

Perspective

Every week, in my mailbox and on my television, there appear invitations to seminars about financial security,



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investing for the future and planning for the golden years. I know there were no IRAs, Edward Jones, or Social Security in Jesus' day, but how am I to interpret Jesus' words: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal" (v. 19). I actually had seminary classmates who opted out of Social Security on religious grounds that the Bible forbids such retirement plans as conflicting with Jesus' teachings! Unmarried though I was at the time I had to ask, "So who will care for the family you claim to love when you come to retirement? Will you blame Jesus for your failure?"

When interpreting the Bible, pay attention to context, customs of the time, comparison to other teachings and remember Jesus was speaking to people in the real world. There is an obvious contrast in the statements of verse 19: "treasures on earth" and "treasures in heaven." Then move to verse 24 for clarification: "No one can serve two masters" ... "you cannot serve God and wealth."

What is the treasure of your heart? Do you understand the difference between responsible management of everything God gives you and lust for more money and possessions? I served on a college board of trustees with a sharp young stockbroker who taught me how to use some of my limited income to provide for my family in the future as good Christian stewardship while continuing to give to mission and benevolent causes. He suggested one rule I must not forget: Honor God and your family first.

Jewish belief was not that the eye is the window that admits light to the soul, but the eye casts light on what is of value to you. So, if your eye is spiritually focused your life will be centered on the true values of a spiritual life instead of the unhealthy darkness of the world's selfishness (v. 22-23). "If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" (v. 24). You cannot have it

both ways: "You cannot serve God and wealth" (v. 24).

We sometimes try very hard to present selfishness in a respectable package. Wealth or success are signs of God's favor. God wants you to have the desires of your heart. Our plenty will point the world to God. Really?

Jesus confronts the deception of that thinking. He says, "do not spend the energy of living on what you eat, what you wear ... is life not more than food, and the body more than clothing?" (v. 25). Birds don't farm for food, and "yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value (to God) than they?" (v. 26). And how much longer can anxiety extend your life (v. 27)? Worry about clothing? Can we ever compare to the beauty of the lilies, which do not "toil or spin." Solomon can't compare even with all his wealth and power (v. 29)! All this that we think is so important is like common field grass, green one day and cast into the fire after harvest is complete (v. 30).

This challenging exposition calls us to confront what is temporary and expendable with what is of true eternal value. "Do not worry," Jesus says, about food, drink or clothing. That is what the unbelieving world holds dear. The God who is your loving eternal Father understands what you need (v. 32).

Jesus lays out the core of the truly spiritual life: "strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things, which you think can be gained by worry, will be given you as well" (v. 33). Did Jesus just say you don't need to work and planning is a waste of time, so just walk out into the morning light and be prepared for everything you need to fall into your lap? We live in a much different culture than first century Judea where poverty was the norm, government programs were nonexistent and injustice was the common arrangement of the day. Jesus is not counseling us to ignore the very real challenges of life, but to face them, knowing God will give you the strength and ability to keep on. No one is immune to real life, but we all have the choice of living with or without God's love and grace. Every day is a choice.

Life is not a Monopoly game or high-

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Scripture: Matthew 6:9-34

stakes poker. Life is a gift from God in which you have amazing freedom of choice. Winning is not getting more than someone else – it is finding joy, loving relationships and understanding that one moment or event is not the totality of life. We sometimes describe a person as "having never grown up." Who really wants to spend life as a six- or seventeen-year-old? Is there any real joy or meaning in having a lot of money or being the most powerful person in the room? Is any prosperity or success ever enough? What is the alternate goal of life? In The Christmas Carol, Scrooge's dead business partner, Jacob Marley, burdened by huge chains of greed, appears to warn Ebenezer of his dark destiny if he does not change. Marley describes those ponderous chains as having been forged one link at a time. His life was wasted. Your treasure in this life defines your life in eternity.

Is your life shaped by what you do not have or a constant longing for more? Do you expend your life energy on collecting the trophies of success decreed by our society? Your "treasure" shows in your attitudes, values, choices and relationships.

How do you process worry? Do you reshape it into a tool of self-examination and reorganization of personal priorities? There are times when you must confront fear, failure and the pressures of secular culture in order to change your thinking and life direction. That is where you can more clearly hear the teachings of Jesus and begin living again.

We are human, influenced by feelings, circumstances and culture. Jesus reminds us that there are times when we need to stop, observe the birds of the air and lilies of the fields, and understand that even Solomon, for all his wealth and power, had an empty heart in the end. Jesus spoke of money and possessions many times. Are these things innately evil? No. The problem comes when we think anything else can replace the love and grace of God. Abundant life is not measured by your bank account or what it can buy, but by the love of God in this moment and eternity. What is your perspective?

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.