

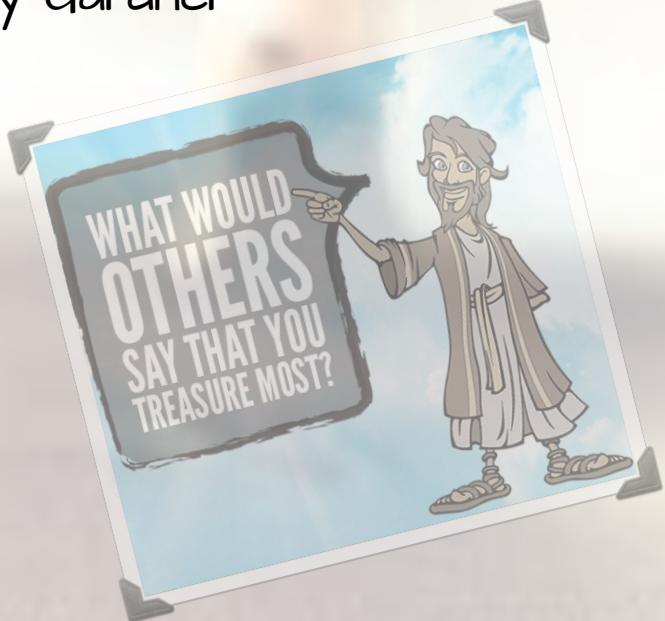
April 17-21, 2023 Edition

The Year_(s) Of ^{Following} Jesus Part 68

Jesus On Treasure: What's In The Bag?

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;O) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: This week we are going to spend some time talking about treasure- in other words, what you value most. Treasure isn't always money (although often it is) but we all have something we treasure. Something we valued above all other things in our lives. We might say we treasure all-the-right-things (health, family, relationships, etc.) but we often fool ourselves. The problem is, you can't fool others when it comes to what you really treasure- at least not for long. Jesus' words in the Sermon On The Mount on treasure are pretty striking:

Don't store up treasures on earth! Moths and rust can destroy them, and thieves can break in and steal them. Instead, store up your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy them, and thieves cannot break in and steal them. Your heart will always be where your treasure is. Your eyes are like a window for your body. When they are good, you have all the light you need. But when your eyes are bad, everything is dark. If the light inside you is dark, you surely are in the dark. You cannot be the slave of two masters! You will like one more than the other or be more loyal to one than the other. You cannot serve both God and money. Matthew 6:19-24 (CEV)

Now before you go thinking this is just going to be the typical teaching on giving to your local church let me stop you right there. First of all that's not what this is and secondly Riverside's take on giving is not your grandpa's church's take on giving. So before we spend any more time talking about treasure let's deal with the elephant in the room- money.

Lots of churches will tell you you're required (or commanded) to give 10% of your pay to the church. That was true in the Old Testament (sort of, I mean there weren't churches back then but there were synagogues and other local places of worship). The "tithe" commanded by God in the Old Testament went to the local place of worship for upkeep and to provide the ministers (they were called levites and they tended to the place of worship and the people who came to worship there) a living.

So in the Old Testament it is true that Jews were required to give 10% of their money (or goods or crops or animals) to the local place of worship. And it is true that Jesus talks about this practice in the gospels where people were still under the Old Testament Law. But once the church begins in the book of Acts you won't find the concept of the "tithe" mentioned again. Sure, people give generously (whatever that means) but there's not a specific number or percentage given by the New Testament to followers of Jesus. We are encouraged to give. We are encouraged to give generously. But the number seems to be left up to us.

Why? Why does Jesus ask us to give back to God? Well it's not because God needs money. He doesn't. Sure there are things the church does that require money but God doesn't need your money. The main reason God asks us to be extravagantly generous in giving back to Him is because of what happens in our hearts if we don't. And what will happen you ask? Well, you'll start to treasure things you shouldn't. And when treasuring goes wrong it can really mess your life up (and the lives of those you love).

