

The Truth about Treasure

Breaking Up Stony Ground, Part 1

Matthew 6:19-24

This past summer I decided to get involved in something that never seemed to make headway – growing grass in my backyard.

To give you the correct picture in your mind, most of our backyard is kept natural . . . that’s a nice way of saying “I never cut it and it’s covered in pine straw . . . and I thank the Lord that every year we get a fresh supply.

But there’s this rather narrow strip of that runs behind our house, between the back of our house and our deck and all that natural area. And grass used to grow in that strip. It created a beautiful green frame around the back of our house. In fact, I curved the edges of that strip of grass so that it creatively meandered along.

At the widest point, that grassy strip is only 12 feet wide, but as it winds its way behind our house, it narrows to only a few feet.

In other words, it really shouldn’t be that difficult to grow grass.

But over the years, that grass has dwindled down; much of the grass has turned into a dusty path that just bakes in the sun. The only thing that seems to grow back there are pebbles that surface after it rains.

So this summer it was time to do battle . . . the ground was aerated, seeded, fertilized and sprinklers were kept going at regular intervals to water that entire strip of land.

Nearly every day I would inspect the progress and look for signs of new, green life.

Some areas did really well . . . but other areas barely responded. It’s obviously going to take more than one season to bring it all back.

I will say this – without a doubt, those sprinklers made all the difference in the world.

The consistent spray of water softened up that hardened ground. The seeds that germinated flourished with steady watering and plenty of sun.

I did notice however that some of the more resistant areas would quickly revert back to hard baked, sandy soil if the water was turned off for more than a day or two.

We kept those sprinklers on for nearly three months. Our water bill tripled during those months. In fact, the water company sent us gift cards and flowers. I’m teasing, but they should have.

That strip of stubborn land became for me a wonderful analogy to the Christian life.

Spiritual growth takes a lot of attention . . . a lot of water from the word and the Spirit of God. There are areas in our lives that respond more quickly to the work of God – but there are stubborn areas that are more difficult to cultivate . . . in fact, it doesn’t seem to take much at all for them to revert back to hard baked soil.

And once again, in fact, over and over again, the work of God’s Spirit has to rain upon the stony ground of our hearts to bring about pliable soil and fresh, new growth.

It reminded me of another analogy but a similar proverb I heard a long time ago – we are clay pots with holes – the only way we can stay full is to stay under the faucet and keep the water running.

I read almost daily from a little book entitled *The Valley of Vision*. It’s a collection of Puritan prayers. And the reason I love it so much is because it is thoroughly biblical and, because of that, entirely balanced in its view of sanctification and genuine spiritual growth. (Charles Spurgeon, Thomas Watson, Richard Baxter, David Brainerd, John Bunyan the author of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Isaac Watts and others).

Frankly, I often pray aloud their prayers, because, frankly, they knew how to pray.

In one of the prayers, it reads, “Lord, my sins are stained and deep, and rise from a stony self-righteous heart. Reveal to me my weaknesses and I may know my strength in You . . . give me grace to know more of my need of grace.”¹

The writer of *Hebrews* encourages the Christian in the race to lay aside everything that will slow you down or get in the way . . . in fact, he refers in ***Hebrews 12:1 to those sins that so easily beset us.***

Easily beset is translated from one Greek compound word – the first part can be rendered

“*readily, cleverly*” – sins that readily and cleverly beset you.

The second part of the word – *beset* – comes from a word that means, “to place itself around; to wrap around”.ⁱⁱ

My translation translates it, ‘sins which cling so closely to you’.

In other words, there are going to be sinful things that you will uniquely battle in your particular race; temptations that you have probably discovered by now are always ready and waiting to wrap themselves around your ankles and slow you down and even trip you up.

In fact, they’re going to dog your heels throughout your entire race of life – it’s that one battle you have to take to the Lord over and over again and receive fresh forgiveness and cleansing and strength so you can get back in the race.

That doesn’t mean we’re guaranteed to lose every time it confronts us; but running well doesn’t mean we’re guaranteed to win every time, either.

In fact, the context carries more of the idea that we’ll never be able to slack off or loosen up when it comes to that particular temptation.

The writer of Hebrews uses a present tense participle when he tells us to *lay aside these besetting sins* – that is we do this constantly, daily, regularly.

These things cling closely . . . they are cleverly and readily awaiting an opportunity to wrap themselves around us.

Now we’re not talking about salvation here, but sanctification. We’re not discussing how to battle temptation so that we can get into the family of God, but how to battle temptation because we are in the family of God.

