancient world, the eye was thought of as projecting an inner light on things so that they could be seen. It's an understanding about the eye that Jesus' listeners would have related to. We use the imagery of the eye in a similar way when we say things like, "That man really has an eye for business." In Proverbs we read,^{RSV} **Proverbs 22:9** "He who has a bountiful eye will be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor." That person's eye was bountiful; it let them see opportunities to be generous and compassionate. It's a healthy eye that sees the chance to do good. But our eye, our way of seeing things can be unhealthy – it can be dark, as Jesus put it here. Jesus gave an example of a dark or unhealthy eye later in Matthew where he talked about an eye full of envy. He said,^{NAS} **Matthew 20:15** "Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?" In today's text about possessions and relationships, about earthly treasures and heavenly treasures, Jesus was saying that if the eye isn't clear on the matter of money and property, then one's whole life is perverted.

The fourth teaching that we'll look at this morning is the simple statement that no one can serve two masters. If you've ever worked in a job where you reported to two different people or two departments, then you know how poorly this works. Jesus said, "You can't serve God and wealth," or as early translations put it, "You cannot serve God and mammon." Mammon is simply the Aramaic word for possessions. Mammon isn't the name of a pagan god, nor does it mean money exclusively. Mammon means the things you own, your property, including money.

Living the good life and living a good life" can pull you in two opposite directions. We piously say that we've chosen to serve God, not possessions, but in our daily life it's possessions that set our priorities and determine our choices. We want to be more generous to the poor and suffering, but we can't - because we need

so much for ourselves. We plan to be more charitable in the future, but right now there are so many things we have to buy. We can so easily drift into the habit of giving God one hour on Sunday and Mammon gets the rest! I don't know why people think that sitting in church for an hour on Sunday morning makes them a Christian. Sitting in the garage doesn't make you a car!

We get the priorities all inverted. When we don't feel very prosperous we say, "I'll be more compassionate when I have more to offer. I'll give more time to God when I'm not scrambling so hard to secure a good life." Then, when we become prosperous, we want to say, "God has blessed me for being a good Christian. I'm believing the right things, and I'm behaving as God wants. I'm all that I need to be to have God's blessing." See how it works? I can't pay more attention to my faith because I'm scrambling to make a living. But when we have a good living it must be because we're being rewarded for paying enough attention to our faith. We may be fooling ourselves, but God isn't buying it!

We can't serve both God and wealth. The problem with prosperity theology is that the motivation is all backwards. When we believe that God will inevitably bless us with prosperity if we believe in Jesus and praise God, then we've made an idol of wealth - and reduced God to the means to acquire it. We give God lip service and empty religious practices in order to get what we want, which is wealth. God will not be mocked!

All through history we've had to choose. After the Hebrews settled in the land of Canaan, Joshua gathered all of the people together and told them, "Choose this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

In the portion of the Sermon on the Mount that we've studied today, the point "of the passage as a whole: [is] that human life is not self-sufficient; that we find the meaning of our lives outside ourselves; that human life inescapably 'serves' something that gives it meaning. The choice is not whether we shall serve, but what or whom we shall serve."⁴ Choosing is inevitable. We can choose consciously or unconsciously. We can certainly choose wisely or unwisely, but we will choose. Bob Dylan, of all people, put the matter clearly in a song he wrote.

You may be a business man or some high degree thief,
They may call you Doctor or they may call you Chief

You may be a preacher with your spiritual pride,
You may be a city councilman taking bribes on the side,

Might like to wear cotton, might like to wear silk,
Might like to drink whiskey, might like to drink milk,

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're gonna have to serve somebody,
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.⁵

Amen!

Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? (Isa 58:5-6 NRS)
Rend your hearts and not your garments. (Joel 2:13)

"You can't be enslaved to both God and a bank account!" (Scholar's Translation)

"Wealth says, 'Indulge yourself, you've earned it.' God says, 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.'

^{NRS} **Joshua 24:15** Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

¹ M. Eugene Boring, *Matthew, NIB Vol VIII* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1995) p 206

² Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, p 47

³ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew, WBC* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1997)p 74

⁴ M. Eugene Boring, *Matthew, NIB Vol VIII* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1995) p 210

⁵ *Gotta Serve Somebody*, recorded by Bob Dylan, Booker T and the MGs, Etta James, Judy Collins, and others