Now I know that I don't have a ton of credibility here. I mean, I work for a local-place-of-worship and my paycheck and my entire job pretty much depend on the generosity of

people who call Riverside home. I'm not exactly an impartial observer which is why whenever I talk about money I always make the same disclaimer: if you don't trust us then don't give us any money. But make sure you find some organization that blesses people in the name of Jesus that you do trust and that you can give to extravagantly because extravagant generosity will change you in ways nothing else will (just like not giving extravagantly will also change you in ways nothing else will).

Did you hear that "thump"? That was our accountant reading that disclaimer and passing out. Not really, everyone who works and volunteers at Riverside knows we're not primarily about the money (Jerry Maguire would be so disappointed in us [don't know who Jerry Maguire is? Google "Jerry Maguire show me the money" and you're welcome]). Do we need money to operate. Sure. Do we need it so badly we'll do whatever we have to in order to separate you from more of your hard earned cash? Nope. Not for the last 20 years.

So relax. This isn't a week where you'll be "encouraged" to "dig deep" or "give til it hurts". But this will be a week where we are all encouraged to take a hard look at what we treasure most in this life. And if you're not sure what you treasure most, just ask those who are close to you.

Tuesday Reflection: So we're talking about treasure this week and it's important to know one thing- everyone treasures something. Everyone.

For those of us watching others it's pretty easy to figure out isn't it? What we treasure is whatever we give the best of our time, energy and resources to get. It's what we put above all other commodities. In Biblical times this concept was called idolatry. Now I know that we don't think we could have a problem with idolatry in 21st century America, but we do. When we think of idolatry we picture savages dancing around a fire bowing to some carved head. And yes, that WAS what idolatry used to be (and probably still is in some parts of the less "civilized" world) but it's not what idolatry looks like now. Now idolatry looks like people streaming into temples made of steel and glass sacrificing the best of themselves at the altar of "career". Now there's nothing wrong with career unless we become obsessed to the point where we sacrifice our health, our relationships and our lives to move-up-the-corporate-ladder.

Idolatry also can look like people glued to stock market pages sacrificing everything they have on the chance of striking it big. It's tougher to spot now but it's very much like gold prospectors you might have seen in westerns. They give everything for the possibility of that big strike. I remember in the 1980s there was a guy named Merv Griffin. He was a TV star but he was also one of the richest men in the world. He was overtaken by a guy named Donald Trump and he just couldn't stand not being first so he risked and risked until he wasn't close to being the richest man on earth anymore. He didn't exactly die penniless but he did die a broken man, bitter because at least from the outside it appeared he worshipped at the altar of success especially as it relates to financial wealth. Nothing wrong with financial wealth and wanting more and working hard to make more until you sacrifice everything at the altar of money and destroy your own life and the lives of those who love you. The world is filled with the biographies of people who sacrificed everything

while their kids were young thinking they'd make-it-up-to-them-later and lost their families in the process and ended up with lots of money but no relationship with the people they told themselves it was all for.

Maybe the clearest picture of idolatry is addiction to a substance. It doesn't take everything from us immediately. At first it promises a high and generally it delivers on this promise- at first. But over time it takes more and more to get that same high and eventually it gets to the point where that high can never be found again but once we're hooked we have to keep worshipping at the altar of pleasure and substances or we suffer in a powerful way. The substance makes good on its promise of pleasure at first but over time it takes more and more until in the end it's taken everything and left us with nothing. We see this pattern the most clearly in substance abuse but it's the same pattern in every treasuring-gone-wrong scenario whether we're talking about money, success, power/control or substances.

Still think idolatry doesn't impact us? The gods haven't gone away. They've just gotten sneaky. They get us to sacrifice the best of our time, energy, relationships and resources to them without us even recognizing it.

We all treasure something. Jesus doesn't try to stop us from treasuring. Treasuring is how we were built. It's what drives us and when we treasure the right things it can drive us to an absolutely beautiful and amazing life. That's why He says:

Don't store up treasures on earth... Instead, store up your treasures in heaven...
Matthew 6:20 (CEV)

Did you catch what He said? He said, "Instead store up YOUR treasures in heaven..." He knows you and I will treasure something. So be careful what you treasure. One of my favorite ways I've ever heard this illustrated is in a story by Robert Fulghum- the Everything-I-Needed-To-Know-I-Learned-In-Kindergarten guy. He tells a story about one day when he was leaving for work and his daughter brought him two bags- he could tell one was his lunch but he asked her what the other bag was. "Just some stuff to take to work with you, daddy."

