“Treasures in Heaven”

Matthew 6:7-21

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 They say the first day of snowboarding is the worst. You spend about 90% of the time falling down and struggling to pick yourself back up. Both feet strapped into one board makes the task more challenging. Unlike skiing where you can just pop your boots out of the ski to straighten yourself out, with snowboarding you are strapped in tight. This makes for some pretty painful falls, with your body being heaved into the mountain.

 I recall my first day of snowboarding. I was a sophomore in high school. My parents were disgraced that I would give up skiing for this so called “rebel sport”. I don’t recall for certain, but I’m sure I was just trying to be cool and impress some cute boy in the youth group.

 Like most first time snowboarders, I spent most of my time laying or sitting on the mountain, trying to work up the momentum to stand up. It was a very discouraging day. I didn’t remember skiing being so difficult to learn, and I was frustrated with how the day was going. I kept catching the edge of my snowboard, causing me to face plant in the snow. The bruises and sore muscles were building as the day wore on.

 It wasn’t until midafternoon that the snowboarding instructor clued me in to a very valuable piece of advice. After analyzing what I was doing wrong, he told me to be mindful of where my shoulders were pointed. As a skier, I was accustomed to pointing my shoulders downhill, so as to obtain as much speed as I could. But in snowboarding, the stance is very different. You don’t face downhill, you face the side of the slope. And because your body is locked into alignment on your board, the directions your shoulders face will determine the direction that your whole body will go. Point your shoulders downhill and you’ll turn to the left. Point them uphill and you’ll turn to the right. The instructor told me to intentionally think about where my shoulders are directed. He said this would help me to stay on my feet. Wouldn’t you know it that changed everything! As if by magic, I was able to turn both directions, and avoid the dreaded face plant. All thanks to a helpful guide who showed me where to direct my shoulders.

 In this portion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us which direction our hearts should be directed.

 He realizes that the disciples and all of the people in the crowd struggle with this. Too often they find themselves pointing their hearts in the wrong direction. Investing their focus in the wrong things. Pursing status among their colleagues. Wanting to impress those around them with their religious piety and acts of service. Praying in grandiose fashion. Making a scene when they fast from food. Storing up for themselves treasures on earth, rather than treasures in Heaven.

 This struggle is all too familiar to us today. We are constantly encouraged by the world to store up for ourselves treasures on earth. We get bombarded with images from the media, telling us how important it is to impress other people. Do those things that will bring greatness to yourself. Make a name for yourself. Show off what you’re capable of. If you’re going to do something good, make sure you get credit for it. Make sure people are watching, so they know how great you are. Earn those treasures on earth, so that when you die, you’ll leave an impressive legacy. It’s all about status, status, status.

 The world tells us to keep up appearances. Show off so that others may see.

 Sadly this filters into our faith lives. We get sidetracked by the ways of the world, losing sight of authentic discipleship. We think that if we just pray a beautiful, articulate prayer, the world will be impressed and think we have solid faith. If we hold a fast, perhaps during Lent, we feel the need to be obvious about it. Moan and wail at how desperately we miss chocolate or Social media. Those who preach a prosperity Gospel, tell us to take pride in our life’s riches and credit God for showing us favor. If we’re doing well by worldly standards, surely it means God is rewarding us, right? All of these things will earn us applause from those around us.

 Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount directly opposes all of these messages. It forces us to stop dead in our tracks and examine our lives. While the world is telling us to store up those treasures on earth, Jesus brings in this countercultural message. He tells us the ways of the world are temporary. Directing our hearts toward the material possessions, or impressive status’ will only lead to a dead end. It isn’t eternal. It won’t last forever.

 Jesus calls us to ask ourselves: Do we carry out these actions to earn brownie points? To attract attention? When we are practicing our faith, is it to impress others, or to show faithful witness to God? Are we making fools of ourselves by publicly displaying our faith? Or are we quietly and humbly doing these things for God? What does our faith lived out through prayer and fasting and pursuit of treasures say about us?

 I’m reminded of a scene in the West Wing, where Jed Bartlett displays an act of humility. I don’t recall all of the details, so if you are a bigger fan of the show than I am, you can correct me during coffee time. What I remember about this scene is that the president is campaigning for re-election to the White House. He is travelling the country, meeting voters. There is one scene where is at a soup kitchen and he notices someone who is down on their luck. His campaign manager encourages him to allow the media to follow him and document his interaction with this poor person. The President declines any cameras and insists on speaking to this person alone. He wants to show this person compassion, but doesn’t want to exploit the situation. What could have been a boost for his campaign, turned into an authentic expression of his character. He didn’t want to use the situation for his personal gain. He just wanted to reach out to someone in need.

 Whenever we have the opportunity to perform kind act or service. Whenever we pray or practice our faith to God, Jesus calls us to turn down the photo-op. Don’t invite cameras and an audience. Don’t turn those faith moments into public displays. Don’t do good things so that you can earn recognition or attention. Do them because God knows you’ve done them. Do these good things because it is pleasing to God and makes the Kingdom of God more present on earth. Quietly and humbly perform these acts in the hope that they will delight God’s heart.

 When Jesus offers this teaching, it’s a lot like that snowboard instructor correcting my shoulder alignment. I was failing and falling all day because my shoulders weren’t pointed where they were supposed to be. Likewise, our faith journey will full of failures and disappointments if we continue to point our hearts in the wrong direction. If we get too caught up in what the world thinks, our faith practice will be futile.

 Jesus reminds us that the things of this earth will fade away. Moths will destroy and thieves will steal. It’s all temporary. You can’t take it with you. Don’t bother storing up treasures on earth, Jesus tells us.

 Instead we ought to store up for ourselves treasures in Heaven. Invest in those acts that have eternal consequences. Take stock in the Kingdom of God which is more stable than any earthly kingdom. Pursue faith lives of integrity. Think about where your heart is directed. If it is pointed in the right direction, one that glorifies God and not yourself, chances are you’re going in the right direction. Do all of this with the faith that those treasures in heaven will lead to eternal joy and goodness. Let us pray…