YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU … OR CAN YOU?

Scriptures: Matthew 6:19-24; Luke 12:13-21

Most of you have probably never heard of William Dodge. He had nothing to do with Dodge automobiles. He was an heir to the Remington firearms fortune. His wife was Geraldine Rockefeller Dodge, heiress to the Standard Oil fortune of John D. Rockefeller. At the time they were married in the early 1900s, they were said to be the wealthiest couple in America.

One summer during seminary I worked as a groundskeeper on their estate in Madison, NJ. It was a beautiful 500 acre property with forests, ponds, gardens, and vast stretches of green neatly mowed lawns. On the property were a mansion, a guest house, stables for the horses, and row upon row of dog kennels, for Geraldine's love affair with dogs.

The irony is that in 1977, the summer I worked there, the place was totally deserted. The Dodges had died years earlier, leaving no children or anyone else to look after the estate. So it was administered by the trust department of a bank. The bank kept on the old crew of groundskeepers, supplemented by some students like me, to mow lawns, rake leaves, trim bushes, and otherwise take care of the grounds until the property could be sold.

It was eerie working there—mowing around trees that no one looked at, sweeping out kennels and stables that no longer housed any animals, looking in the windows of the mansion and seeing a grand ballroom completely empty of furniture, lights, drapes, or anything else except a few tattered pieces of wallpaper sloughing off on to the floor. And now even that is gone. In the years after I worked there the estate was sold, the buildings were torn down, and most of the land was plowed up and paved over for a giant office complex.

It reminds me of the story in our first scripture lesson. Jesus tells about a man whose barns were overflowing with grain, so he builds larger barns and says to himself, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" No matter how rich and powerful you become, you can't take it with you.

Now one way of dealing with this problem is to say, "Well, if I can't take it with me, I'm going to spend it now." A Christian writer named Tony Campolo tells of taking his daughter on a Grayline tour of Chicago. As the bus stopped in front of a movie theater, the guide pointed to an alley where John Dillinger, the mobster, was gunned down by the FBI. The guide told them, "When John Dillinger died, after robbing more than one million dollars from banks across the Midwest, he had only thirty-two cents to his name." Campolo's daughter turned to him and whispered, "Wow! What great timing!" (*The Success Fantasy*, p. 12).

If you can't take it with you, spend it before you go. That's one way to deal with the problem. I call the Schlitz ethic, after the old beer commercials "You only go around once in life, so grab for all the gusto you can get." And if you can't take it with you, why not?

Or can you? Is it possible to invest your life in treasures that will last beyond this life? Is it possible to take it with you?

According to Jesus it is. "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal."

How does that work? How do you actually store up treasure in heaven?

In Matthew 19 a young man comes to Jesus and asks, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Jesus tells his to keep the commandments, but the man says, "I have kept all these; what do I still lack?" Then Jesus says, "Go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

This is not complicated. According to Jesus the way we acquire treasure in heaven is by giving it away to people in need here on earth. He illustrates this at several places in Matthew's gospel. In Matthew 10:42 Jesus says, "Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward." You can acquire the finest collection of wines every assembled, but the cup of water you give to a person in need is what you will take with you when you die.

In Matthew 25 Jesus tells a parable where the king, meaning himself, says to those on his right, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then he says, "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." We acquire treasure in heaven by giving it away to people in need here on earth.

Think about this a minute. What is the one thing you take with you to heaven when you die? Yourself! The only thing you take with you to heaven when you die is yourself. So the question is what kind of a person do you take with you?

Turn back to our scripture reading for just a moment: Matthew 6, starting at verse 19 (NT, p. 6). In verses 19-20 Jesus talks about storing up treasures in heaven. Now look at verse 21. Jesus says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." The idea is that what you do with your treasure shapes your heart. And your heart is the one thing you take with you when you die.

Now look at verses 22-23. Jesus says, "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness." What is the point of that statement? How is it connected to what Jesus says about storing up treasure in heaven?

In the original Greek of this verse, the unhealthy eye is literally "an evil eye." In Greek it says literally, "If your eye is evil, your whole body will be full of darkness." Interestingly there

are two places in the Old Testament where that expression "evil eye" is used. Proverbs 23:6 says, "Do not eat the bread of the stingy," and in Hebrew it says literally "Do not eat the bread of one having an evil eye." And Proverbs 28:22 says, "The miser is in a hurry to get rich," and in Hebrew it says literally, "The man of evil eye is in a hurry to get rich." In the Bible to have an evil eye means to have an eye that is closed to others, or to put it another way it means having a heart that is closed to others.

Now do you now see the connection? To have your heart closed to others is like having your eyes closed to others. Both will plunge your soul in darkness. Giving of your self and your treasure to others is not a financial transaction by which you purchase credits in heaven. It is training for your soul. The only thing you take to heaven is yourself, and the practice of giving of yourself to others enlarges your soul; it brings light into your soul; it makes you more the kind of person you would want to be around forever.

Let me close by sharing a story, actually two stories. These stories are told by Ben Patterson in a book called *The Grand Essentials*.

> I have a theory about old age. It's very unscientific, but I hold it with deep conviction. I believe that when life has whittled us down, when joints have failed and skin has wrinkled and capillaries have clogged and hardened, what is left of us will be what we were all along, in our essence.
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> Exhibit A is a distant uncle. … All his life he did nothing but find new ways to get rich. A few of his schemes succeeded and he became a moderately wealthy man. He spent his [last years] very comfortably, drooling and babbling constantly about the money he had made. I remember watching him when I was a child and even then being dumbstruck that he had wasted his whole life getting something which was so useless to him as he approached eternity. When life whittled him down to his essence, all there was left was raw greed….
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> Exhibit B is my wife's grandmother. … Her name was Edna. When she died in her mid-eighties, she had already been senile for several years. What did this lady talk about? The best example I can think of was when we asked her to pray before dinner. She would reach out and hold the hands of those sitting beside her, a broad beatific smile would spread across her face, her dim eyes would fill with tears as she looked up to heaven, and her chin would quaver as she poured out her love to Jesus. That was Edna in a nutshell. … She couldn't remember our names, but she couldn't keep her hands from patting us lovingly whenever she we got near her. When life whittled her down to her essence all there was left was love (pp. 109-110).

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth but treasures in heaven. Because the only treasure you will ever take to heaven is the person you have become through Christ.

- Ken Onstot
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