So he put both bags in his brief case and went to work. When it was time for lunch he opened his brief case and took out his lunch and saw the other bag so he brought it out and put it on his desk. When he opened it he wasn't sure what to think- in the bag were two hair ribbons, three small stones, a plastic dinosaur, a pencil stub, a tiny seashell, two animal crackers, a marble, a used lipstick, a small doll and two Hershey's Kisses. He thought it was just a bag of junk so he left it sitting on the shelf behind his desk. But when he got home his daughter met him at the door and asked what he thought of her treasure bag? That's when he started getting the sneaking feeling maybe he had messed up. She asked where her treasure bag was and he told her he left it at work and would bring it to her the next day. She was obviously very worried and told him not to forget- she needed her treasures back.

The next day he got to work just in time to stop the janitor from throwing his daughter's treasure bag away (I guess the janitor couldn't spot a treasure when he saw one either). He took the bag home to his daughter that night and she was obviously relieved. After

that from time to time his daughter would hand him more than the usual solitary lunch bag and he'd get to take her treasures with him to work again. He said he could never figure out why some days she gave them to him and others she didn't. He came to think of the bag as his "daddy prize".

One day he said she never asked for the bag back. He offered it to her and she told him it was his now- she didn't need it anymore. Now Robert Fulghum says that bag sits in a place of honor in his office where he is continually reminded that one man's junk just might be his daughter's treasure.

We are all more like that little girl than we know. We all have a kind of figurative treasure bag where we keep the things that mean the most to us. Robert Fulghum finishes his story but warning all of us- be careful what you put in your treasure bag.

Wednesday Reflection: Yesterday we looked at the fact that we all treasure something. Today we'll continue by looking at how whatever it is that we treasure- it shapes us:

Their idols are... the work of human hands... No sounds come from their throats. People who make idols will be like them, and so will those who trust them. Psalm 115:4-8 (NCV)

Now I know this verse is about idolatry and not specifically about "treasuring" but if you read yesterday's reflection then you might remember that idolatry is nothing more and nothing less than treasuring gone wrong. So with that in mind I think it's pretty safe to say that whatever we put in our treasure bag will end up shaping our lives.

For instance, if I put power and success into the bag (my bag of treasures which if you don't know what I'm talking about go read yesterday's reflection) then I will worship at whatever altar I'm trying to attain or conquer. For some of us it would be work/career. For some it's politics. Heck, some folks even worship at the altar of success and power in the religious arena. It doesn't matter where you're trying to achieve power and success- if that's the most important thing to you then that's what you've put in the bag and that will end up shaping you. How will it shape me, you ask? Your life will be defined by arrogance and control. And if you gain power or success you will feel like your life is a success but if you lose power or success you will feel like there's no worth to your life.

Some people worship at the altar of physical appearance and beauty. Their temples are health clubs (where the priests and priestesses wear spandex and muscle shirts), spas and department stores. Now there's nothing wrong with wanting to look your best but if physical appearance and beauty are what you've put into the bag then your life will be defined by vanity and as time takes its toll you will be devastated and start to feel like your life isn't worth much anymore.

You get the picture, right? If money is what you put in the bag your life will be defined by greed and desire. If approval of others (always wanting to be liked) is what you value above all else then that's what you'll put in your bag and your life will be defined by the opinions and applause of others (think politicians). Some of us even make being right the most important thing. We then have to make sure everyone knows exactly how smart we are and attack anyone with a different idea or opinion.

