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Series: The Sermon on The Mount
Message: Fasting and Flourishing

Transcribed Message
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Matthew 6:14-24

Someone has defined preaching as being the fine art of talking in somebody else's sleep. That may be a bit harsh. That may be severe. I trust that will not be your experience this morning, that I will not be talking in your sleep. The point the guy is trying to make is that the loss of attention of one's audience is just a part of the occupational hazard of the preacher, of a teacher. Even Jesus on numerous occasions reminded us of that. He would often say to the audience that He was speaking to, those of you who have ears listen to what I'm saying. We know that in Jesus's ministry a lot of people heard Him. In this occasion that we're looking at on the Sermon on the Mount, there were 5000 some people listening or hearing Him. How many of them listened, we don't know.

I think our subject this morning, and that's why I began as I did, is rather appropriate because of the things that we are dealing with this morning. This may be an additional concern. We turn again to the Sermon on the Mount and as we do so, we turn to the sixth chapter and the verses that I read just a moment ago beginning at verse 16. Before we jump into this matter of looking at fasting and flourishing, I need to go back to last Sunday because I said something that was not true. Thankfully it was not related to doctrine or the truth of God's Word, but remember in my illustration about Phil Mickelson hitting the ball that was moving as it was going off the green, and I said to you this has never happened before in the history of the PGA. If I had left it there, I might not come back to it, but then I said you can trust me on this. Actually, you can't trust me on that because my youngest son reminded me there was actually a guy named John Daly who did that same thing. So that word of correction which reminds us that as the Word is taught, we are to be like the Bereans, aren't we? We're to be examining the Scriptures to see if what you hear is a part of what God has said to us.

This morning we're going to focus on the second part of this passage more so than the first. As we do that, we are going to see that Jesus spoke about money and spoke about possessions and He spoke about stuff more than any other topic. That is kind of a fascinating thing in and of itself. Out of all the things that Jesus addressed, He spoke to that one more than any other and I think that we know why. I think the reason why is because Jesus knows how easily our heart is captured by the things of this world. The things that we own quickly own us and that's why we have the admonition to guard our hearts with all diligence. Charles Spurgeon made this observation: "I believe that the one reason why the church of God at this present moment has so little influence over the world is because the world has so much influence over the church." When I read that I didn't see who had said that. I thought it was somebody saying something about the 21st century and then I looked and it was Spurgeon and he said that in the 19th century. The reason the church has so little influence over the world is the world has so much influence over the church. We're called to invert that. We're called to be people who have great influence in the circles of our lives, precisely because of the Word of God that has so much influence, so much capacity to change us.

Let's look at this matter of ostentatious piety. You remember that, don't you? Ostentatious piety. It all started at the beginning of the sixth chapter. It was at that first verse. Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them. What is that? Ostentatious piety. Jesus begins to unfold then in the rest of this chapter these three things that illustrate that truth. He did so by talking about giving. When you want people to know and see how much you're giving and how generous you are, Jesus said go ahead and do that. You've got your reward but you're not going to get a reward in heaven. Be seen by men and you've got your reward. Then we looked at this matter of praying and it was in that section that Jesus gave us the whole teaching of the Lord's prayer. Even then He reminded us that we when we pray we're not praying to each other. We're not praying to be heard by people. We're not praying to impress people with how we're praying. He reminded us of ostentatious piety in regard to prayer. This last one is fasting and that begins at verse 16: "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint

your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

As I said last Sunday, this whole matter of food has reached a level of idolatry in our day and time. When we think about where we place the value of food in our culture and then we hear Jesus talking about fasting, it's like these things just go right by each other. We don't even give this very much, if any, consideration. There's two resources I just want to put before you as we look at these verses briefly. Don Whitney's book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* has a great chapter on fasting. I would recommend that. I made up some copies and put them on the welcome booth and it just goes through all of the passages in the Bible dealing with fasting. You get immediately a sense of the context of what's going on.

