

Chapter 20: Eyes on the Master

Matthew 6:19–24

As Jesus continues to teach through the Sermon on the Mount, he turns from false piety to address the factors that corrupt and undermine our holiness. Specifically, Jesus warns us about the treasures of our hearts, and the fixations of our eyes. We often act as though we are free and fully in charge of ourselves, so that what we look at and what we love are fully under our control. What Jesus warns us, though, is that where we direct our attention subtly enslaves us in ways that we do not realize. One way or another, *our eyes shape our hearts to serve a master.*

What do you Seek? (Matt. 6:19–21)

In the previous section, Jesus addressed the problem of hypocrisy (Matt. 6:1–18). Specifically, he warned against practicing one’s righteousness in front of others, in order to be seen by them (Matt. 6:1). Now, Jesus moves to warn against laying up treasures on earth (v. 19). Lenski shrewdly notes the connection between the two themes: “Hypocrisy deceives others, yet it deceives the person guilty of it most of all. From the deception of others Jesus now turns to the deception of self; and the example he uses is the seeking of perishable treasures instead of the imperishable.”¹

So, Jesus says, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal” (vv. 19–20). The tense of the command carries the idea that it is dealing with an ongoing issue, so that R. T. France argues that it should be translated as “Stop storing up for yourselves....”² Furthermore, the word for “lay up” would be more literally translated as “treasure,” since it is the verbal form of the word “treasures.”³ So, if we combined both of these grammatical observations, we might translate Jesus’ words this way: “Stop treasuring treasures on earth...but [instead] treasure treasures in heaven.”

In support of this claim, Jesus explains a fundamental difference between earthly and heavenly treasures. Whereas earthly treasures may be corroded by moth and rust, or stolen by thieves, heavenly treasures are impervious to such threats. Why, then, would anyone make such a foolish exchange to devote themselves to earthly treasures rather than heavenly treasures? John Calvin gives two reasons: (1) covetousness is so blinded by desire that it does not consider the tenuous nature of earthly treasures, and (2) we do not give sufficient attention to the heavenly life.⁴ We crave the things that are right in front of us in this world, rather than the invisible, spiritual promises that God

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 274.

² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 258.

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 275.

⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:332.

makes to us.

What, though, do we stand to gain by God’s heavenly promises? In a word, we gain *God*—God himself in all his glory, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, throughout all ages. Specifically, we will gaze on his glory throughout all eternity. This promise of the *beatific vision* of seeing God is the hope of the whole Bible, culminating in Revelation 22: “...the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. *They will see his face...*” (Rev. 22:3b–4a). Michael Allen has recently observed that this is something that even well-meaning Christians can lose sight of when we “instrumentalize” God, by treating him as a means to another end: especially, as the means to the end of merely *created* pleasures, rather than the joy of communion with the *Creator*.⁵

Jesus puts his finger on the ultimate question behind this line of teaching in v. 21: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Our hearts inevitably entangle themselves in whatever it is that we treasure.⁶ This is why riches can be so deceiving: our intellects regularly work backwards, trying to create justifications for us to have whatever it is that we want in our affections. In a positive way, this helps us to overcome the obstacles to following Christ; however, this is also where we are most self-deceived when we treasure something other than God, as Calvin notes:

If honor is reckoned the supreme good, the minds of men must be wholly occupied with ambition: if money, covetousness will immediately predominate: if pleasure, it will be impossible to prevent men from sinking into brutal indulgence. We have all a natural desire to pursue happiness; and the consequence is, that false imaginations carry us away in every direction. But if we were honestly and firmly convinced that our happiness is in heaven, it would be easy for us to trample upon the world, to despise earthly blessings, (by the deceitful attractions of which the greater part of men are fascinated,) and to rise towards heaven.⁷

How, then, can we disentangle ourselves from our idolatrous covetousness?

What do you See? (Matt. 6:22–23)

In the next two verses, Jesus gives us a crucial insight into *theological anthropology*—that is, into a biblically informed understanding of who we are, and how God has created us to function. Jesus says this: “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is

⁵ “We need to be wary, therefore, of unwittingly falling into an eschatological naturalism that speaks of God instrumentally (as a means to, or instigator of, an end) but fails to confess communion with God as our one true end (in whom alone any other things are to be enjoyed).” (Michael Allen, *Grounded in Heaven: Recentering Hope and Life on God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 23.)

⁶ “Against the potential objection that material prosperity has no effect on one’s spiritual condition, v. 21 adds that one’s affections are inherently drawn to one’s treasure. This does not imply that rich people cannot be Christians, although the first centuries of Christians knew only a small number of them. It does imply that riches bring grave dangers, not least of which is extra anxiety to protect one’s possessions.” (Blomberg, *Matthew*, 123.)

⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:334.

darkness, how great is the darkness!” (vv. 22–23). At one level, Blomberg is correct to note that Jesus draws a parallel between our heart and our eyes: “Just as the ‘heart’ (v. 21) forms the center of one’s affections and commitments, the ‘eyes’ enable the whole person to see. Good and bad eyes probably parallel a good and bad heart and thus refer, respectively, to storing up treasures in heaven versus storing them upon earth.”⁸

Still, this does not go far enough. The eyes and the heart do not merely function in parallel, but according to a profound connection. Lenski is correct when he writes this: “Since by setting its affection upon something the heart makes a treasure of it, everything depends upon the eye....The eye is the one member of the body which acts as a lamp by which a man sees. The context, however, limits the application to *the treasures* which the earth offers to the body. These seek to captivate the eye and thus to win the heart and the body and their affection.”⁹ The eyes *shape* the desires of the heart. We learn to love (to “treasure”) whatever it is that we set our eyes upon. Therefore, if we want to *stop* treasuring earthly treasures, then we must stop fixing our visual attention upon them.

