

St. Luke's UMC
November 17, 2024
Pledge Sunday

A Generous Life

Characteristic #3: Making a Lasting Difference **Matthew 6:19-21**

When did people start using money? That's a question today's scripture makes you think about. When Jesus said, **"Do not store up treasures where moth and rust consume, or where thieves break in and steal,"** he's giving us a peak into what currency looked like at that time. One thing we know for sure is it didn't look like this, (*pull out some cash*) An old euphemism for cash is scratch. There wasn't scratch in Jesus' day, so where did this idea start?

In a book called *The Wealth of Nations*, author Adam Smith points out that the concept of money goes back to the paleolithic period more than 10,000 years ago where people bartered for things. If you killed a buffalo and I wanted some of your steak, I might give some milk because I happen to own a cow. You get the idea.

Now the bartering system worked but it didn't provide a consistent measurement of value. So jump ahead thousands of years and people began giving values to items they would trade like ivory, and quartz and even whale teeth! Try that next time you go to Costco. Give them some whale teeth and see what you can get for it.

Perhaps the most popular item was grain because it was so universally used by people for food. So folks would store up grain and that was one way of creating personal wealth. But there was a big problem with this idea of banking. Insects and worms can get to your grain. There was no perfect way to preserve grain without that risk. It was hard to create wealth and not have things eat away at it and cause it to rot and go bad.

So, around the time of King Ahab in the Old Testament, a community in what is modern day Turkey came up with a better idea. They started using various metals and cutting them in round shapes and putting images on them and giving them a value. This is when something like modern day money began to be used. Their value was determined by weight. The weightier the coin the more it was worth. This was the **first shekel**. But they discovered there was a problem with much of this money. Moisture! When these metals like tin and lead got wet, they corroded. Money could actually rot and be worthless.

So they started using silver and gold. The Greeks took this idea and ran with it, and then the Romans universalized the system. And this is where it became a problem for Jews, especially after the Romans invaded Israel in 63BCE, because they put an image of Caesar on their coins and called him God. For Jews it was idolatry to even touch these coins. By the time of Jesus, for everyday economics, folks were still using this old system of metals and grains. And they would store these valuables, these treasures, in a room in their homes. Typically the storeroom was the only one in a first century house that had a lock.

But folks understood, in the best of homes these things can go bad. Not only that, thieves can break in and steal. Actually, the word Jesus uses here is “thieves can *dig through* and steal...” Homes had mud walls. Robbers didn’t have to break in. If they knew where the store room was, they just quietly dug through walls.

So Jesus tells people to be careful with storing up treasures because they can go bad, they end up being meaningless.

Now, obviously this is one saying of Jesus that has no application for us today, right? Because our money can’t rot. In fact, we don’t even need scratch. All we need is this (*hold up phone*) because now we have Apple Pay! Just touch your phone to an electronic reader and *ding!* We can sing with Will Ferrell, “*I want to be with you everywhere.*”

Because our treasures today can’t go bad, they cannot become meaningless...can they?

In San Jose, CA is a mansion known as the **Winchester Mystery House**. It was purchased in the 1800’s by Sarah Winchester, heiress of the famous gun company that built the Winchester Rifle. She suffered a number of emotional traumas including the death of her husband. With the money she was left she moved to California from Connecticut and purchased a modest 2-story, 8 room farmhouse.

But she became consumed with adding onto it even though she had no family. She spent much of her vast fortune on this home, perhaps as if she was trying to complete something, but she never could. Things were never quite right. She dismissed architects mid-project because their work wasn’t what she wanted. Eventually **the house** became 160 rooms with 2,000 doors, 10,000 windows, 47 stairways and fireplaces, 13 bathrooms, and six kitchens. But what is interesting is the number of oddities in it like:

Stair wells that rise into a ceiling...

Doors and windows that don’t open to anything

The famous switchback staircase that uses 44 steps to go up just 10 feet

All kinds of rumors spread that Sarah Winchester went mad because of her personal traumas. Others say the house was haunted by the spirits of people killed by Winchester rifles and she was trying to confuse the spirits. Whatever the reason, what is clear is that her treasure became somewhat meaningless.

Maybe Jesus did know what he was talking about after all. ~~Maybe his words still apply. That there are things in our lives money can’t help with.~~ Moths and rust might not threaten our treasures, but our treasures can still go bad, because there are some things treasures can’t fill. There are some things treasures can’t satisfy. So Jesus said, “**store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.**” (Matthew 6:20)

Jesus recognizes that there are two realities we live in, the here and now and the heavenly. Let me illustrate...