Let's just touch on this for a moment this morning. Here's what we know about fasting. Jesus is talking about fasting as this third example of not letting people just see your righteousness, but rather let it flow from the heart. The first thing is it's not for show. It's not for show. In the 1st century, it was common for people to fast, especially the religious leaders, the Pharisees, to fast on Monday and Thursday. They wanted everybody to know they were doing that. That's why He makes the comment that He does. Don't look gloomy. Don't disfigure your faces when you're fasting. What would that look like? It would be like you seeing a friend and you look at them and there's something that's not right. They just have a look about them and you say are you feeling okay. And they say I'm feeling fine. You're not sure where to go after that because they don't look like it. Then they say I'm feeling fine but I am fasting. Jesus's point is if you're going to fast just put on a happy face. Put oil on your face. Look like you're doing better than you might even be feeling in the midst of the fast. That's the first thing. It's not about the show that we're putting on for anybody. That's ostentatious piety when we do that.

The second thing we know about fasting is it's not for what you can get. I think there's a good bit of confusion even in the writing today about fasting. You see the differing reasons that people give why we should or shouldn't fast. Many of those reasons have to do with things that we can get and primarily things we can get from God. The motivation of fasting is to get things from Him.

I would suggest to you thirdly that the overwhelming teaching of Scripture about fasting is that it allows us to enter more intensely into the heart of God. I think as you look at those verses on fasting, fasting is always linked to prayer in Scripture. It is linked to worship. It's linked to people who are pursuing a fellowship with God on a deeper level, on a more intensified level. They're setting aside the physical earthly pleasures of food in this case and they're pressing in to their relationship with God. That's what they want to know more of. So the context is repentance. It's brokenness. It's humility.

Notice that Jesus says when you fast, He doesn't say if you fast. He says when you fast. The interesting thing is that in all of the Bible there's only one place that we're commanded to fast. It's in the Old Testament in the book of Leviticus and is in relation to the day of atonement, the highest and holiest day on the Jewish calendar. On that day, the nation was commanded together to enter into a corporate fast. You see the rest of the New Testament, and for that matter the Old Testament, the same thing is almost always in response to something that is happening, and oftentimes it's bad things. Oftentimes it's hard things. Oftentimes it's difficult things, not exclusively, but oftentimes that is the case. Here's the interesting thing. Fasting in the New Testament is mentioned in the Gospels. Here we are the Gospel of Matthew. It's mentioned in the book of Acts. Then you don't find the word "fasting" for the rest of the New Testament Scriptures. There's not a word about fasting in the epistles that were written to the churches. It is a choice that we enter into. It is something that has value. It is something that we do in our personal walk with God because we have a sense of need and a deep desire to set aside something physical and we press into that which is spiritual. Jesus says in this third area, don't let your righteousness be simply something that you do to be seen by other people.

Then we turn for the rest of our time this morning to verses 19 to 24. Take your pick but you only get one. This isn't talking about food. This isn't your restaurant where you pick one entrée and you get two choices, or you pick an entrée and you get three choices. This is the entrée and you only get one. We're going to see what this looks like. If fasting on some level for many of us seems a little bit out of the ordinary, maybe a little bit strange, I think when we transition into this next section which is all about materialism and money and possessions. I think the very natural reaction we have when

we hear the preacher is going to talk about this stuff is maybe to think of somebody who could really use this message this morning. You know somebody that you know that they have a lot of stuff by the way. I sure hope they're listening because this is going to be very appropriate for them to hear. The reality is we know that you can be very, very rich and be captured by materialism. You can be very, very poor and have very little and be just as covetous towards stuff in that case that you don't have.

Do you know the other way we sometimes respond to verses like this? We frankly and simply do not believe what Jesus says. Jesus says, and we're going to see this at the end, you have to pick one. This isn't a pick two deal and sometimes I think we believe we can do the very thing Jesus says we can't do.