How, though, can we set our eyes upon invisible, spiritual, and *heavenly* things? The Scriptures regularly speak about the eyes of our hearts (e.g., Eph. 1:18). We “see” things that are not visible by attention, reflection, and contemplation. Particularly, the Scriptures speak of Christianity in terms of “seeing” God:

And we all, with unveiled face, *beholding the glory of the Lord*, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit....In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from *seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ*, who is the image of God....For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give *the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*. (2 Cor. 3:18; 4:4, 6)

Notice that we *see* Christ by the light of the “knowledge” of the glory of God. Elsewhere, Paul says something along the same lines to the Galatians: “It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified” (Gal. 3:1). Christ was not crucified in Galatia, but right outside the city of Jerusalem. Thus, it was through the *preaching* of the gospel that their eyes saw Christ crucified.

Jesus, then, tells us that we are to have a “healthy” (or, literally, “single” eye) that is set on God: “men go wrong through carelessness, because they do not keep their eye fixed, as they ought to do, on the proper object.”¹⁰ R. T. France notes that elsewhere, the contrasted “evil eye” refers to “a jealous stinginess”:¹¹ “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge [lit., “(is) your evil eye (against)] my generosity?” (Matt. 20:15). Thus, Jesus is framing a complex wordplay with his words from the previous section: the good/healthy/single eye is generous with earthly possessions because of a fixation on heavenly treasures, while the evil eye is not generous because it continues to treasure earthly treasures. If our eyes are fixed on earthly treasures,

⁸ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 123.

⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 276–77.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:335.

¹¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 261–62.

how great will be the darkness that floods our souls (v. 23)!

Whom do you Serve? (Matt. 6:24)

There is some question about how connected v. 24 is to what has come before. I think John Stott captures the basic sense of Jesus' conclusion to this section well: "Jesus now explains that behind the choice between two treasures (where we lay them up) and two visions (where we fix our eyes) there lies the still more basic choice between two masters (whom we are going to serve."¹² As Carson notes, "Both God and Money are portrayed, not as employers, but as slave owners."¹³ While a slave could have a number of owners (e.g., Acts 16:16), Osborne points out that "Jesus is speaking of ultimate issues. With two masters it would be impossible to give either total allegiance."¹⁴ We cannot retain allegiances to the treasures of this world, but must hold everything with an open hand.

Still, Calvin is right to note that this does not mean that all those who struggle with ongoing desires for earthly treasures have not genuinely received salvation:

It is, no doubt, true, that believers themselves are never so perfectly devoted to obedience to God, as not to be withdrawn from it by the sinful desires of the flesh. But as they groan under this wretched bondage, and are dissatisfied with themselves, and give nothing more than an unwilling and reluctant service to the flesh, they are not said to serve two masters: for their desires and exertions are approved by the Lord, as if they rendered to him a perfect obedience. But this passage reproves the hypocrisy of those who flatter themselves in their vices, as if they could reconcile light and darkness.¹⁵

As in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is speaking of the ideal. He is demanding what the Law demands: absolute perfection. The wrong way to receive Jesus' words is to carve out an exception for our sins: "Surely it wouldn't be that big of a deal for me to..." Ultimately, Jesus drives us back again and again to the Gospel: "I still see my sin bursting up from the recesses of my heart. Lord Jesus, forgive me, cleanse me by your blood, create in me a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within me." The gospel does not diminish the Law's demands for perfection, but fully answers it, both in the promises of justification and sanctification.

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to "treasure earthly treasures" (v. 19)? Why do our hearts gravitate so easily toward treasures on earth? What earthly treasures tend to ensnare your own heart? How might corruptibility (destroyed by moth or rust) and instability (stolen by thieves) affect the earthly treasures that you most prize? What, on the other hand, are heavenly treasures? How can you

¹² John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 158; cited by Carson, "Matthew," 213.

¹³ Carson, "Matthew," 213.

¹⁴ Osborne, *Matthew*, 244.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:338.

cultivate a love for heavenly treasures?

2. What does it mean for your eyes to be the “lamp” of your body (v. 22)? What does it mean for your body to be filled with light? What would it mean for your eye to be filled with darkness (v. 23)? What is the connection between our hearts (vv. 19–21) and our eyes (vv. 22–23)? How do our eyes shape, train, and teach our hearts? What does this tell us about the power of our sideways glances in the course of our lives?

3. How do our eyes and our hearts relate to the master whom we serve? Which two masters does Jesus name in v. 24? Why is impossible to serve both of these masters? How much influence does money have over your heart? How are you tempted to seek after material possessions? If you are honest with yourself, how do these material possessions draw you away from wholehearted service to your Master, Jesus Christ?

4. Why must we not only “stop treasuring” earthly treasures, but also “start treasuring” heavenly treasures (v. 20)? Why must we cultivate valuable spiritual practices to replace harmful practices? According to the logic of this passage, how do we train our hearts to serve our Master, Jesus Christ? Where do we see him now (2 Cor. 3:18–4:6; Gal. 3:1)? What plan do you have for regularly gazing upon the beauty of Jesus Christ?