

Where Your Heart Belongs

Sermon by Cristina Adelina Alexe

Seated with the disciples gathered around Him on the shore of the Galilee Sea, Jesus delivered what we often refer to as the “Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew 5–7). Even though the Greek word describing the location is that for mountain, some commentators suggest that the mountain was a hill north or west of the Lake of Galilee, where the hills rise steeply from the lake. In this sermon, one writer states, Jesus addresses “a Christian’s character, influence, righteousness, piety, goals and priorities, relationships, and commitment.”¹

Let us read Matthew 6:19–21 together, out loud.

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19–21, NKJV).

One of the features in this passage is the inverse parallelism in verses 19 and 20, where one of the sentences describes the opposite of the other. The word *but* in verse 19 puts us on notice that what follows is different from what comes before it. If we reduce the phrase to its core structure, we read:

“Do not lay up treasures on earth but lay up treasures in heaven.” The almost identical wording underscores the contrast between the key words *earth* and *heaven*, indicating that this passage is really a comparison between heaven and earth.

Jesus invites us to store up treasures in heaven, not on earth, and the reason why we should do so is found in the explanation following the word *where*:

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal” (verses 19, 20).

To help us understand why we should not store up treasures on earth, but in heaven, Jesus describes heaven and earth. He does so quite fascinatingly, in only three words: *moth*, *rust*, and *thieves*. Let’s take a closer look at each of these and see what they reveal.

Moth

Most of us know what a moth is, right? Those tiny creatures that can create unwanted new patterns in your carpet, or turn your sweater into an unexpected piece of art. As a friend of mine put it, they are the “not-quite-as-cool-as-a butterfly insect.” This is the picture that usually comes to my mind whenever I read this passage. The truth is, though, I have never seen a moth. The fact that Jesus spoke of the moth sparked my curiosity about this somewhat evasive insect. What I discovered surprised me.

Listen to this description of a moth. “A moth is an insect related to the butterfly, both being of the order Lepidoptera. Most of this order are moths; there are thought to be about 160,000 species of moth . . . , with thousands of species yet to be described.”² What’s intriguing about moths is that it seems most—if not all—species are pests. They cause damage. They are agents of destruction, and not only of carpets and coats. Corn borer and bollworm caterpillars damage the ears of corn, as well as the

stalks, by chewing tunnels, which cause the plants to fall over. In many parts of the world, they are a major agricultural pest. The diamondback moth is a serious pest on cabbage, cauliflower, and so on. The caterpillar of the gypsy moth causes severe damage to forests. There is also the codling moth that causes extensive damage to fruit farms. The larvae of Tineidae moths eat clothes and blankets made from natural fibers such as wool, silk, fur, or feathers.

Moths are truly agents of destruction for fruits and vegetables (our food), trees (our environment), and clothes. What really struck me as I discovered these facts was the breadth of harm Jesus grasped in just one word—*moth*. Even years after Jesus chose the moth to describe destruction, we still understand what He had in mind.

Rust

Jesus also refers to rust. “In colloquial usage, the term is applied to red oxides, formed by the reaction of iron and oxygen in the presence of water or air moisture.”³

Those of us, especially living in northern climates, are familiar with rust on our cars. Car rust can be a problem, but we don’t typically think of it in terms of disaster. Rust, however, has the potential to put us in great peril, as the story of the collapse of the Mianus River Bridge in Connecticut shows. On June 28, 1983, the bridge failed when the bearings rusted internally and pushed one corner of the road slab off its support.

Rust was also an important factor in the Silver Bridge disaster of 1967 in West Virginia, when a steel suspension bridge collapsed in less than a minute. Forty-six people lost their lives. The bridge failure was due to a defect in a single link.⁴ “A small crack was formed through fretting wear at the bearing, and grew through internal corrosion. . . The crack was only about 0.1 inch deep when it went critical, and it broke in a brittle fashion. . . . When the lower side of the eyebar failed, all the load was transferred to the other side of the eyebar, which then failed by ductile overload. . . . The chain was completely severed. Collapse of the entire structure was inevitable since all parts of a suspension bridge are in equilibrium with one another.”⁵ After the disaster, the Silver Bridge was sometimes referred to as “a monster of death.” (see video: [How West Virginia's Silver Bridge Fell in 1967 | NOVA | PBS](#))

In art and literature, rust has been used as a metaphor for ruin, decay, and faded glory. Jesus’ use of the word makes no exception. The breadth of what He covered in this one word clearly points to decay—we understand what He said.