So let's look at what this means. Where are you investing? Verses 19 to 20. We have a command in each verse. The first one begins with a negative. Let's jump into verse 19: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal." The first thing I want you to see is that opening statement of verse 19. Do not lay up for yourselves. Do not lay up is a verb, an imperative. That's why we are referencing this as a command. It is in the present tense and so we could actually be translating this as if Jesus said stop laying up treasures on earth. It is in the present. It's happening. The reality of the people to whom He is speaking is this is not a danger that they may fall into. This is a reality that they are confronting every day. I would suggest to you that materialism and the things of this world and their tug of our heart are the default position of our heart. This is where we naturally go unless we're heeding what the Scriptures say in this critical area. It is a call to us specifically about an area that we're dealing with on a daily basis.

The other thing I want you to see is there is a play on words here. When Jesus says do not lay up and then he says do not lay up treasures, both of those words, the verbal form of "do not lay up" and then the word "treasure" has the same root word. They are from the root word from which we get the word "thesaurus". What is a thesaurus? A thesaurus is a treasury of words. Look at the word play here. Jesus basically says do not treasure for yourselves treasures. Do not treasure treasures. This isn't a ban on private property. This isn't Jesus saying to us here don't own anything. Take a vow of poverty. Many of the parables that Jesus told are based on people

owning property and owning stuff. Sometimes a lot of it. This isn't to be misunderstood or twisted to say Jesus is telling you to sell everything you have. He's not telling you to take a vow of poverty. He's not telling you not to have a savings account and don't have any insurance. He's not saying whatever you do don't make any investments. That is not the point of what Jesus is saying here. The point He is driving us to do is be careful. Stop being caught up in thinking this world is all there is. Stop acting in such a way that you're viewing this life as all that there is and as a result of that philosophy of life, you're grabbing for everything that you can. You're holding it as tightly and closely as you possibly can.

I think that's what Jesus is saying to us here and warning us about. I think it's fair to say that it's not so much what you have as it is why do you have it? What are you doing with it? And what is your plan and intention for how it is that you're going to use this? This is one of those passages that in our mind's eye we might picture Jesus with a red flag waving a flag to our conscience to our hearts to our mind. He is putting us on alert. What Jesus is warning us about here and what He's condemning is when our focus becomes totally oriented towards this world and towards this earthly life and existence. We think this is all that there is. Life by every and any measure consists in how much and how much more you can get. The bumper sticker comes to mind that says he who dies with the most toys wins. That's this. That is what Jesus is saying. Whether you would state this so ostentatiously on the back of your bumper or whether your philosophy is guided by "this is all there is, so I'm grabbing everything that I can get." That's what Jesus is speaking to here. The reason should be totally clear to us because He tells us that earthly treasures are corruptible and they're temporary. That's what He means when He says that there's moths that eat at fine clothing. There is rust. There are things that undermine this view of life as if this is really all that there is.

I'm reading an interesting book now called *The Snowball*. It's about the life of Warren Buffett. By any measure, I suppose we would say he's one of the greatest investment strategist of our lifetime. As a junior high kid, he was going to the library and checking out every book that he could find on investing. He was barely 13 years old and he read everything in the library written by all these professors about investing. As you read the book, you begin to get a sense of what drives him not only is money, but as he

looks for investments he's looking for growth potential. He is trying to find undervalued companies that people are passing over. He's trying to find ways to make the maximum investment on the money he put into these certain situations. You may be familiar with his company, Berkshire Hathaway. Berkshire Hathaway, a class A share, one class A share of Berkshire Hathaway sold in January of this year for \$324,180. One share. Five years ago they sold for \$170,000. I'm like you. I have kicked myself 100 times for not buying 4 or 5 shares, but then I remembered I can't afford one share. He looks for companies that are undervalued, that have great growth potential and are going to maximize his investment. He is a billionaire. If somebody told him the company that he was getting ready to buy would be going bankrupt next week, I don't think he would buy it.