This line represents time. There's a beginning. The first two people were Adam and Eve. One day history will end. That will be it. Let's say the last two people will be Fred and Ethel. Now let's say we live somewhere in here in the middle (*place mark with marker*). That mark represents your life, only that isn't accurate. That's much too wide. Our total lifespan in the context of time is more like this (*pencil mark*). Can you see that? If not, good! You get the point. Picture our lives being like a little scratch on the line. In the span of time, we can't even see it. But we love our scratch. We hang onto our scratch with everything we've got. And that's good. We should love it. But some people use everything they've got for their scratch to make it as great as it can be.

But there is another reality. Let's picture it like radio waves. There are radio waves in this room right now. We can't see them, but they're here. And these waves have no beginning and no end. They are eternal. This is heaven. This is God's time. But now look at this, God stepped out of God's time to enter ours. God came into our scratch to say, "I see it. I know you're here. You matter to me. And I want your life to matter beyond your scratch. And this is where it gets really cool. We don't have to just live in this time zone. We can also live in this one. We can go to heaven right. We can let God use us, take what we have to make a difference in eternal ways, and suddenly our scratch is going on forever!

And I'm not just talking about this kind of scratch (*cash*). I'm not talking about everything. Our resources. Our relationships. Our influence. Our talents. Our love. Our desire to bless. Everything that is worth lasting forever. Now we've all got stuff that shouldn't last forever. We've probably got some stuff that shouldn't last through this day. But we've got other stuff within. Stuff that makes the world better. Stuff that makes life beautiful. Stuff that makes God smile and is worth lasting. When we live for that, our scratch outlasts us.

This is the last secret to the generous life. This is what respondents to my generosity survey said. When they considered their motivations for practicing generosity they said, **We want to do things that make a lasting difference.** Listen to a few statements people shared:

"The generous person is one who invests oneself in things beyond self."

"(Being generous) makes me feel like there will be something of mine left behind long after my days on earth are over."

"My personal mission is to honor God and make a difference in other people's lives."

One person summed up his feelings about generosity in the words of a former Lilly executive: "(people) have a universal and deep desire to attach themselves to a purpose that extends beyond a task, project, job, or even a career to a life that makes a meaningful contribution to something larger and more significant."

The Generous Life means getting to a place where you don't need all the scratch for yourself. That's not even what rewards you. You get rewarded by living for this other reality, allowing what you have now to make a difference for others, maybe even after you're gone. You don't need the recognition. You don't need to be remembered. Your reward is knowing you made a lasting impact.

If you saw the movie ***The Greatest Showman (pic of movie cover?)*** you might remember the name Jenny Lind. She was the European opera singer PT Barnum brought to America. Listen to her sing in her debut...**(clip)**

Now Jenny Lind was a real person, known as the Swedish Nightingale, one of the greatest voices of her time, but how did she come to be known? Jenny was an orphan in Stockholm who was cared for by a working woman who used to lock her in her room each day while she went to work. All she had to do was sit by a window and listen to the birds sing, and start singing back to them. One day an old music master was walking by and heard her voice. With his trained ear he recognized the talent in the voice and made arrangements to meet with the girl's guardian. He was allowed to work with her and develop her talent and she went on to grab the hearts of Europe and America.

Think about that. Someone we never heard of is responsible for the world hearing one of the greatest voices ever. That's called making a lasting impact. If our impact is mainly for us, then we cease to influence once we are gone, but when we do what we can now for people who will make an impact in their day, then it continues.

But we don't have to talk about someone who has been dead for over 140 years to appreciate this truth. We can look at a musician we know. Hasn't it been a joy to watch Michael Conley direct the choir the last few months? Its not just talent Michael pours out. He pours out his heart. Why?

Michael, what does St. Luke's mean to you?

And how old were you when you started singing in the children's choir?

Now friends, I want you to think about this for a moment. ____ years Dr. Kent Millard was the senior pastor. And he no doubt preached a stewardship sermon and invited people to make pledges to St. Luke's to support ministry ahead. Most people who did so most likely didn't know who Michael Conley was. They wouldn't have had any idea they were supporting ministry that shaped the direction of his life. But aren't you glad they gave? They made a lasting impact, and we get to benefit from it...

It comes down to what we allow to grab our heart. Jesus said, ***"Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."*** You would think Jesus would have said that the other way around, where your put your heart is where you invest your treasure, but Jesus knows better. He understood human nature, that what gets our treasures is what grabs our hearts, our attention, our love, our focus. And so he encourages us to invest ourselves in things that will outlast us, things that are worth lasting. Let that grab your heart.