Now there's nothing wrong with most of these things in and of themselves. But they make a lousy foundation for your life. But with the proper foundation most of those things that on their own create a toxic, destructive and dysfunctional life can be part of what makes a balanced life beautiful and rich. So what is the foundation I should be building my life on? What should I put in the bag? I'm glad you asked. When Jesus was almost done with His Sermon On The Mount He concluded the most influential speech ever given in the history of this world like this:

Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won't collapse because it is built on bedrock. But anyone who hears my teaching and doesn't obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash." Matthew 7:24-27 (NLT)

And when He finished saying those words He turned around and walked away. Sermon is over. Go home everyone. And think about what you heard. What had they heard? Well, they had heard a sweeping exposition on what the human life was designed to look like. They were told how they should handle their calling, their anger, their money, their prayer life, their sex lives, their integrity, their money (again), their bitterness and un-forgiveness, their prayer lives (again), their relationships with others and their relationship with their Creator. And when He's all done His brilliant conclusion is to just tell them that if they hear what He says (all that stuff I kind of briefly outlined above) and put it into PRACTICE (not if you hear and are perfect and implementation but if you practice what you've heard- I don't know about you but I take great comfort in the difference between practice and perfection) then your life will be built on a solid foundation. A foundation built on complete integrity in how you relate to others, to God and even to yourself in just about every important category of human existence.

That's the foundation that will not shake beneath you. That's what we should be putting in the bag. Why? Because like I said at the top of this reflection- my treasure shapes me. So be careful what you put in the bag.

Thursday Reflection: So far this week as we've talked about treasure we've looked at the fact that everyone "treasures" something. Then we looked at the fact that our treasure shapes us (and so be careful what you build your life upon/put in the bag). Today we're going to look at why what we treasure can have such a profound impact on our lives without us even recognizing it- because our treasure blinds us. Look at what Jesus said:

Your eye is a lamp that provides light for your body. When your eye is good, your whole body is filled with light. But when your eye is bad, your whole body is filled with darkness. And if the light you think you have is actually darkness, how deep that darkness is! Matthew 6:22-23 (NLT)

This is such a strange little passage. It falls right between where Jesus tells us to store our treasures in heaven and the part where he's talking about "serving" money with our whole

lives. But in between those two passages that are obviously talking about money He drops this strange little nugget and I never got why? It's not about money, is it? Or is it?

I think what Jesus is saying here is that if we're not careful we will be blinded by our treasure/idols. In other words, we won't even know we've got a problem. I think I mentioned earlier in the week that the clearest way to see how treasuring gone wrong or idolatry works is in someone addicted to a substance. What do they (we) say when someone tells them (us) they've (we've) got a problem? Not me. I don't have a problem other than you telling me I've got a problem. It's wild isn't it? Everybody can clearly see they've got a problem but they don't see it. Why not? Because their idol has blinded them to their predicament. It's pretty obvious with chemical addictions but there are lots of other addictions that aren't quite as obvious and are much more socially acceptable. If someone treasures money above all else they might sacrifice the best of their time, energy, integrity and even relationships to get more. And if someone suggests maybe they've got a problem what do they (we) say?

Not me. I don't have a problem. Yes I'm living my life right now in a way that isn't sustainable and is possibly harmful but I'm doing it for you/the kids. Can't you see that? Eventually life will settle down and I'll change. In fact, I can stop whenever I want.

Sound familiar? And before you start making a list of all the people you need to send this reflection to maybe ask yourself if you don't have a problem with greed. I'm pretty confident in guessing that you don't think you do. Why? Because nobody thinks they have a problem with greed (the treasuring of money above all else). There are a tiny fraction of people in this world who know they're "rich" but the vast majority of us know people who have much more than we do. That must mean I'm not rich. Not compared to (fill in the blank). As long as we know someone with more than us we can assure ourselves that we're not the one with a problem.

But the rest of the world knows the truth. They know that just about all of us in America are part of the top 1% of the world's wealthiest people. In America some folks rail against the one percenters but globally all it takes to be part of that exclusive list is to make around \$32,000 per year. I have a feeling most of us reading this make that much. Maybe even some of you have railed against the 1%. Imagine- that's what the rest of the world thinks of you and your luxury gadgets while they wallow in poverty.

Now I didn't do all of this just to make you feel bad but to point out that nobody thinks they've got a problem. Why is that? Because our idols blind us. That's why Jesus said:

Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions. Luke 12:15 (NLT)

Notice how He says, "watch out!"? This is the only place He does that. He doesn't say, "watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of adultery". Why not? Because we know when we're committing adultery. He doesn't warn us about watching our and being on guard against all kinds of lying or murder or theft. Why not? Because we know when we're doing those things. But greed will blind you. Treasuring gone wrong will blind you. It will leave you saying, "I don't have a problem. I don't have enough to have a problem." (and then you'll chuckle to yourself and stop thinking about it).