That is exactly what Jesus is saying to us when we buy into this life as being all that there is. It is like putting all of our investment into something that is getting ready to go bankrupt. The Bible has a word for people like that. The Bible says that person, the person who would invest all that they have into something that is corruptible and temporary, is nothing less than a fool. That's the thing we're not to do.

Now look at the thing that we're to do positively. Verse 20. There's a positive command here as well. Jesus says in verse 20 "but". Here's the contrast. Here is the adversative. Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven for where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. So again, it doesn't mean that somehow we're gaining merit in the eyes of God and we're earning God's favor. He is not saying that to us. He is not saying do enough good things in this life and it will all turn out okay. He already told us in the first beatitude blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. He's already told us that before God we're to be bankrupt spiritually. He is not telling us to earn your way there and do everything you can to get there.

It does mean this though. It does mean live your life every day with an eternal perspective. Live your life every day. Give your life every day to what ultimately matters, that has ultimate value. What will be here today, will be here tomorrow too, here for all eternity. The negative said don't invest in what will be here today and gone tomorrow.

The positive says but do invest in what's here today, will be here tomorrow and will be here forever. That's what we're supposed to be investing in.

What kind of thing has that kind of value? What should we be investing in if we're not going to be a fool but are going to be wise in investing. Let me answer that question by reading to you Scripture. In 1 Timothy chapter 6 we'll get some good ideas about what he's talking about. 1 Timothy 6:17 – “As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.” The art to do good, to be rich, good works, to be generous and ready to share the story puts up treasures for themselves as a good foundation for the future that they may take hold of that which is truly life. Listen to Jesus in Luke chapter 12 in verse 33: “Sell your possessions and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with money bags.” Listen to this. This is great. “Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” Over in Luke 16 and verse 9. Jesus said: “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into eternal dwellings.”

Now what is the point of all that? How do we make investments that last forever? How do we know what has eternal value? What is it that we could invest in that is going to last forever? If you've been around Covenant for very long, or if you've walked with God for very long, you know the answer to that question is two things. It is the Word of God and it is people. Only two things are going to last forever. The Word of God can last forever and people are going to last forever. Everything else is going to be subject to that which is temporary and to that which is corruptible. We are to be looking for things that are eternal.

I remember back 20+ some years ago when Bonnie and I made out a will. There wasn't a whole lot of time needed to do that, but we did it. What do you have? We've got that. Ok, good we're done. The only the fascinating thing is that the attorney in all of these comments about it all never asked either of us what it was that we wanted to take with us. Just think of a guy like Warren Buffett who has got however many billions of dollars and stuff all over the place. Although he lives a fairly common life compared to

most, but just think of people in that kind of life, everything is left behind. That's why it's so foolish to live as if that were it. The truth of the matter is we can get hit by a car when you walk out into the parking lot. That is why Jesus often says when He talks about these kinds of things you don't have any idea what tomorrow even holds. It's the Word of God and it's people and we should be looking for ways to have a spiritual impact through those two means that is going to go on and on forever. That ought to be what we're pursuing. That ought to be how we're planning. That ought to be the passion of our heart.

How do we lay up treasures in heaven that are going to last forever? I can tell you very practically if you're a parent one of the ways you can do that is you can pour the gospel in the life of your children every day. You can make your home a Christ-centered citadel every day. You can love each other and put before them what that looks like as a husband and wife to walk with God every day. What are you doing? You're making potentially an investment that is going to last forever as it imprinted upon the hearts and minds of your children. If you're not married, you can do very similar things in terms of what it is that you give your life to, how it is that you use the gifts and resources and the stewarding of the things that God has entrusted to you. All of that is available to all of us. Listen. it's as simple as this. It's as simple as living a holy life. It's as simple as following everything that we've been learning in the Sermon on the Mount. You don't need to go to Warren Buffett to get an investment strategy for spiritual things but you do need to be in this book to know what it is that is going to last forever. It is a holy life that is going to go on forever. It's the influence of that life that is going to go on forever. It's your openness to sharing the gospel with somebody that God brings across your path or just a simple word of kindness. In this day and age that would go a long way. It is all of these things. The discipling of a new believer. The encouragement that we share with each other. Time in the word. Time of prayer. It's all there.

