

2020-10-25 Matthew 6.19-33

¹⁹ “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.

²² “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. ²³ But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

²⁴ “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

²⁸ “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

It’s a few years ago since I learnt to drive a car. I like to think of myself now as a good driver – don’t we all?! – but I have to admit that I didn’t pass my driving test the first time. I took a little while to convince the driving examiner that I was safely in control on a public road of 1.5 tonnes of speeding metal. One early lesson that I recall – and still follow today – is what to do when you are driving down a dark road with an oncoming car, headlights beaming. I was wisely taught not – despite the temptation – to look at the dazzling lights of, but instead to fix my eyes on the road ahead. The reason for this advice being that we are inclined to go towards the things we are looking at, and drifting across the road into the oncoming traffic is clearly something we want to avoid. The same principle applies when cutting the grass. If you want to produce a nice straight stripe, fix your gaze on a point on the opposite side of the garden and you will naturally walk in a straight line towards it, rather than looking at your ground and ending up with a wobbly line across the lawn.

Jesus’s teaching on money and possessions that we heard read to us earlier essentially makes the same point. We set our sights on and head towards the things that matter to us; the things that we value and prioritise. Our focus – our aim – is fundamentally important, and determines both our course in life and our ultimate destination.

Jesus speaks about what we invest in, what we focus on, what we serve and what we seek. And he says that in each case, there are basically two options – the eternal or the temporary, the good or the bad, the things of God or the things of this world.

In speaking of our treasure – that which we invest time and energy in to accumulate – Jesus tells us that it can either be in things that only can only – at most – last as long as our life on earth, such as possessions, career, and the esteem of our fellow humans, or else in something will last as long as heaven itself.

In speaking of the way we look at the world, Jesus tells us that it can either be with eyes that are healthy or unhealthy, but the literal translation is eyes that are either ‘generous’ or ‘stingy’. Whether we focus on ourselves or on others drives our decisions, the course of our lives, and ultimately our spiritual state – whether we are full of light or of darkness.

In speaking of that which we serve, Jesus tells us that our loyalties cannot be divided; we serve either God or Money – literally ‘Mammon’, who was the Carthaginian god of wealth. But this is a choice between serving the giver or the given, and it is the supreme treason to prize the gift above the donor.

In speaking of what we seek, Jesus says that our overriding concern can be either for a sort of mini kingdom, as it were, of our own lives and bodies – and especially our food, drink and clothes – or for something that is far bigger and lasts far longer – the kingdom of God and its underpinning values.

In all four areas – what we spend our time and energy on, and what we think about and prioritise, we can follow after what the world – or the pagans – run after, things that are of only temporary value, or else we can live as citizens of the kingdom of heaven, and pursue its extension on earth.

The fundamental issue, then, is our priorities. We use our time, energy and resources on the things that matter to us. It can be good and right to provide for our basic needs and to care for those we love. But we often prioritise our own ‘wants’ over the ‘needs’ of others. Jesus instead calls us to be citizens of a kingdom which has other priorities – that of loving God and neighbour first. To do so is to look beyond our own limited interests – our own mini-kingdom – to the wider interests of others and the extension of God’s loving rule. It is to lift our eyes beyond the timeframe of our earthly lives to God’s eternal timeframe. It is to invest not just in this world, but in the next.

But what this does mean in real terms? What *are* the things don’t just give a short-term benefit to us, but will produce ‘kingdom fruit’ in the long-term? I would suggest that it is not too much of a simplification to say that the only thing that ultimately counts and lasts is love, which Jesus tells us is a summary of the law of God who is himself love. Time, energy and money invested in loving causes will never be wasted.

We love God by obeying his commandments and through caring for and serving the precious people that he has made and the world that is their home. People need food, shelter, friendship, guidance, purpose, love. They need ultimately to discover and respond to the love of God, in whom all of our deepest needs are met. The mission of the Church is to serve people in all these ways and more, and so see God's kingdom grow.

In our families, workplaces and friendships we can be God's servants, invested in God's work of showing God's love in word and deed. And as Christians we are called to love and work together as his Church to do so, too. Christians are part of the universal church, with its awesome, inspiring and exciting global mission, and are also part of its local expressions, such as in Chilton and Harwell. When we partner together, bringing to God our time, talents and treasure, we are able to do great things in God's name. I'll give examples of three key areas.

As churches, we want to continue the amazing, valuable work amongst our local families. We want to provide friendship and guidance for new mums and carers through Fledgelings, to run free Holiday Clubs to provide a fun introduction to the Christian faith for primary aged children and welcome respite to hard-pressed families, to support and engage with our local schools and villages especially at key festivals, to run creative Family Services and children's and youth groups, and to do many other things, too. To do all this we need to continue to employ our Children and Families' Workers Sarah and Melanie, who work tirelessly and lead amazing teams of volunteers. What can be more valuable than investing in the spiritual, moral and emotional wellbeing of the children and young people of our communities and their families?

As churches, we want to continue to support the invaluable work of our local award-winning Christians Against Poverty Debt Centre, which has to date enabled 42 local individuals and families to become debt free, and seen many come to faith for the first time or else re-commit. With the pandemic, financial need will inevitably increase, and the need for this often literally life-saving organisation will grow. What can be more reflective of God's character than giving our resources to enable those in the very depth of poverty and despair to have their debts cancelled and to be given a fresh start in life?

As churches, we want to continue to maintain and develop our beautiful, iconic church buildings, which periodically need roof repairs, new heating and seating, redecoration, cleaning and a whole host of other things. This practical stewardship of this precious inherited resource provides our churches with an operational base, an inspiring focus for our corporate worship, and an welcoming haven of peace for the members of our communities experiencing the ups and downs of life. What material thing can be a better focus of our energy and resources than these two buildings specifically dedicated to the mission and glory of God in our communities?

As churches we want to do a whole host of other things in Harwell and Chilton – caring for our neighbours through our pastoral teams and Generation Gold, meeting and worshipping together in services and small groups, encouraging sustainable living and care for God’s creation, supporting the work of the wider church and our mission partners overseas, running courses for enquirers, providing funerals, weddings and baptisms, and more! And all this is possible with the freely-given time, talents and treasure of those who have decided that the work of God’s kingdom of love should be a priority.

Can I urge each of us, brothers and sisters, to make God’s kingdom, and the work of loving God and neighbour, our priority, and for this to be reflected in how we use all our God-given resources. May us each prayerfully review before God how we use and spend all that we have? Maybe God is prompting you to particularly support the work amongst Children and Families, or amongst those in debt, or the care and development of our church buildings, or some other area of church life. You may like to get involved practically offering you time and talents, or financially with a restricted donation, which we are particularly encouraging people to consider making on our Gift Day next Sunday, 1st November, which is All Saints’ Day. All of God’s people – his saints – have different and unique things to offer, and together our gifts offered and used will fulfil the mission of the God’s church and see his kingdom come in Harwell and Chilton, and beyond.

St Paul tells us in Romans 12:1 that to offer all that we are and have is our true and proper worship of God. To do so is to invest in the only thing that ultimately will persist; the only thing that ultimately counts.