

# “Our Treasure and Our Hearts”

a sermon by

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**Text: “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:21).**

Recently, someone shared with me a message delivered by William Willimon, a Methodist Bishop in Alabama, that Willimon delivered recently to the Oxford Institute of Wesley Studies at Christ College in Oxford, England. The title of the address intrigued me. Willimon entitled the address “What if Wesley Was Right? In this address Willimon raised the question to his fellow Methodists about whether John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist tradition were right—not right about everything (like every theologian, he had his weaknesses)—but what if he were right about the things that matter. Willimon points that that John Wesley had a powerful, robust belief in God. For Wesley, God was not just an abstraction, a source of meaning, or a technique to help us through the day. Wesley’s God was the One who presently, directly speaks, creates, intrudes, convicts, enlightens, commands, loves, and continually transforms.

John Wesley had a somewhat different understanding of God’s grace. For Wesley, God’s grace was the constant, moment by moment active working of God in us that gives us a different world. Wesley’s understanding of God’s grace in Jesus Christ was such that human beings could actually contribute to their own salvation. Wesley placed a great deal of emphasis on the notion of “sanctification” or the Christian life. But Wesley did not simply talk about “sanctification.” He brought about a tremendous revival in England that literally transformed not only the Anglican Church but transformed England as well.

Needless to say, some of the Presbyterian or Reformed theologians of Wesley’s day were horrified by this notion of grace. Stanley Hauerwas, who teaches Ethics at Duke, observed recently that “When contemporary Episcopalians speak about the Incarnation, they don’t know what they are talking about, and when Methodists speak today of grace they know even less.” I won’t comment on that quotation.

However, reading Willimon's address prompted a somewhat different question with me, namely the question "What if Jesus was right?" and that is the question I want to pose to you this morning. I don't know this for a fact, but I have a deep suspicion that many of us come to church not because we believe Jesus was right, but because we find Jesus interesting. We come because we are curious about Jesus or because we find Jesus useful in explaining something else that interests us more—our concern for the poor, the environment, or some other contemporary concern.

## I.

But what if Jesus was right? What if Jesus was something more than an interesting religious leader, a marvelous teacher, a person who had the power to change human history? What if what he said was true? What if what he claimed to be, the Son of God, was right? What if he was right when he said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

To be honest, there is at least one sense in which I hope Jesus was not right. After all, when I read the New Testament, I find some things that I hope Jesus was not right about. He said that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter heaven. I hope he wasn't right about that for a lot of our sakes. He commanded us "love our enemies," "to turn the other cheek," "to be perfect," and to refrain from anger and lust. At least Reinhold Niebuhr was honest enough to say that the ethic of Jesus was an impossible ethic.

But what if Jesus was right? What if coming to church was something more than being entertained, enjoying beautiful music, and hoping to find a word that might make our lives more useful, more productive, and more enjoyable. What if worship is really about being confronted by the words of Jesus which make us uncomfortable, challenge our complacency, and force us to go places we don't want to do? What if I told you, for example, that if you came to worship today to be comforted, consoled, entertained, to be uplifted, and to be made comfortable that my hope is that you will leave here terribly disappointed and frustrated.

## II.

What if Jesus was right? Take, for example, this saying in Matthew's gospel that forms our text today. Jesus said that where a person's heart was, his treasure was there as well. This saying is part of the Sermon on the Mount, this speaks about a "higher righteousness." It is also part of a group of sayings that address the use of money (Matthew 6: 19-34). It is connected to the saying about "the generous eye" (Matthew 6: 22-23), the quotation about "God and Mammon" (6:24), and about the importance of trusting God to provide the necessities of our lives (6:25-34).

There is something self-evident about this text. Like so many of Jesus' sayings, it has a simplicity about it that demonstrates its validity. Certainly, the people of his day understood. The typical Palestinian home was made of clay and brick and it was not hard for thieves to break in and steal. People who kept valuable rugs and cloth knew quite well how moths could destroy the finest fabric, and rust could consume even priceless metals.

The thrust of Jesus' saying is that there is an intimate and quantifiable relationship between a person's heart and their treasure. Many of us say we believe in certain things. We

believe in the church. We believe in quality education. We believe in helping others less fortunate than ourselves. But what is the tale that our check book tells? One of the most important things that a church member can do is to look on a yearly, if not monthly, basis on the things that you spend money on. How much do you spend on housing, food, clothing, entertainment, country club dues, health care, etc? Then look at your giving to the church and other charitable giving. Jesus said that where your treasure is, your heart will be and for most of us, it will be pretty obvious where our heart is.

