

PRIORITIZING

Lift Series (Part 3) | Matthew 6:19-24, 33; 19:16-30

Good morning! As we head today into the third week of our LIFT series, I want to pause and reflect with you on what, exactly, we are seeking to do in this season.

I know that some of you are relative newcomers to Christ Church. You may have just arrived for the first time today. You may have come to Christ Church since we ended our last major initiative and not experienced one of these seasons before. If you're anywhere in that continuum, we're really glad you are here, but you deserve to be given a little context. So, here's the deal.

According to reliable research, less than 1% of churches in America have the volume of participants, vitality of ministry, and missional reach that Christ Church does. That's not something to brag about; it's simply what is. The primary reason for this is God's inexplicable grace. A second reason, I think, is the amazing collection of faithful people God has assembled here. A third reason we are the way we are, I believe, is because every 3-7 years over the past nearly six decades, our congregation has stretched to do something remarkable. As few churches do, the people of Christ Church have gone the extra-mile and increased their giving to enable us to fund new ministry programs, to extend our missions impact, to improve facilities, pay down debt, or just wake everybody up to how important their giving and voluntarism is to our mission.

If you are a newcomer, you've walked into one of those defining moments. We don't always talk about money here. Actually, we rarely do, save for introducing the weekly offering. But for the last two weeks, today, and through February 19, we are intentionally talking what the Bible has to say about our discipleship, our financial stewardship and the mission of the church.

Again, why do we do this? And this part is even for those of us who are old-timers here. Because what we do with our resources to honor God's purposes is a major theme of the Bible and of the teaching of Jesus. There are more verses in the Bible, challenging us to think about what we do with money than verses about prayer or evangelism. I would be failing you as a pastor if I did not call you (and me) to think about this theme from time to time. The other reason we're having this conversation is because we need your help. We want to see more people come into a life-changing relationship with Jesus. We have a vision of lifting 10,000 people to their God-given potential and a strategy for doing that. Our leaders have prayed and thought long and hard about the portfolio of projects we're seeking to fund and you can learn more about those by going to **LiftTogether.us** or reading the LIFT Booklet. We know that we're facing economic and cultural headwinds, but this is nothing new for the Church of Jesus Christ. We hope to go forward by faith and I invite you to join me as we take those steps.

In the first week of our series, I reflected with you about FOLLOWING where God leads. I encouraged you to start asking God to reveal to you what role he might want you to play in helping us lift our church and its ministry and mission further. I have no desire or ability to compel YOU to do anything. My prayer is just that you will listen for GOD's voice and follow HIM. God may prompt you to give generously to the LIFT Initiative or to join a small group or to volunteer in one of our serving ministries or to get involved in one of our community missions. He may lead you to do ALL of these things. However, he calls you, I hope you will FOLLOW, because he only wants to take you someplace good.

Last week, pastor Tara Beth Leach talked about TRUSTING God to provide for us and being faithful with all the resources he has entrusted to us. Few people step out of the boat and become more generous unless they trust God to supply their needs. God says, "test me in this" (Malachi 3:10).

Today, I want to reflect with you about the third finger of faithful stewardship. At the risk of sounding irreverent, it's the part where some of us may be inclined to give the preacher or God himself our middle finger, because in this part of Jesus' teaching he really challenges us. He calls us to do some PRIORITIZING – to evaluate and perhaps change some of the ways we're currently using our resources.

Listen to Christ's words from the Sermon on the Mount: **Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal (Mat 6:19).** To begin to appreciate what Jesus is saying here it is crucial that we set it in the CONTEXT of the larger teaching of the Bible about how God's people are called to regard earthly treasures. Jesus is clearly NOT saying that pursuing material things is an evil.

The Bible is plain that: We are meant to WORK hard and make provision for the future. **Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest. (Prov 6:6-8)** We are supposed to PROVIDE for our family members too, where possible. St. Paul writes: **If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1 Tim 5:8).** We are called to ENJOY the fruits of life, the good things the Creator has provided. **For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving (1 Tim 4:4).**

So what, then, is Jesus really saying about our worldly treasures? I think he is inviting us to think carefully and honestly about where they place in our PRIORITIES. First, we are not to put our pride or hope in our wealth but in God. **Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth,**

which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. (1 Tim. 6:17) Secondly, we are not to be selfish or greedy with respect to possessions, but to seek to use our possessions for the purposes of God. This is what Jesus means when he emphasizes: **Do not store up for YOURSELVES...**

Jesus then goes on to give us the first of two very good reasons not to get consumed with accumulating the wealth of this world. First, we need to remember that the stuff we tend to hoard in this life is painfully lose-able. Clothing is subject to the ravages of the moth. Most other material objects are subject to the deterioration of "rust." The Greek word used there can refer to oxidation, mildew, or chewing rats – anything that eats away at what you have. Inflation, maybe!

Even treasures less prone to decay are subject to being stolen, says Jesus. The Greek term translated "Break in" here, literally means "dig through." The walls of first century Palestinian homes were made of mud-brick, which a determined thief could burrow through in time. The big idea Jesus is seeking to get across is that no human treasure is unassailable. #bitcoin.

I think of the owner of a home I visited in Rancho Santa Fe CA who believed his treasure was safe. He was an underwriter with a famous insurance company. The artwork in his palatial home was worth \$26M alone. His closets had oil paintings hanging in them. And then Lloyd's of London crashed and he lost all of it. No man-made security system can protect earthly treasure. I discovered that when I was 18 and my dad lost his political office and my parents split-up and our house burned in a fire. Some of you are suffering losses of your earthly treasures right now. I'm among you.