Listen to what one person said: "Quit being satisfied with little 5% yields of pleasure that get eaten up by the moths and inflation and the rust of death. Invest in the blue-chip high-yield divinely insured securities of heaven. A life devoted to material comforts and thrills is like throwing money down a rat hole, but a life invested in the labor of love yields dividends of joy unsurpassed and unending." And, oh by the way,

this is called a walk of faith. As you make these investments in eternity and you give yourself to things that are valuable forever, you don't get to pull out the paper every day and read the rate of returns. But Jesus says in Luke 16:9 you do that and there are going to be people waiting for you in heaven to say thank you.

Look at the basis of this investment strategy. Why does He tell us to do this? Verse 21. Here's the answer: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Talk about short, succinct and to the point. Here it is. What you value most is what captures your heart. What you value most is what captures your heart. That's why Proverbs 4:23 says to guard your heart with all diligence, for out of it flow the issues of life. The things that we value are the things that control our lives. So I simply ask you as I ask myself: what is it that I value? Things? Money? Possessions? Hobbies? Recreation? The list is endless. Verse 21 says that this stuff that we give ourselves to, that we're thinking about, that we're talking about, that we're pursuing, that is the focus of our life, that consumes us, that becomes the driving force is what captures our heart. We want to know how to keep it. We want to know how to increase it. We want to know how we can better enjoy it. All of those things that are so temporal and corruptible. Your heart follows your treasure.

You might be thinking I don't know where I'm at on this. Good. Let's look at the next point then because the illustration that Jesus gives helps us understand where we are as well as His summary statement. Let's look at verses 22 and 23: "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 bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" I would welcome someone standing and explaining that all to us please. It's a little difficult. We can get lost in the metaphor. There's language here that Jesus is using to symbolize and to give us a picture.

Let's look at the metaphor. I want to suggest to you that the eye is in relation to our heart. The eye is a picture of our heart. When He references the body, I think He is just talking about life and how we live our life. I think the light is shining into that heart and influencing that life is the priorities, the goals of life. What is it that we're giving ourselves to? What is it that we're investing in? If our priorities and goals are as He describes it, bringing light into our life and determining how it is that we're going to live,

then we're going to be living a good and godly and healthy life. On the other side of that, if it's dark it's bad. The eye is bad. So too will be your life. If your priorities are given to the things of this world, that is going to influence your heart. Your heart determines how it is that you can live this out in life.

The meaning of this application of this I think is simply this. There's two things here. The first one is you hold things loosely. You hold your hands open and you likely have a very generous heart. You hold things loosely and you have a generous heart. Look again at verse 22: "The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is healthy..." That's the English Standard Version that translates that word as healthy. The NIV translates the word there as good. So healthy and good. If you have the King James version, then it's single minded. This is a rather interesting way that the translators have dealt with this verse because in Romans 12:8 and in James chapter 1 verse 5, the same root word here is translated generous. I think the picture that we have here is you have a healthy life, you have a good and godly life if the goal of your life is single minded devotion to Christ. If you've got your priorities straight, if the light is shining into your heart and influencing your decisions and your choices in your life, if you understand that this stuff all around us that is so appealing, that's packaged every day to cry out to us buy me, you need me, you have to have me is all corruptible. It's all temporary and you ain't taking any of it with you when you die. If you have your hands open and all of this stuff is just there to be used by God as He would see fit and it hasn't entangled your heart and captured your eye, then I've got a feeling you're living life with the spirit of generosity.