### III.

Our church is presently in the midst of our annual stewardship campaign. In two weeks, on October 14<sup>th</sup>, each member will be asked to bring his or her pledge card and place it on the communion table as an act of worship in support of the work of First Presbyterian Church.

This year is a challenging year in many respects. There is a great uncertainty about our economy, particularly in light of the crisis created in many homes by the collapse of submarket lending practices.

Our church faces a number of challenges. This year we are asking our members to consider giving an 8 percent increase to their pledge. So this morning I want to share with you five reasons that a person should support the work of the church with his or her financial resources.

The first is that it is Biblical. The Bible in both Testaments supports direct, systematic, and proportionate giving. In Leviticus, the law required that a person bring one tenth of one's resources to the Temple. The prophet Malachi accuses people of "robbing God" by not bringing their gifts to God.

In the New Testament, giving is a matter of love and not law. Both Jesus and Paul had a great deal to say about giving. In his correspondence to the church at Corinth, the Apostle Paul observes that "in giving we show the proof of our love." One of the first descriptions of the work of the early church in the Book of Acts was to take an offering for the famine in Jerusalem. The witness of Scripture is clear. Stewardship is more than the giving of our money, but it is never less.

The second reason that compels us to support the work of the church with our financial resources is that giving is an act of worship and a "means of grace." In 1952, one of the Presbyteries of the General Assembly of our church overtured the Assembly concerning the proper way of raising funds for the work of the church. The General Assembly of 1952 affirmed what it had affirmed in 1888, 1891, and in 1916, namely that the proper way for raising funds in the church was a "recognition of our obligation to give in proportion to what God has given us." When Horace Greeley was once approached by a group of persons from a church seeking to raise funds for the church, one of the church members told Mr. Greeley that they had tried every imaginable way to raise funds for the church: fairs, strawberry festivals, oyster suppers, box socials, mock weddings, etc. This person went on to say, "Mr. Greeley, do you have any other suggestions? He replied, "You might try religion." There is no better suggestion than that.

A third reason to support the work of the church through our stewardship effort is that it is consistent with the appeal of Christ. On a number of occasions, Jesus spoke about the cost of discipleship. “If anyone would come after me,” said Jesus, “let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminded us that there is such thing as “cheap grace”—forgiveness without repentance, baptism without discipline, and grace without cost.

Jesus was very consistent on the demands of discipleship. On one occasion he observed “You cannot serve God and Mammon.” On another occasion he reminded his disciples that “no one who lays his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

A fourth reason for giving to the church is that the giving of our money to the church cements our commitment to the church and its mission. Often, ministers hear people say, “I am willing to give my time to the church, my talents, but not my money.” That may be true in a limited number of circumstances but I cannot imagine that it is true in very many circumstances. If a person is not willing to give a financial commitment to the church, he or she is not really committed.

Several years ago there was a performance given at Spirit Square of Charles Dickens’ great story, “A Christmas Carol.” There is a part in that play when Ebenezer Scrooge comes face-to-face with the ghost of Christmas past, present, and future. At the end of this horrible night Scrooge comes to his senses. As he awakens from his nightmares, he is a changed person. When he discovers that it is Christmas morning, he is determined to do something to change his miserly life. He runs to the window of his house, opens the window, and looks down to a young boy standing below in the street. “Hey, you, young man,” he says. “Here is a gold coin. Go, and fetch me a goose for Christmas.” Now, in the play, the actor playing Scrooge spoke this line while looking out at the audience. He was pointing to no one in particular, but a small boy who was sitting with his parents in the audience thought that the actor was speaking to him. So the young boy got out of his seat, walked down the aisle of the theater and came on the stage. The actor playing Scrooge was very self-possessed and understood immediately what had happened. He gave the boy the coin and the boy walked off stage. After the performance the actor called this young boy back on stage and the audience gave the young boy a standing ovation.

I have thought about that young boy. He believed that the actor was speaking to him. So often in church we sit on the sidelines as the great drama of salvation passes us by. We think that somehow what the preacher says is addressed to someone else. That boy became more than a spectator. He became involved in the drama.

What if Jesus was right? What if he was right when he said that where our treasure was, there was our heart?

As we come to Dedication Sunday, let us resolve to ourselves that we will follow him and may we find in his service our deepest joy.

Amen.