

Series: Membership Vows
Sermon: Gifts

Malachi 3:6-12

“I the Lord do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. 7 Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the Lord Almighty.

“But you ask, ‘How are we to return?’

8 “Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me.

“But you ask, ‘How are we robbing you?’

“In tithes and offerings. 9 You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. 10 Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the Lord Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it. 11 I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe,” says the Lord Almighty. 12 “Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,” says the Lord Almighty.

II Corinthians 8:1-4

And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. 2 In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. 3 For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, 4 they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people.

Matthew 6:19-21

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Sermon

I remember a few years ago when Martha Stewart got caught improperly trading stock. You remember the story. She was convicted and imprisoned for "insider trading." Geesh, that doesn't sound so bad now. She owned stock in ImClone and sold it one day before the FDA announced it wouldn't review the company's new cancer drug. The SEC thinks Martha was tipped off by the Chairman of ImClone before the sale. Martha says she was just chatting with a friend. Because Martha sold her stock when she did, she made \$46,000 more than she would have made the very next day. You've heard the saying, if it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, then it is a duck. In the same way, if it looks like insider trading and sounds like insider trading and smells like insider trading, it is probably insider trading.

This morning, I want to give you the ultimate insider trading tip. If you follow what I say, it will earn you untold wealth. From Matthew 5, we read, “Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth, where rust, and moth and

thieves break in and steal. Instead, store up for yourselves treasure in heaven.” Yes, this is going to be a giving type of sermon. We’re in our pledge drive. And we’re examining our membership vows this month. We’ve explored prayers and presence, and now we’re onto gifts. But its more than giving - its about attitude. Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth. Jesus made many references to money and possessions in His teachings. In fact, 15% of everything Christ said relates to this topic. He said more about money and possessions than He said about evangelism or about heaven and hell. Why did Jesus put such an emphasis on money and possessions? Because there is a fundamental connection between our spiritual lives and how we think about and handle money. We may try to divorce faith and finances, but the Lord doesn't.

We see this connection laid out for us in numerous places. I think of Luke 3 where we read of John the Baptist preaching to great crowds of people on the banks of the Jordan River. The crowds, tax collectors, and soldiers heard his call to repentance and each group asked, "What shall we do?" I want you to take note of the Baptist's answers:

- John says the crowds should share clothing and food with the poor and hungry (vs 11).
- John says tax collectors should not collect any more taxes than they are required to (vs 13).
- John says soldiers should not extort money and should be content with their pay (vs 14).

Each answer relates to money and possessions. But neither the crowds nor the tax collectors nor the soldiers had asked John about money issues. They asked about repentance. Seems they go hand in hand.

I am reminded of what Martin Luther said. He said everyone needs two conversions: one of the heart and one of the pocketbook. In Luke, Jesus spoke of a rich man who kept all his wealth for himself. He planned to tear down his barns and build bigger ones to store up for himself so he could retire early and take life easy and party all day long. But God said the man was a fool and called his life from him that very night. Jesus concludes by saying this is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.

We can also speak of the rich young man who pressed Jesus on what to do to gain eternal life. Jesus told him to sell his possessions and give to the poor and "Then come, follow me" Jesus knew that money and possessions were this man's god. He knew the man couldn't and wouldn't serve God unless this idol god was dethroned. But the rich young man considered the price too great. In other words, he loved his earthly wealth more than he loved Jesus. It is plain from these passages, and others like them, that the Lord sees a fundamental connection between our spiritual lives and how we think about and handle money. We may try to divorce faith and finances, but the Lord doesn't.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth." I want you to notice why he warns us. He doesn't warn us against storing up treasures on earth because they are bad. We all know they aren't. Money and assets are part of the good gifts that God gives us in this life and on this earth. I like cash. Even a wise man brought gold to Jesus. They are part of what Paul says we need to receive with thanksgiving. They help to make life comfortable and enjoyable and less stressful. So why does Jesus warn us against storing up treasures on earth? Too many times I've heard the preacher say, "money is bad, money is evil. Jesus told us not to accumulate wealth." I don't see that in this scripture. What I do see, and why I see is that Jesus told us not to store up treasure is simply this: Because they don't last! At the time of Jesus, earthly treasures were either destroyed by moth and rust or stolen by thieves. I love how Proverbs describes this: (Prov 23:5) Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle. What an image. Next time you find yourself clinging to a prized possession – a car, a pickup, a dairy, a computer, a bike, a toy, a house, at our home it's the Wii! If only we could have a Wii! – imagine it sprouting wings and flying off. Sooner or later, says Jesus, it will disappear.

Now, I want you to notice that Jesus doesn't just say earthly wealth and possessions might be lost; He says it will be lost. Either it leaves us while we live, or we leave it when we die. No exceptions. When you invest in treasure in this life and on this earth, you are investing in something that will become worthless – either when Christ returns or when you die, whichever comes first - one of those is going to happen! Think of it this way: Imagine that you are alive at the end of the Civil War. You are living in the South and have accumulated a lot of Confederate money. Now, suppose you know for a fact that the North is going to win the war and the end is imminent. What will you do with your Confederate money? If you are smart, there is only one answer. You immediately cash in your Confederate money for something that will have value once the war is over – gold, or U.S. currency, or jewels, or property. You keep only enough Confederate money to meet your short-term needs. As a Christian, you have inside knowledge that someday all the treasure of this world will be worthless. So, to accumulate vast earthly treasures is the same as stockpiling Confederate money. It is foolish and silly. There is nothing wrong with Confederate money, as long as you understand its limits. There is nothing wrong with earthly treasures, as long as you understand they are not permanent.

