



What to do with Things

~ Matthew 6:19-21

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust

consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Man's relationship to things is a problem as old as man himself. Sooner or later we all come to realize that "we brought nothing into the world and it is certain that we can take nothing out." The Bible reckons with this issue: What should be our attitude toward things?

This is a subject of great interest to all of us. Though there have been other affluent societies, we live in the richest, most nearly homogeneously affluent society that the world has ever known.

God does not condemn us for what we possess; but, he does have a great deal to say about our attitude toward possessions. When Israel was about to enter the promised land, God made a promise to bless them, if they obeyed his word in the new land. The blessing was not only spiritual, but included flocks, herds, and material possessions. In turn, he warned them that if they failed to focus on eternal, spiritual things, he would shut the windows of heaven, there would be no rain, and there would be no harvest.

Gradually this principal deteriorated to the point where *things* became an end in themselves. By the time Jesus came, the doctrine had become, "Whom the Lord loves, He makes rich." In recent years, we've heard that doctrine preached at every turn. Become a Christian, get rich, cure all your ills and live an easy, trouble-free life. Things were no longer something to be used, but something to get. They were no longer to help in service, but to have, possess, cling to, store up, hoard and make us more important and more powerful than others.

Rather than people possessing things, they became "possessed by" things. Instead of making life better, that is, enhancing life, things became the goal in life. Instead of using them to accomplish an end, they became an end in themselves.

These are words that we all need to hear, because, by way of comparison to the people of New Testament days, we would all be considered wealthy. In Matthew 6, Jesus divided treasure into two categories: earthly and heavenly; or in another way, material and immaterial.

That which is material has value only because man assigns value to it. It is not valuable because of what it is, but because of the value placed upon it. This value fluctuates; for example, one week gold may be valued at \$1,800, another at \$1,500, and another at \$1,360. When people become unsure of other things, they often buy gold. This week it was \$3,023 an ounce. Sometimes it is hard to understand, after all, there is practically no difference between a diamond and a lump of coal, yet one ends up in a jewelry shop, while the other is thrown into a furnace.

Things have value because of the value we place on them. I once had a 1929 Durant delivery truck that I gave to

our son Dan. It has value. You wouldn't want to travel very far with it. The motor could use some more work, and it needs king-pins. You wouldn't want to haul anything with it. You have to wash and wax it whenever you want to look at it and, maybe, do some unexpected mechanic work on it. You have to store it; it's a regular nuisance; yet, people assign value to it. That is the only reason it has value; it cannot help you survive --you cannot eat it. However, it is cute.

By contrast, spiritual things have value because God places value upon them. The Christian has a new set of values, by which to pursue the spiritual. The Apostle Paul made this clear when he told Timothy that the greatest gain is "Godliness with contentment" (1 Timothy 6:6). He contrasted this spiritual value with material, and in the very next breath he said, "For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain that we can carry nothing out" (1 Timothy 6:7). According to my Dad, another reason you can't take it with you is that it goes before you do.

Paul continued by saying, "but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who **want to be rich** fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction" (1 Timothy 6:8-9). Why? Well, they always end up doing a little "insider trading." They trade character for money.

It is wise to notice that the apostle did not say, "They who *are* rich," but rather, "those who want to be rich." That includes the "rich young ruler" and many, many poor people as well; it includes all people who say, "I will be rich." He is focusing on an attitude toward material: "I will have it; I will get it; I'll do whatever it takes." With that, the trap is set; *things* are the bait. People who stand between this person and things are now bound to get hurt. Here, now, is a person who is controlled by the desire for things.

Paul continues: "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains" (1 Timothy 6:10). Not money, but the "love of money," and you don't have to have it to love it. While the person who has material may love it, the person who doesn't have material may love it even more!

Money represents all material --all that is temporary. I wish things weren't quite so temporary; I get tired of fixing them. The contrast is in effort, accomplishment, and productivity that is spiritual and, therefore, not finite --not temporary. The great tragedy is that we give an unrealistic effort and affection to that which must pass away, and cannot possibly last.

The second thing Christ said about the material is that things can enslave a person. "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matthew 6:24). The idea is not that people cannot *usually* serve both, it is that they can never serve both. It is an either-or proposition. The reason is in verse 21, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Not that you can't *have* both God and money, but that you can't *serve* both. True service is a thing of the heart.

The third thing Christ points out is that the pursuit of things is a false and empty goal in life. (Matthew 6:25-33) In verse 32 he said, "For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things." If you ever visit the ruins of the ancient societies of Jesus' day, it will become apparent to you that the people loved material things. They built beautiful buildings, paved the floors with fine mosaics, and had beautiful gardens. Their things fill our museums today. Material things became the

essence of life for the Greeks and Romans. Pharaohs filled tombs with stuff.