This past summer I read again John Bunyan’s classic work, *Pilgrim’s Progress*; written in the mid-1600’s by this pastor who was imprisoned off and on for as much as 12 years for preaching without a government license.

In his allegory, he tells the story of Christian – a man who lived in the City of Destruction but heard the gospel and believed it and began his long journey toward the Celestial City of God.

Demonic forces and other people attempted to stop him or deceive him and trick him or distract him and even threaten to kill him. And he failed often, by the way. He tripped up in the Slough of Despond; he became imprisoned in Doubting Castle; he became distracted by false advisors; he became fearful and anxious in Vanity Fair.

The average Christian is tempted to think that if they really committed their lives to God, their lives would settle down.

And they are surprised when their lives only got stirred up. They discover that Christianity is a marathon race, not a 100 yard dash.

Keep in mind that the temptation of Jesus Christ in the wilderness by Satan himself came *after* Jesus began his public ministry, not before.

The battle – His race – began in earnest.

In fact, the word for race – in *Hebrews 12:1* – *run the race that is set before you* . . . that word for *race* comes from the Greek word, *agon* (αγων), which gives us our word *agony*. It refers to a struggle.

This is the agonizing struggle that Paul couldn’t wait to finally complete at the end of life; this was his personal battle with sin from Romans chapter 7 where he admitted in that very personal and transparent testimony that things he didn’t want to do, he often did and things he wanted to do he often didn’t do.

Paul isn’t condoning or excusing sin, it grieved him deeply. He’s expressing his personal battle with sin. And at the end of it he praises God that his security is not won through battle successes, but through the blood of His successful Savior who conquered the penalty of sin forever.

In the meantime, the Christian race is a battle; so strap on your armor, Paul commands in *Ephesians 6*. Be alert and vigilant, Peter commands in *1 Peter 5*.

The believer needs to sleep, as it were, with one eye open.

What I want to do in this series of studies is identify some of the more common temptations; temptations that seem to be some of the favorites of Satan and our own flesh that often trip us up – things that will revert our hearts back to hard baked ground if we give them any opportunity; things that will move in and take over if we offer them as much as a seat on the front porch of our lives.

And the first subject I want to deal with in this series is something that we all have. Some of us have more of it than others; but most of us never come to the conclusion that we have enough.

In a word, possessions.

Things . . . stuff.

To treasure our treasures . . . you know what I mean? To treasure those things that do not last and in the end do not really matter.

And by the way, I'm not talking about some subjective amount of money . . . when too much is too much.

Money isn't the problem . . . the love of money is.

The Bible has plenty of examples of poor Christians who brought God glory – such as John the Baptist (Mathew 3) and the widow who gave everything she had to the temple offering (Mark 12) and there are examples of wealthy Christians who also brought Him glory such as Barnabas and Lydia – and before them, believers like Abraham and Job.ⁱⁱⁱ

The last thing you want to do in a conversation about materialism is assume you don't have a problem with it because your car isn't as new as others believers you know; or your house is smaller than theirs is.

One pastor recalled being in a meeting with 200 other pastors when the speaker asked them the question “Is it possible for a person to build a house so large that it's sinful in the eyes of God? Raise your hand if you think so.”

All 200 pastors raised their hands.

The speaker then asked, “Can you tell me at exactly what size, the square footage, where house becomes sinful to live in?”

Silence from the pastors . . . you could have heard a pin drop. Finally, a pastor in the back laughed and said, “Easy, when that house is bigger than mine.”^{iv}

Listen, materialism isn't defined by comparing your life with someone else; in fact, materialism is more a matter of your heart than it is your wallet, or the square footage of your house.

Jesus Christ will cut to the core of this particular temptation that can so easily and readily wraps itself around all our hearts.

Let's listen in as he preaches a sermon, recorded in *Matthew's* Gospel.

Turn to *chapter 6 and verse 19*.

Jesus says, “***Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth.***”

I don't want you to miss his play on words here. The verb ***to lay up*** (θησαυριζω) and the noun ***treasures*** (θησαυρος) come from the same basic Greek term. The noun form was used to refer to a treasure chest.^v

There's a play on words here . . . Jesus is saying, “Do not treasure up a treasure chest on earth.”

Why not?

Well, He gives some very practical reminders of how fragile and temporary that pursuit can be:

1. First, he reminds his audience in *verse 19* of the power of a little moth to destroy someone's life savings

In the culture of Jesus Christ, clothing was currency.

Wealthy people often had golden threads woven into their clothing, both to display their wealth and also to store their wealth.^{vi}

When Samson, the Old Testament prophet paid a debt to the Philistines, he paid in clothing.