As a Christian, you are being told to switch investment strategies: you are being told to get out of worldly treasure. Earthly treasure is about to take a nose dive far worse than the Dow ever could. Earthly treasure, for all of us, will take a permanent dive into the basement. Jesus warn us against storing up treasures on earth because they don't last. Not only that, but you can't take it with you when you die. One thing you will never ever see is a hearse pulling a U-Haul. Actually, it has happened. A pastor friend of mine had a small church in Kansas, the grandmother, who lived alone, died and all of the family came in from out of town. But so they didn't have to take two trips and to get dibs on the stuff in her home, everyone came in with pick-ups and trailers. Between her death and the funeral, they ransacked the poor lady's home and loaded up. At the funeral, everyone came with their trucks and trailers to the cemetery because they didn't trust their respective families - someone might skip the funeral, and steal the stolen goods that they have rightfully stolen. At her funeral were all her possessions and then they drove away. All her treasures were now gone.

You can't store it up for yourself. And, you can't take it with you. From an eternal or spiritual point-of-view, earthly treasure is a poor investment. Money is great. I hope to have lots of it someday, but it is temporal. This is the first part of the ultimate insider trading tip. Now comes the second part of the ultimate insider trading tip. Jesus not only tells us what to get out of, but He also tells us what to get into. He not only tells us where not to put our treasures, but He also tells us where to put our treasures. Instead of investing in earthly treasure, He tells us to get into heavenly treasure: "store up for yourselves treasures in heaven." If you stopped reading too soon, you would think that Christ was against us storing up treasures for ourselves. No. He is all for it! In fact, He commands it. He wants us to store up treasures. It is just that He wants us to stop storing the wrong things in the wrong place and start storing the right things in the right place.

Jesus is talking about deferred gratification. You give up something now to gain even more in the future. Jesus promises that those who sacrifice on earth will receive "a hundred times as much" in heaven (Mt 19:29). That is a 10,000% return – remember how we thought a 10% gain in the stock market was impressive? Or any gain?

"Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven." Like Zacchaeus or the rich young ruler, give to the poor. Like the early believers, help out your brothers and sisters in the faith. Support the work and mission of the church. Invest in Kingdom causes like orphanages, the sick, the dying, the outcast. Support Kingdom agencies that benefit and show Christ's love in the world. Visit the lonely and the widow. Befriend the stranger. "Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven."

"Do not store up treasures on earth." Why not? Because earthly treasure is on the way down (remember, it is going to hit the basement when Christ returns or when you die). "But store up treasures in heaven." Why? Because heavenly treasure is on the way up. Heavenly treasure will last. There moth and rust do not destroy and

thieves do not break in and steal. Invest in heavenly treasure because heavenly treasure has lasting value. When it comes to earthly treasures, you can't take it with you. But when it comes to heavenly treasure, you can send it on ahead. Anything we try to hang on to here will be lost. But anything we put into God's hands will be ours for eternity. That is a guarantee. Right now, the FDIC insures money that we put into the bank – and that is for treasure that doesn't last and that we cannot take with us. But the Father's insurance is far greater and far longer. Financial planners tell us to think not just 3 months or 3 years ahead but 30 years ahead. Christ tells us to think ahead even further to eternity – 300 years and 30,000 years and 30 million years - when we've been there 10,000 years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's grace, than when we first began.

This isn't a sermon about giving. It's not about how money is evil and you should sell everything and give to the church. That's what your tithe is for. Use your money on things you like and want to do. But do it with the proper perspective. In Charles Dickens's classic, *A Christmas Carol*. The hero was who? Bob Cratchet. Who was the villain? Scrooge. Scrooge wasn't the bad guy because he was rich. He was the bad guy because of what he did with his money. What did he do with it? Nothing. He sat on it. He didn't even get to enjoy it. It just collected dust.

Just to close: When it comes to this morning's message, two tombs describe it all. One belongs to William Borden. The other belongs to King Tut. In 1904 William Borden, heir to the Borden Dairy Estate, graduated from a Chicago high school a millionaire. His parents gave him a trip around the world. Traveling through Asia, the middle East, and Europe gave Borden a burden for the world's hurting people. Writing home, he said, "I'm going to give my life to prepare for the mission field." After graduating from Yale University he turned down several high-paying job offers. Completing studies at Princeton Seminary, Borden sailed for China to work with Muslims, stopping first at Egypt for some preparation. While there he was stricken with cerebral meningitis and died within a month. His tomb is in a graveyard hidden off the back alley of a street littered with garbage. It is overgrown with grass and weeds. But he's in paradise.

King Tut, the boy king, was only 17 when he died. He was buried with solid gold chariots and thousands of golden artifacts. His gold coffin was found within gold tombs within gold tombs. The burial site was filled with tons of gold. The Egyptians, you need to realize, believed in an afterlife – one where they could take earthly treasures. But all the treasures intended for King Tut's eternal enjoyment stayed right where they were until Howard Carter discovered the burial chamber in 1922. They had not been touched for more than 3000 years.

Borden's grave was obscure, dusty, and hidden. Tut's tomb glittered with unimaginable wealth. But I wonder, who has the treasure now?

This morning, go with this insider's tip: Go with the stock that gives great returns. When you invest in the Kingdom, your returns are out of this world!