

7. **Earthly-Mindedness and the Ethic of the Kingdom** (6:19-34)

Following His treatment of alms-giving, prayer, and fasting, the Lord redirected His discourse in a way that seems abrupt and even disconnected from the previous context. Without any transition or explanation whatsoever, Jesus immediately turned His attention from the matter of Israel's practical piety to what appears to be an exhortation regarding wealth. And, if determining the contextual connection between this new topic and what preceded it isn't difficult enough, Jesus also seemed to "shift gears" within this new context by moving from the consideration of wealth issues to a metaphorical discussion of the eye as the lamp of the body (6:22-23).

Whatever the difficulties of finding the actual lines of connection, it is undeniable that they exist. For, whenever a person moves from one topic or thought to another, there is always a linear stream of consciousness in his own thought process, regardless of whether those listening can identify it. In such circumstances, the listener may respond by asking, "Where did that come from?" or "How did we get onto that topic?", but, if the speaker chooses to do so, he can retrace his line of thought to show how he transitioned in his mind from the one thing to the other. So it was with Jesus on the mountain in Galilee: What came out of His mouth reflected a seamless, well-ordered train of thought and instruction, whether or not His audience was able to discern the connecting strands.

So, in this particular transition, the connection is easy to see once the reader understands Jesus' overall concern, frame of reference and orientation in His instruction. In fact, this understanding brings order, cohesiveness and profound richness to the entire discourse. It is precisely the absence of the right pair of glasses – that is, the right interpretive grid – that leaves so many finding in the Sermon on the Mount a collection of discrete instruction sets dealing with individual components/aspects of Christian morality and ethics. They can't see the unified whole or discern its harmonized message because their "glasses" don't allow them to see the actual lines of connection and coherence.

By now it ought to be evident that Jesus wasn't outlining for His hearers a catalog of Christian attitudes and behaviors; such instruction would have been utterly incoherent to them. The multitudes listening to Jesus on that mountain were *Jews* – sons of Abraham whose conception of the promised kingdom of God, their own relationship to it as God's "chosen people," and the Son of David who was to rule over it, was flawed to the point that they were in danger of missing the "day of their visitation" (ref. Luke 19:29-44).

Jesus wasn't attempting to school them in Christian ethics; He was proclaiming to them the gospel of His kingdom. He was declaring the good news that His presence among them indicated the "in-breaking" of the everlasting new-creational kingdom proclaimed and pledged in all the Scripture. But that good news also brought with it a dire warning: Unless and until the sons of Israel turned from their self-righteous and self-serving delusions, they were doomed to "stumble over the stumbling stone" and find themselves cast out of the kingdom, just as the prophets had predicted (cf. Isaiah 8:11-9:7, 28:1-16 with Matthew 21:23-44, Luke 2:25-34, Acts 4:1-12, Romans 9:30-33 and 1 Peter 2:4-8; ref. also Matthew 8:1-12; 1 Corinthians 1:18-24).

Jesus' gospel of the kingdom was His proclamation that the day of purging and renewal had come. His kingdom is the realm and administration of the recovered creation, and all who would enter into it must first enter into the new life that comes from personal union with Him. The only authentic way into the "sheepfold" is through the "door" that is Jesus Himself; all who attempt to enter by another way are thieves and looters. In effect, such men seek to "plunder" the kingdom by their insistence upon redefining it and keeping men out of it (ref. John 10:1-10; cf. also Matthew 11:2-19, 23:13).

Jesus' kingdom is the kingdom of the new creation, and its ethic is simply *Christiformity*: life lived in conformity to the consummate human sonship first realized in the Last Adam and True Israel and subsequently in those who are His brethren through union with Him by His indwelling Spirit. This renewal in Christ was the marrow of God's promise to fallen man; thus the kingdom's ethic stands upon the fulfillment of all the Scripture, including the Law of Moses (5:17-48), and it expresses itself in the true piety previously symbolized in Israel's rituals and traditions (6:1-18).

And because it is the ethic of the kingdom *of heaven* – the "other-worldly" kingdom that is creational restoration, this ethic transcends every earthly counterpart, however noble or exemplary. If Jesus' kingdom and its ethic bear the stamp of heaven, so do its inhabitants: The sons of the kingdom have their new life and everlasting citizenship in the "heavenlies" (cf. Ephesians 1:3, 2:1-6; Philippians 3:17-21; Colossians 3:1-4; etc.), and this implies first that their minds and hearts are set on things above, but also that they live their present earthly lives with an "other-worldly" perspective and set of priorities. These truths lie at the heart of Jesus' instruction in the present context (6:19-34).

- a. The first section of the context introduces this theme by means of a paired exhortation in which Jesus first negatively and then positively called His hearers to a heavenly perspective and valuation (6:19-21). *Specifically, the sons of the kingdom of heaven are to accumulate their "treasure" in the heavenly realm.* Earthly-mindedness (and its corollary, "natural wisdom") is the fundamental consequence of human estrangement from God. Alienated within himself, man's entire existence has become "earth-bound"; even his spiritual thoughts, aspirations and activities are entirely human. Separated from the life and mind of God, men are constrained to their own thoughts, sensibilities and judgments. And because this state of alienation defines and orders the fallen creation, it is also the essential point of distinction between every form and expression of human religion and the kingdom of heaven. The reason, again, is that the kingdom of heaven is the realm of creational renewal and restoration which has its focal point in humanity's reconciliation to its Creator-Father.