If however you hold things tightly, you are stingy in your spirit. Verse 23. The eye is bad so now you have a distorted view. You're holding on to this stuff as if it is yours. It's not. You're going to leave it. It's all staying behind. Listen to Proverbs 28 and verse 22: "A stingy man hastens after wealth and does not know that poverty will come on him." Now listen to this. Proverbs 28:22 at the bottom of my page the note says this: The Hebrew says the man whose eye is evil. This is exactly what Jesus was referencing. If a man has a stingy eye and hastens after wealth, if a man has a stingy heart and evil eyes, he is hastening after wealth. He's going to find instead that he is going to encounter poverty. Look down at the 25th verse: "A greedy man stirs up strife

but the one who trusts in the Lord he will be enriched.” He’s got investments being laid up that will wait for him until he gets there.

Now you look at what Jesus does with this. Let's close with this point. You've got to serve somebody. Remember Bob Dylan? You've got to serve somebody. You've got to serve somebody or you've got to serve something. In the summary conclusion, look what Jesus says in verse 24: “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” My friends, that is as simple and profound a statement as you'll find in the Gospels from the words of our Lord. He tells us not as a command, not as an exhortation, not as giving us good advice for how to make investments. He tells us it is an undeniable, unalterable fact, a simple statement of truth, that you have to pick one. In this case you can't pick two. Your heart won't let you. Jesus says it can't be done. Don't try to fool yourself into thinking you're the exception. You're not. If this stuff that you hold tightly in your hand has got your heart, you've made a choice. If this stuff is just loosely in your circle and you're stewarding it as best you know how and it doesn't have your heart, then you're in the other group.

Here is the bottom line. We can't do this very often with a passage of Scripture but we can this morning. We can say there are two groups of people here based on what Jesus has said. I hope personally one group is really big and I hope one group is really small. I hope it isn't a 50-50 split. Based on what Jesus has said, we can categorically, undeniably say that everybody in this room and everybody listening at some point has made one of these choices. Either the stuff of this world has so captivated your heart that you're laying up treasures on earth that you're not taking with you. They're corruptible and temporary. Or you made the choice of the wise man and you have said this stuff being what it is can be used as I steward my life for the glory of God. But it will not and it dare not capture my heart.

William Guthrie said it this way: “If you find yourself loving any pleasure better than your prayers, any book better than your Bible, any house better than the house of God, any table better than the Lord's table, any person better than Christ, or any indulgence better than the hope of heaven, be alarmed.” That's what Jesus says. Why does he say that? Because Jesus knows that the stuff we own very often owns us.

Let's look at this as the final take away. What do we do with this? There's a choice to be made. Here is my prayer for myself and my prayer for you. God, please help me find my greatest treasure in You. Please do such a work in my heart that the things of this world have no appeal to me, but, God, please by Your Spirit and by Your Word and by other people in my life, help me to find my greatest treasure to be in You. Give me a passion for the treasures of heaven. Give me a heart that is wise to be making investments that are going to last forever. Lord, loosen the grip of this world on my heart, the pursuit of more. Help me to see that Jesus is enough. You get there by going to the cross. That's where it begins. Apart from the cross, the default setting of our heart is on self and stuff. It's only the gospel that overcomes that original default setting. God reprograms our hearts by the gospel. That's what I would want for everybody here to know and understand. As we come to this table of communion it is the gospel.

Jesus came to this earth as the Son of God. He lived a perfect sinless life and then He went to that horrible terrible cross for us, for you and for me. We dare not try to work or earn His favor in light of what Jesus has done in giving His life because that's all that was needed and that's all that is necessary. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. Your sins will be forgiven. You will be given the gift of eternal life. You can start investing for eternity.

Let's pray. Father God, it is this great and glorious gospel that has set us free from the things of this world. Lord, we know yet that the appeal of this stuff can be so very, very strong, so we call out to You as Your people, that You will cause us to find our greatest treasure in You, that we will have a passion for the things that are eternal and our investment strategy will reflect that. In Jesus's name, Amen.