Christ cautioned against falling into that way of thinking. He said, "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33) What things? The things we need to exist; the things he gives to the birds of the air and the beauty that he gives to the flowers of the field. Princess Diana had physical beauty; however, it was Mother Teresa who shared with her a more essential beauty --so that the two women were friends. A person will not seek the kingdom of God first unless that person loves God. On this basis, Paul wrote, "My God shall supply all your needs according to his riches in Glory by Christ Jesus."

Peter gives this rule, "tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it --not for sordid gain but eagerly" (1 Peter 5:2). To say it another way, while people who are in Christian ministry may need to be paid, no one should be in Christian ministry for pay. The retirement plan, the perks and benefits should not be the basis for Christian service. Not for the minister, --not for anyone.

James had something to say about those who used material to control other people. He said that they were "rich and miserable" (James 5:1). Not because they owned things, but because they used things to hurt other people. He continued, "Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you (against your values)" (James 5:2-3). Rusty money is hard to believe, but don't leave a quarter out in the acid rain too long. James, like our Lord, pointed out the temporary nature of material.

An economist in Los Angeles wrote a book titled: *The Short Story of Money*. The book contains only seven words, "Here it is and there it goes." Because of the real nature of money, we may have to stop trying to teach our children about the "value of the dollar," unless we want them to grow up to be cynical. They're going to ask, "If George Washington never told a lie, then what is his picture doing on the dollar bill?"

To make it worse, according to verses 4-6, these folk had come by their money through a "less than honest" scheme, and I think most people would be willing to earn their money honestly if it didn't take so long. They think of the "cassino" as a "short-cut" --the cassino owner takes advantage of that --he has no product (like a farm or factory). He sells to your greed --and, he knows it.

You cannot satisfy a cow with hamburger, nor a dog with hay. Man is a spiritual being and cannot be truly satisfied by material. Man is the only existential animal. Man is the only animal who wonders: "why am I here -- for what purpose is my life? Is my life being wasted? From where did I come, and to where do I go? What is out there --beyond? Where did all of this come from? I exist, therefore, there must be a reason for my existence. What will be the outcome of my life?" Man is the only animal that is compelled to erect a tombstone, or a library to his memory. For example, look at the funeral of Princess Diana --2 ½ billion people watched it; you don't see that sort of thing with chimps.

Man can dream and plan. Created in the "image of God," man is the only true creator among the animals. Man is spiritual, and therefore, must find his satisfaction in his creator. "God is a spirit, they who worship him, worship in spirit and in truth."

Money cannot save us; only God can do that. Peter said, You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways

inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ like that of a lamb without defect or blemish" (1 Peter 1:18-19).

We are all left with a choice about what to do about material things.

Egypt was one of the richest countries in the world. If you ever visit the *Cairo Egyptian Museum*, you will see the body of King Tut, one of their most insignificant kings, encased in a gold coffin valued at more than 5 million dollars. Moses was adopted into the Royal family of Egypt. Yet, he became a regular Mother Teresa; he not only championed the down-trodden, he went to live with them, and live the way they lived. Look at the choice Moses made: "Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward" (Hebrews 11:24-26).

While the Bible does not condemn the possession of material things, it does condemn the *love of* material things. There is often only a fine line between the two.

It was Paul who said that, "God has given us all things richly to enjoy." Yet, what did Paul mean? Here is an example: God has given us food to enjoy. However, there is a difference between a gourmet, who studies the wonders of taste God has placed in food, and a glutton, who simply pursues food. Of course, sometimes, we gourmets study too much.

Perhaps the things we have should be considered more in terms of God's goodness to us. Material things *can* be used to gain spiritual treasure. We must make them the *means to an end*, rather than an *end in themselves*.

It is not what we have in our pocket that makes us thankful, but what we have in our heart. The value of money lies altogether in the uses to which it is put. Money is a good servant but a poor master. A.M. Sullivan wrote, "Money is an amoral instrument, and like science serves good and evil alike. There's no such thing as dirty money; the stain is only on the hand that holds it as a giver or taker."

Benjamin Franklin said, "Money never made a man happy, nor will it. There is nothing in its nature to produce happiness. The more a man has, the more he wants. Instead of filling a vacuum, it makes one. If it satisfies one want, it doubles and trebles that want another way. That was a true proverb of the wise man, rely upon it: 'Better is little with the fear of the Lord, than great treasure, and trouble therewith.'" That's Benjamin Franklin.

Another way to say it is: No one knows whether or not people would be happy if they had all the money they wanted --there isn't that much money! Money can buy a house, not a home. It can buy wedding rings, but not a marriage. It can buy a dinner, but not the fellowship and friendship that go with it. You see what Christ was saying, don't you?

Things are to use, and if we use them right, we can do a lot of good.