So today maybe spend some time asking Jesus to show you if you've got a problem with greed. Ask Him if maybe you've put money in the bag but now you can't see it because your idol has blinded you.

Friday Reflection: One final observation about treasure- my heart will always follow after whatever I treasure the most. Jesus said it like this:

Your heart will always be where your treasure is. Matthew 6:21 (CEV)

I don't know about you but that always seemed backwards to me. What I would think is if I find something that captures my heart then my treasure would follow. In other words I'd put my money where my heart is. But Jesus said that's backwards- Jesus says our hearts follow our treasure. And really we recognize that this is the way it is. Let me give you a couple of examples:

Before Judy and I bought a house in Eagle River I really didn't pay much attention to the real estate market. It could go up. It could go down. Didn't impact me. But as soon as we sunk a fairly substantial chunk of change into a house in Eagle River I follow the real estate trends with great interest. Why? Because my heart followed after where I put my treasure.

Same thing with the stock market. I never paid much attention. Then I became an Alaskan and I started to realize that my dividend was connected to the fluctuations of the stock market. I've seen some monster dividends when the stock market was doing well and I've seen some anemic dividends when the stock market was struggling. I never noticed what the stock market was doing before I connected it with the size of my dividend but since I recognized the relationship I pay pretty close attention. Why? Because I've some treasure tangled up with the stock market so my heart is following after.

Now there's nothing wrong with noticing the trends of the stock market or real estate prices. Unless they become the most important thing in my life. How do I know? What you treasure most is the thing that you tell yourself, "if I don't have this (fill in the blank) I won't be ok." Earlier in the week we talked about idolatry (treasuring gone wrong) and so let's finish the week talking about it. An addict treasures the next high above all else. He tells himself that if he doesn't get that next high he won't be ok. He'll sacrifice the best of his time, energy, health, resources and even relationships to get that next high whatever the cost. That's the clearest way to see treasuring gone wrong but the same pattern exists for the most part in all forms of idolatry.

If I don't have a certain number in the bank I won't be ok. If I don't achieve a certain level of success or influence I won't be ok. If I don't have the right clothes or haircut or makeup or physique or jewelry I won't be ok. When we don't have what our idols promise us we are crushed. Now, maybe you're thinking to yourself, "self, I don't have what I'd like to have but I'm still ok." Does that mean you don't have an idol problem. Not necessarily. Because as long as you think there's still hope you won't fall completely apart. You'll destroy everything and sometimes everyone around you to achieve what you feel you need to be ok but you can survive ok while you're trying to achieve it. You'll tell yourself, "I may not have (fill in the blank) yet. But one day I will and then everything will be ok!"

That's why the only people writing those "warning- don't fall for the same lie I fell for" books are generally people who have made it to the top of their field and found it empty. They finally achieved that number or that level or that relationship or that control they felt like they had to have in order to be ok and guess what? They still weren't ok! So what did most of them do? They blamed something or someone else for them not being ok. That's one reason celebrities lives are fodder for supermarket tabloids (or TMZ for us youngsters ;o)- because an actress or billionaire reaches the pinnacle of their field and when they realize it's empty they generally start off blaming whoever they're married to or dating and they start divorcing and marrying and then divorcing and remarrying and then maybe kids will fix this emptiness and then no kids made it worse so it must be something else...

It's exhausting for you to read and I'm sure it's even worse to live out. It's not until people realize the problem was in what they treasured (what they put-in-the-bag; their idol) that they can start to get healthy. And that's almost always how those warning books end- the actor or celebrity or billionaire finally figured out their problem was that the things they thought they needed to be ok were fine in and of themselves but they made a horrible foundation for a life. They put what they treasured most in the bag and that treasure shaped them and blinded them and their hearts followed the treasure like rats followed the Pied Piper.

So be very careful what you treasure. Be very careful what you put in the bag.