But there is another aspect to rust. It can also be a plant disease affecting leaves, stems, fruits, and seeds. Plant rusts are parasites and require a living host, such as a plant, to complete their life cycle. Cereal crops can be devastated in one season, and trees often die due to this.

So, moths and rust affect our accommodation and commodities, means of transportation, food, environment, and clothes. This covers a significant part of our lives, doesn’t it.

Thieves

Although condemned in the Bible and prohibited by law, stealing has infested our world with much loss and grief, generating an atmosphere of insecurity and anxiety. Stealing takes place in different ways, at various levels, and with a diverse range of targets. Individuals, organizations, governments, and nations can steal. One can seek to appropriate for himself or herself someone else’s material goods, intellectual property, or identity. Adultery involves coveting and stealing someone else’s spouse.

Innocence and dignity can be stolen. We can steal someone else's time, efforts, identity, and talents. We can steal someone's present and rob them of their future.

Again, one word, the one concept Jesus chose to illustrate the human decay, is broad and easily understood. The word describes the condition of the entire human race—selfishness. It is, indeed, selfishness that stands at the foundation of sin. Lucifer wanted to steal God's throne. Eve and Adam stole each other's innocence and robbed all their descendants of God's presence and the peace of a sinless heart. Selfishness has marked and driven the course of human beings who are bound for decay and, eventually, complete destruction.

What is heaven like?

Jesus' words are remarkably rich in content and meaning. They are a carefully crafted summary of all evil on earth. Natural and moral evil are terms that generally describe two types of evil. Natural evil refers to evil in the material and animal world not caused by human beings, while moral evil describes the evil caused by humans. In Matthew 6:19, 20, Jesus encompasses the reality of all evil through three words that represent the three types of evil on earth:

Moth: representing animal natural evil

Rust: representing material natural evil

Thieves: representing human moral evil

In three words, He clearly sums up the condition of our planet with all it contains and illustrates the heart of His teaching: earthly life is marked by instability and insecurities and saturated with the pain of loss and separation. Yet, this passage reveals not only the decay characteristic of our fallen planet, but also a solution, an alternative to perishing. As One who came down from heaven, the Son of God goes on to weave hope into the reality of the world He just depicted. It is now time to lift our eyes towards the land of the redeemed.

We often think of the afterlife and wonder what it will be like. Even among Christians who read the Bible, there are various ideas about what heaven is like. Let's see what kind of heaven this biblical passage reveals to us:

1. *Heaven, like earth, is real and yet distinct from earth.* Have you heard people say that heaven is what we make of our lives on earth? That is a nice way to suggest that being loving, good, and responsible during our lives here can help us make a little heaven in our lives and the lives of others. However, heaven is the name for something that is actually real and distinct from earth. To neglect the reality of heaven and the physical distinction between heaven and earth is to forego much of what the Bible has to say, sadly to our loss.
2. *Evil—natural or moral—will not exist in heaven; therefore, no loss.* On earth everything is unstable, uncertain, and insecure; it is subject to decay, destruction, stealing, and loss. Heaven is the opposite: everything is eternal, durable, secure, and imperishable. In heaven, there is no loss.

In the past two centuries, the theory of evolution has gained wide acceptance, even among many Christians. When a Christian accepts evolution, though, he or she inevitably agrees that evil existed before the Fall, since animal death is supposed to have occurred before the creation of humans. Because a Christian who believes in evolution needs to reject a literal fall of Adam and Eve and redefine sin, the certainty of our future is also dismantled into mere opinions, some

optimistic, some rather pessimistic. But Matthew 6:19, 20 points out that evil—all evil—will not characterize the world of the redeemed.

3. *Heaven is something we should wish for.* Jesus invites us to lay up treasures for ourselves in heaven. Heaven is something we should wish for, and only we can choose for ourselves. It is not something we can give up so others can have it; Jesus made provision for everyone who desires it. But in these verses Jesus appeals to us personally. The heaven we discover in Matthew 6:19, 20 is a real place, distinct from earth, where no evil exists, where no loss of any kind will occur. But, of what value or relevance would it be for us to know that such a beautiful and happy place exists, if we could not partake of it?
4. *Heaven is possible to attain.* The most hopeful part in all of what Jesus is saying is that we can have part in this reward. The very One whose hands and feet were pierced with iron nails, invites us to lay up treasures there; even while living on earth we can partake of heaven.