Garments were handed down as inheritance. Wealthy people would keep their clothing locked away for fear of being ruined by the elements.^{vii}

Jesus is delivering a practical warning – if you're security is in your cloth, all it takes is a moth or two and you've lost your inheritance.

But that isn't all.

2. Secondly, he refers to the danger of rust in *verse 17* – where moths and rust destroy.

Many of you moved here from the north and you know what rust can do to an automobile.

My first car was a Plymouth Volare – you remember those? The name sounds like Ferrari, but that's as close as it gets.

By the time I married my bride and we headed off for several years of seminary, first in Michigan, the rust holes in the back, by the back tires, were large enough to put your fist through.

The running board underneath was rusted through in several places as well. My Volare was rust with a steering wheel.

I can remember that when it rained, the carpet on the floorboard would get sopping wet . . . which of course created this musty year-round odor from the carpet getting wet and then drying and then getting wet again.

During those Michigan winters – I remember they lasted 12 months – the floorboard on the passenger side up front would literally turn into a sheet of ice an inch thick. Marsha would sit next to me and put her feet up on the hump in the middle of the floorboard to keep her shoes dry.

She obviously married me for love . . . it sure wasn't for my car.

We knew all about rust.

The word Jesus uses here for rust is *brosis* (βρωσις) which literally refers to eating away.

More than likely it's a parallel thought to the Lord's reference to the moth.^{viii}

More than likely the Lord is referring to the rodents that would eat away at the grain stored up in granaries and barns. This problem is a major threat to this day in third world regions that depend on grain to survive.

In India today, they estimate that as much as 50% of their annual grain supply is consumed by rodents – rats and mice primarily.

The New Testament audience understood immediately the threat of rodents sweeping in and literally consuming their wealth.

Their bank account was in the barn.

So they're tracking right along as Jesus illustrates His point. And He isn't finished . . .

The Lord went on to point out another threat.

3. Thirdly, notice the latter part of *verse 19* – *where thieves break in and steal*.

In other words, if all you want to do with your life is to fill up your own personal treasure chest, be prepared to lose it all – and mice aren't your only problem. People are.

And the verb the Lord uses here, translated *to break in*, can be literally translated "*to dig in – or dig through*."^{ix}

In the Middle East during the days of Christ – the walls of many of the houses were made of nothing more than baked clay; burglars could get into a house by simply digging through the wall.^x

And if people buried their valuables in the floor, the thieves would be able to literally dig around and possibly find those hiding places as well.

Several years ago I remember reading about the discovery by a homeowner in the Middle East town of Eshtemoa. The discovery included 62 pounds of exquisite, handcrafted silver jewelry. They had been stored in several clay jars and buried. Now worth tens of thousands of dollars, these jars were discovered buried in a hole 2 feet underneath the main floor of a home that had been a home site for more than 1,000 years – someone had literally kept their treasure buried 18 inches under the living room floor.

Imagine all those later homeowners who had no idea they were walking on buried treasure.

The Lord follows up these three warnings this encouragement; *notice verse 20. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth*

nor rust destroys, and thieves do not break in and steal.

There's no security issue in heaven. Nothing wears out, rusts out or gets stolen away.

The Lord then adds to that a statement – and this statement is one of those verdict oriented statements where the Lord wants us to pause and do some evaluation.

Look at verse 21. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Again, this issue of materialistic pursuit and longing for more things is really not an issue of how much you've got or how much it's worth, but how much does it matter to you? And what does it say about your greater treasure and passion in life?

You say, but no one can judge my heart . . . no one can really tell me the true treasure of my heart?

Jesus Christ would absolutely disagree.

He says here – where your treasure is . . . that will show you where your heart is.

- Somebody will say to me, "My heart is really interested in missions?" Really – do you volunteer in the church or in some ministry locally? No. Well, have you ever been on a mission's trip? "No". How much of your income is dedicated to supporting missions and missionaries? "I've never thought about it." Well, have you ever thought about giving a week or a year to some other culture to build the church and disciple others?"

No, but my heart is really there . . . my heart's always been interested in missions.

No it isn't . . . because you're not investing in it.

- My heart is really concerned about reaching the next generation . . . my heart is so concerned about young people.

Great – are you serving as a volunteer youth leader? No.

Are you volunteering in the children's department as a teacher? No

Are you leading a Bible study for students?

Are you volunteering in the nursery? No.

Then you're really not interested in the next generation, no matter what you think your heart says to you – because you're not investing in the next generation.

Interest always follows investment. In fact, investment proves interest.

Man I hoped my girlfriend would say yes when I proposed – I put every penny I had in to that engagement ring – I thought if I propose and she

hesitates, maybe that diamond ring will distract her and she'll say yes.

