

Treasuring Others



by J. ALASDAIR GROVES

Does the doctrine of heavenly treasure have an impact on your daily life? Does Jesus' command to lay up heavenly treasure motivate you to strive for the good of others?

If you're like me, the answer to both these questions has been "no." Or, at least, not much. It's not that I have doubted that Jesus meant what he said. Nor have I doubted that heavenly treasure is a good thing. It's simply a teaching of Scripture I rarely thought about. And, when I did, it did little to motivate or direct me in my efforts to love others and follow Christ.

I suspect I'm not alone.

This invites an interesting follow up question: Why *did* Jesus command us to "lay up treasures in heaven" (Matt 6:19). Why did he say to "give to the poor" so we might have "a treasure in the heavens that does not fail" (Luke 12:33)? On the surface, the answer is simple. Jesus is warning us not to waste our lives amassing wealth that will decay or wander off in the end. Instead, he urges us to invest our hearts, hopes, and energies into things that matter for eternity.

So far so good. But, as C. S. Lewis once asked, what is to be gained by receiving any kind of treasure or reward in heaven beyond God himself? After all, "it must be true...that he who has God and everything else has no

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more than he who has God only.”¹ Or, to press this logic one step further, we could even ask: Is it right to desire heavenly treasure at all? Should we not desire God alone?

Such questions are important and fair. Sadly, I have rarely seen them provoke deep reflection on the nature of heavenly treasure or our Lord’s calls to pursue it. They certainly didn’t in my life for many years. Instead, my experience is that we usually respond to this doctrine in one of two unhelpful ways, both of which undercut Jesus’ purpose in telling us to seek treasure.

The first problematic response is to treat heavenly treasure as a kind of scoring system that somehow adds something to our salvation, or at least represents a prize separate from our joy in God. At its worst, this leads one to seek heavenly reward from selfish motives. Our hearts all too easily desire to have something to show off, and heavenly treasure could scratch the itch. Some of us could get excited about comparing treasure piles. Even at its best, however, heavenly treasure as an add-on to the gospel remains a mysterious and unmotivating compensation for sacrificial obedience to God on this earth. Ultimately, such a model of seeking heavenly treasure may not directly contradict other scriptures about why we ought to serve and love others, but it sits awkwardly disconnected from them. While this perspective rightly takes Jesus at face value and puts the doctrine into practice, it can quickly deteriorate into works righteousness. Functionally we end up as mercenaries, obeying in order to put God in our debt, serving others because we love ourselves.

The second problem is to see the first problem but respond by shelving the doctrine of treasure in heaven altogether. “Yes, yes,” some might say, “we’ll have treasure when we get there, but just being there will be plenty good enough, so we don’t need to worry about it.” Or, somewhat more creatively, I’ve heard others say that getting crowns in heaven (another New Testament phrasing of God’s promise to reward believers) will be wonderful, but we’ll just throw them at Christ’s feet anyway, so it doesn’t really matter. While this avoids the danger of seeking heavenly treasure in a self-serving way,

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (The Macmillan Company: New York, 1949), 7.

it largely guts any incentive that the promise of treasure or crowns might have provided.

On the one hand, I have great sympathy for this second position. After all, when confronted by a doctrine whose relevance or attractiveness we cannot presently see, it is wise to say “this is right, but I am not sure what more to do with it. I won’t reject it, but I also won’t try to apply it until I know more.” On the other hand, any doctrine we leave *permanently* on the shelf will warp us in some way, giving our walk of faith a limp. This is especially true given that rewards in heaven are not a small side issue mentioned only in one or two obscure verses. On the contrary, Jesus and

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Paul repeatedly urge us to seek heavenly reward as if doing so were quite relevant and important for the life of every believer.

The problem with both views is that they treat heavenly reward as a mercenary endeavor for a self-serving end. One baptizes the mercenary approach. The other not only condemns it, but also condemns the very idea of reward. Both see heavenly treasure as a bonus to the Christian life, an optional way to add on to the work of Christ, not something commanded by him for our good and the good of his kingdom. In all of this, both views err.

Rather than a mercenary endeavor, seeking treasure is right, godly, and important for followers of Christ. Instead of an add-on, Christ promises heavenly treasure as the *consummation* of our love for him. Again, Lewis gets to the crux of the issue:

There are different kinds of reward. There is the reward which has no *natural connection* with the things you do to earn it, and is quite foreign to the desires that ought to accompany those things. Money is not the natural reward of love; that is why we call a man mercenary if he marries a woman for the sake of her money. But marriage is the proper

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