But how are we to gather treasures in heaven? We cannot fly there to lay up gold or goods, and we don't have a bank of heaven where we can store our money to keep it safe. R. T. France reminds us that heavenly treasures are "stored up not by my performing meritorious acts, but by belonging to and living by the priorities of the kingdom of heaven."⁶

Ellen White fills in the contours of what "heavenly treasure" means: "Every opportunity to help a brother in need, or to aid the cause of God in the spread of the truth, is a pearl that you can send beforehand, and deposit in the bank of heaven for safe keeping."⁷ She also writes, "What shall we do with our time, our understanding, our possessions, which are not ours, but are entrusted to us to test our honesty? Let us bring them to Jesus. Let us use our treasures for the advancement of His cause. Thus, we shall obey the injunction, 'Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, . . . but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven.'"⁸

Sometimes people suggest Jesus' words in Matthew 6 speak against wealth and well-being. The text, however, does not indicate a requirement for us to live in poverty. Rather, the word treasure for many implies gathering, storing up wealth. It suggests a way to create security for ourselves by relying on our own powers and resources. But we soon discover that we become possessed by our possessions. Jesus' words reveal that what we desire most is not something we must strive for on our own, it is freely given to us by our Lord and Savior. But "possessed by our possessions, we discover that we cannot will our way free of possessions. Yet if we can be freed, that that is so true, so beautiful may grasp our attention, we discover we have been dispossessed. To seek first the righteousness of the kingdom of God is to discover that for which we seek is given, not achieved."⁹

Jesus invites us to walk through this life as people who have accepted the gift of heaven.

Conclusion

Perhaps you think you are not worthy of heaven; you've been wandering away from God, and heaven sounds like a place someone like you could not attain. You are separating yourself from the Shepherd's flock because you don't feel worthy to walk among them. Jesus calls you home. He calls you back. He calls you to be transformed and wants you to accept the promise of heaven. You are renewed in His blood. You are a son or daughter of God, and *you* belong in heaven.

Perhaps you've been bewildered by ideas saying that heaven is not real. You've wondered about the meaning of the Bible, questioned the Scripture, and doubted the truth. Please know that in Jesus,

there is no deceit. God Himself engraved His Word for us to remember that heaven is real. Heaven is being prepared for you to take part in when Jesus returns to take you home. Embrace this promise. Weave it into your life goals, and let its fragrance enhance each day of your life here.

Perhaps you have been deprived of material goods that you have worked so hard to attain. I know that Jesus grieves your loss with you. He invites you to trust Him and make Him your Shelter. He is the God who can renew not only hope, but things as well. Heaven and the earth made new are promised to you. And while living with your eyes on that promised future, may the blessing and wisdom of God be your part and guide.

Perhaps you have invested your talents in reaching out to others; you have sacrificed in ways they may never have imagined, yet your efforts don't seem to be appreciated, nor is the reward in sight. May the Spirit of Jesus move you forward in God's strength, defying discouragement and disposing of disappointment.

Perhaps the truth of a heaven where beauty is unmarred, and joy is endless cannot be grasped through your tearing eyes. Maybe you've lost someone dear. Maybe you've lost hope for a loved one. Your heart may have grown heavy dealing with the sorrows of this life. Lift your eyes to the sky, breathe in the freshness of this very moment of life, and may you be reminded that heaven is a place of reunion, healing, and peace. Don't lose faith; don't lose sight; don't lose heart. And in so doing, may the peace and healing of heaven be upon you even in this very moment with strength renewed and hope restored.

Matthew 6:21 states, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Your heart belongs to the kingdom of your Father. And that's where your treasure is.

Endnotes

¹ George Knight, *The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier: Matthew* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 1994), 77.

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moth> (accessed June 30, 2012).

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rust> (accessed July 28, 2012).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silver_Bridge (accessed March 27, 2013).

⁶ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 259.

⁷ Ellen G. White, *Christian Service*, electronic edition (Silver Spring, Md.: Review and Herald® Publishing Association), 221.3

⁸ Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship*, electronic edition (Silver Spring, Md.: Review and Herald®), 116, 117.

⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2007), 81.

Cristina Adelina Alexe, is a PhD student with an emphasis in systematic theology and New Testament studies at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University. She completed her undergraduate studies in her native Romania and earned her MDiv at Andrews University. In addition to being very active in the churches she has attended, she also worked in several countries. She was an English teacher in China and an elementary teacher in Palau.