This is precisely why Jesus' proclamation of His kingdom's gospel stresses the earthly vs. heavenly distinction between the Jews' conception of the messianic kingdom and what it is in truth. Israel's (and fallen man's) earthly-mindedness was very much at the heart of the preceding context, but in the narrow sense of human preoccupation with recognition and praise; in this passage Jesus broadened His view, showing that earthly-mindedness determines all that men think and do.

Human independence from God has left men earth-bound in the truest and fullest sense; even their spirituality has become “fleshly” (cf. Ephesians 4:17-24; Colossians 2:16-23). *Living as captives within their own minds, human beings are incapable of transcending themselves, and this self-referential existence reduces everything in life to the **personal** and **natural**.* This doesn’t imply that people have no awareness of or concern for the supernatural; it simply recognizes that they conceive and interact with even the supernatural through a natural mind.

- 1) Fallen man is entirely “earthly-minded.” In Paul’s words, he has his heart and mind set on earthly things (Colossians 3:1-3); he belongs to the fallen, estranged creation and serves as a bondsman to the “god” that is his natural appetite (Philippians 3:18-20). *Man’s earthly-mindedness leaves him no alternative but to locate and pursue his treasure within the realm of the earthly and natural.* (Thus Jesus’ exhortation to **stop** laying up earthly treasure.) However spiritual or religious he may be, fallen man necessarily finds his treasure “upon the earth.” Such treasure may be more overtly “fleshly, as the prestige, honor and religious power sought by Israel’s elite. But it can also be the seemingly “godly” treasure of a righteous standing before God and the obtainment of His approbation and blessing. This was Paul’s treasure, and it found him as much of a blasphemer and offender in God’s sight as those who set their hearts on carnal delights (cf. Acts 22:1-8 with Philippians 3:1-9 and 1 Timothy 1:12-13).

This frame of reference is absolutely essential to understanding Jesus’ exhortation; *without it, the inevitable tendency is to see Him calling His hearers to forsake a materialistic mindset and orientation.* Multitudes of Christians hold (and have held) this view, and yet it is antithetical to what Jesus was actually saying.

- First, this interpretation leaves all men fully capable of fulfilling Jesus’ directive. If the kingdom of heaven is about renouncing this world and its goods, then all one needs to do is embrace the life of the monk or the ascetic. Moreover, this criterion places *Jesus Himself* outside of His own kingdom; the One accused of being a glutton and drunkard hardly lived a life devoid of all earthly pleasure and enjoyment.
- But more importantly, this interpretation obscures what it actually means to “lay up treasure in heaven” (6:20). This isn’t accomplished by self-denial or the renunciation of earthly things and pleasures; *to lay up heavenly treasure a person must first be liberated from his enslavement to his self-referential earthly-mindedness.* He must be “born from above” to be able to accurately perceive the kingdom of heaven (John 3:1-6), and that “true sight” of the heavenly kingdom is what enables him to identify and locate a treasure outside of the personal and natural.

- 2) Before moving on in His discussion, Jesus summarized His opening exhortation with a clarifying statement that makes His meaning all the more evident (6:21). His declaration is both simple and profound: simple in that it notes the obvious truth that each person's interests and desires determine what he values; profound in that it highlights what Solomon came to understand, namely the ultimate vanity of human existence independent of God.

The latter observation is easily missed when Jesus' exhortation is regarded as directing men to renounce a materialistic lifestyle. From that perspective, some have argued that Jesus was saying that, if a person wants to cultivate heaven-directed affections, he must vigorously renounce his preoccupation with earthly concerns and begin to labor for heavenly things; in this way, his heart will follow his treasure. Others come from the opposite direction: The affections of a man's heart determine what he values. This is certainly true, but Jesus was saying much more than that:

- First of all, in this passage He associated treasure with two *realms* rather than particular entities or commodities. All treasure exists either in the earthly realm or the heavenly realm.
- Second, in direct contrast to "heavenly" treasure, all "earthly" treasure is *transient* – the one who possesses it will lose it. If somehow he can forestall its natural decay and ruin, it can still be taken from him. And even if he can manage to hang on to it his entire life, it will finally be snatched from his hands at death.

Taken together, these two observations show that Jesus wasn't contrasting material and non-material (spiritual) valuables. "*Treasure upon earth*" refers to that which is a part of the present passing order of things; "*treasure in heaven*" refers to that which exists within the realm of the enduring new creation. Here is where the profundity of Jesus' words shines forth: By observing that a person's heart always resides with his treasure – and having linked human treasure with two separate and distinct realms, He was highlighting the truth that the sons of this world have no actual connection with the kingdom of heaven. Such ones perceive, think and operate only in the natural realm: They cannot perceive the kingdom of heaven; how, then, could they possibly find "treasure" in that realm?

Conversely, the sons of Christ's kingdom have been delivered, by the Spirit's renewing work, from the present passing order (what Paul called the *domain of darkness*). They not only perceive the kingdom of heaven, they have entered it through union with its King. And so, consistent with His instruction thus far, Jesus' exhortation to "lay up treasure in heaven" is His call to repentance and faith; to escape the deceit and vanity of the fleeting self-life and find true life and everlasting treasure as God's sons.