But the stuff that God offers us can never be lost. It's what Jesus meant when he said: **But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal (Mat 6:20).** The idea here is that whatever investment you make for the sake of the King and the kingdom here, produces eternal and imperishable rewards.

Now, let me be clear that this comment does not apply to the salvation of your soul. Eternal life is not something we bank for ourselves on the basis of our good or godly deeds. Jesus' statement here is directed at people who are children of the Kingdom -- i.e. those who know that it will only be by God's grace and not their goodness that they inherit eternal life. At the same time, there are numerous biblical references to suggest that there ARE heavenly rewards for doing righteous deeds, suffering for Christ's sake, forgiving others, and sharing with those in need.

It has been my experience that when someone puts Christ first in their lives and PRIORITIZES the work of his Church and Kingdom, they experience treasures even before they get to heaven. The most faithful disciples and stewards I know seem to

enjoy greater peace of mind; deeper relationships; the sublime satisfaction of knowing they are being used for the good in others' lives; and the enjoyment of the gratitude that comes from others. You can probably think of more.

But there is also a future component to God's rewards recurrently mentioned in Scripture. What the precise nature of that reward is, remains a mystery. The only thing that the Bible is absolutely clear about is that when such reward is received it WILL definitely be regarded as "treasure." You won't get to heaven and say: *"Oh, no, is that all? I really should have spent more money on myself on earth."* You're not going to say that. You're going to fall on your knees in gratitude and say: *"For this, I would have been willing to sacrifice much more."*

This is the awareness that fills the words Jesus speaks here. The original Greek for this first verse carries an imperative emphasis that isn't fully captured in the English translation. A better way of conveying the sentiment would be to translate it as: *"Stop storing up earthly treasures!"* The tone is the kind a parent uses when he or she says to a child: "Stop eating those chips - can't you see that dinner's on the table?!" It is an exhortation to change a behavior that is plainly short-sighted. Jesus is saying: *Why are you stuffing yourself with Fritos when there's filet mignon and baked potato with all the fixings waiting for you at my table?"*

The bottom line is that followers of Jesus don't over-prioritize earthly treasures because they are looking higher. As disciples, we work for worldly goods. We enjoy and employ them as good stewards. But we're always focused on the greater gold of God's kingdom and on the deep joys that come from following, trusting and prioritizing God's ways.

But that's not all. That's not the only reason to make sure that the treasure you're focused on is the highest, most valuable, and least lose-able kind. The second reason is suggested by the next verse: **For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Mat 6:21)**. It's significant to note that Jesus shifts from the plural to the singular form when he makes this statement. He's been speaking to the crowd up to this point. Now he is speaking personally to each of us. He knows something about us which, if we're honest, we know about ourselves too.

Our "HEART" (which is to say our true spirit and priorities) is EVIDENCED by what we consider treasure. Take a survey of your credit or debit card statement or your checkbook ledger and you will learn a great deal about the character and commitments of your heart. Watch the pursuits that people invest their time on, and particularly their free time, and you will learn a lot about their heart. Our heart, however, is not only evidenced by but also INFLUENCED by what we consider treasure. That is, the things we prize and prioritize set a course for the development or the decay of our hearts.

The sixteenth century Christian reformer, John Calvin, put it this way: *"If honor is rated the highest good, then ambition must take complete charge of a person; if money, then*

greed takes over the kingdom; if pleasure, then people will certainly degenerate into sheer self-indulgence." Conversely, if personal integrity, loving impact, or the glory of God is the prize you treasure, your very focus upon these goals will condition your heart in a whole different way.

Maybe you recall the story of the scoundrel who fell in love with a woman of tremendous goodness. There was no chance that she was going to fall for a guy like him so, to woo her, he put on the mask of a saint. It worked. She began to return his affections, even to the point of saying she'd marry him. The woman's other suitors saw through the deception and were enraged by it. They found the couple together and fell upon the scoundrel and ripped off the mask. Everyone gasped. For underneath was now the face of a saint. He had become like the beauty he had focused on.

That's why the Apostle Paul says: **Set your hearts on things above, not on earthly things (Col 3 :1-2). Whatever is noble, noteworthy and pure, whatever is lovely and admirable, whatever is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things, and the God of peace will be with you (Phil 4:8).** Or as the old song says: *Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in his wonderful face. And the things of this earth will grow strangely dim, by the light of his glory and grace.*

Here's the truth. You and I are living 24/7 in the midst of the greatest Materialism Machine ever assembled. Jesus called that machine "Mammon"— a spiritual force bent on mastering us (Mat 6:24). Think about the relentless calls all of us hear to shop, to acquire, to store and organize, to be discontented until we have newer and more. Again, God cares about our material well-being. He expects us to take care of our families. He wants us to enjoy the fruit of our labor.

But God also wants to see people LIFTED up, spiritually and materially. He has chosen the Church, the Body of Christ, as his hands in this world. The local church is not a profitable business, a deeply endowed 501(c)3 or some impersonal institution that somebody else is going to take care of continuing. Christ Church is as strong and enduring as YOU and ME.

So, I invite you to do what I will do in days ahead. FOLLOW Jesus where he leads you. TRUST God to provide for your needs. PRIORITIZE the life-changing work he has given you his church to do in our time. Don't let the weight of worry crush you. ***There IS a grace greater than the gravity of life.*** Jesus shows us that. I hope you and I will BE the human hands of His grace – as this couple I know keep seeking to be.

[VIDEO TESTIMONY]