Let me illustrate it another way.

I don't get the newspaper. But when I'm at Smithfield's or Chick-fil-A eating lunch, I'll sometimes pick up the newspaper to skim while I eat.

There's one section of that newspaper I'll never even glance at. It's the Wall Street section declaring which stocks are up and which ones are down.

I could tell you all day my heart is interested in IBM; I've got some friends that work over there and so I'm, you know, I'm concerned for the growth of IBM stock and the well-being of the stock holders.

I really care about that company succeeding.

The truth is, I'm not . . . what's the proof? I've never bought one share of IBM stock.

Investment proves interest.

Listen, suppose I sunk my savings account into IBM stock. I mean I took all \$852 dollars and bought shares with that money. Now . . . now . . . what part of the newspaper do you think I would read, even before I read the comic strip?

The stock pages; you see, I'm now genuinely interested because I've invested.

The trouble with materialism – living for the material world that is passing away – is that most people have it wrapped around their ankles without realizing it.

And all they want to do is invest their time and energy and money into things, not realizing that their investment is revealing their true treasure in life.

Let me provide some practical questions to evaluate just how much in danger you might be.

Ask yourself these questions?

- First, do I spend more time thinking about what money can do with my life versus what I want God to do with my life?
- Here's another; do I consistently pay my bills, but sporadically give to the Lord?
- Do I compromise my convictions to avoid any kind of financial or reputational loss?
- Do I have financial goals but not any spiritual goals?
- Do I invest time and energy in work and family and recreation but make no investment of time and energy in serving my family in the body of Christ?
- Here's another one: Am I suddenly interested in my charitable giving in December, or do I do give in December like I give in July?

- If I receive a year-end bonus or salary increase, will it raise my standard of living, or will it affect my level of giving?
- Here's another question; is my online banking program designed to make monthly deposits and payments to creditors, but nothing's planned for my church? I'll do that when I feel like it.
- When's the last time I've given away something I would have preferred to keep for myself?
- What's my attitude or response when I see a homeless person begging on the street?
- Have I ever helped a widow or an orphan with tangible gifts of time or energy or money?
- Is a charitable gift designed into my will, or does all of my estate pass on to my heirs?

Listen, I have pastored now for 28 years and to this date – no one has ever left the church in their will. Now that doesn't mean that people haven't given from their parent's or grandparent's or family's estate, but no one has ever actually put Colonial in their will for a direct contribution.

Now if you have, don't tell me . . . I don't want to be tempted to pray that you die so you can be the first one. Just keep it a secret.

But isn't that telling?

- Two more questions; do I think more about my retirement than I do Christ's return?
- Last question; do I dream more about my retirement home than I do my heavenly home in the Father's house?

Beloved, there isn't anything that'll break up the stony ground of materialism and keep us focused on the things above than developing a generous spirit toward everybody but you.

Hold things loosely.

Give something away – invest your possessions, time, energy, money in people and ministry and discipleship and prayer . . . make plans that will outlive you.

Ask God for spiritual fruit that will outlast you.

Let's ask the Lord to keep softening the soil of our hearts, making us givers in every way – which imitates God our Master who genuinely loved us, right?

How do we know we're His true treasure? He proved it by:

- investing in us . . .
- giving Himself to us . . .
- sacrificing His life for us . . .
- and creating a place to live with us . . . forever.

This is the paradox of the Christian life . . . to give away is to become wealthy; to share, is to keep that which matters; to be generous is to put into your treasure chest of life those elements that truly matter.

Let me close by reading just a paragraph from another prayer in The Valley of Vision collection of Puritan prayers:

*Lord, let me learn . . .
That the way down is the way up
That to be humbled is to be high,
That the broken heart is the healed heart,
That the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit
That to have nothing is to possess everything,
That to give is to receive.^{xi}*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/21/2014 by Stephen Davey.

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i Editor, Arthur Bennett, The Valley of Vision (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975)

ii Kenneth S. Wuest, Wuest's Word Studies: Hebrews (Eerdmans, 1947), p. 214

iii Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, Strengthening Your Grip Study Guide (Insight for Living, 1989), p. 28

iv <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2005/september/16113.html>

v Fritz Rienecker/Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 18

vi John MacArthur, Matthew 1-7 (Moody, 1985), p. 411

vii Grant Osborne, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew (Zondervan, 2010), p. 242

viii Ibid

ix Ibid

x William Barclay, The Gospel of Matthew: Volume 1 (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 239

xi Editor, Arthur Bennett, The Valley of Vision (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), p. xxiv