

The Synoptic Gospels: A Journey Into the Kingdom

by Edward L. Bleynat, Jr.

Matthew
Mark
Luke

Volume II:
*From the Desert
to the Mount*

Foreword by Phyllis Tickle, best-selling author and founding religion editor of *Publishers Weekly*



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• CHAPTER ELEVEN •

From Security's Illusion to Faith's Reality

The deeds of righteousness we studied in chapter 10 connected the Judaic tradition with the new Jesus movement. Jesus reaffirmed the importance of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting as practices of piety. However, he invested all three of these practices with a spirit of renewal and authenticity, asking his followers to separate themselves from merely *seeming* pious in order actually to *be* pious.

In chapter 11, we will continue to observe the ways in which Jesus is leading his followers. The scriptural passages we will study contain valuable information for the Christian community. In this chapter, we will examine Jesus' directives about our relationship to material possessions. We will also see what he has to say about anxiety over the future. While some of these themes may seem unrelated, in practice they are closely connected to each other. Through the message of these

passages, we are called to confront anxiety, trust, and misplacing reliance on fleeting treasures in the moment, instead of focusing on permanent ones.

Jesus tells us that we must not be ruled by the elusive and short-term goal of earthly security. Instead, we are to be governed by a faith that asks, for this day only, to receive “our daily bread;” we are to look beyond our cares about tomorrow, and instead focus toward an eternal perspective.

† *Matthew 6:19–21 Treasures*

¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal;

²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.

²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

1. Why do you think Jesus uses moths, rust, and thieves as examples of what might deprive someone of his earthly treasures?
2. What are heavenly treasures? How can they be “stored”?

In the ancient Eastern world, stores of wealth often included fine, elaborate clothing, food, and gold. These assets could provide the owner protection against the ravages of cold, famine, war, and poverty. They provided a measure of security and were a sign of status.

They also had their limits. Moths were a threat to fine clothing. They exposed that medium of wealth to destruction. Jesus uses the moth as a metaphor to communicate the transitory and unreliable nature of earthly treasures.

The same is true of rust. The Greek word that the NRSV translates as “rust” roughly means “eating away.”¹ It was often used not only to describe a corrosive process affecting metals, but also how worms or insects would eat grain.² As with

¹See Barclay commentary on Matthew at 239.

²*Id.*

clothing, grain was a store of wealth that was always vulnerable to the natural laws of the world.

But forces of nature are not the only risks to accumulated wealth. Gold, incorruptible as it may seem, was also vulnerable. It was portable and readily exchangeable. It could be taken away in the night by thieves, never to be returned to its owner.

Jesus describes how all three of these forms of personal property that served as measures of worldly success and provided a sense of security could nonetheless be consumed or disappear, regardless of their owners' attempts to protect them. These treasures may seem to provide security, but it is only an illusion. All of it could disappear in an instant. That possibility compels us to reevaluate the nature of true wealth, and give more weighty consideration to the type that can be stored in heaven. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

1. It is one thing to say that we should not store earthly treasures and another thing to be able to set them aside. How do we try to accomplish this second, more demanding feat? How much financial security is "enough"?
2. What treasures can be stored in heaven? How can we store them there? Does the Sermon on the Mount provide us with any clues?
3. Our tendency is to think of "things" as having substance and "ideas" or "principles" as being transient. Plato would have argued just the opposite—that reality in its truest, heavenly form is only imitated or shadowed in this earthly life. Does this age-old debate about what is "true" resonate today? How do we distinguish between the concrete and the abstract? What does this distinction tell us about our treasures?
4. Let's take a huge leap out of the knowledge pool available to most people (myself included) and land in the realm of pure science. The scientifically literate among us may wish to consider these questions in connection with pondering the "true" nature of treasure:
 - a. What do physics in the age following Einstein say about our former conceptions of matter and energy? We have learned that it is the

energy, much more than the particles, within an atom that keeps us from walking through walls or falling through floors. How does this concept affect the true nature of what we consider to be “material”?

- b. John Polkinghorne, professor of mathematical physics at Queens College, Cambridge, and an Anglican priest, addressed the relationship between theology and science in his 1998 book *Belief in God in an Age of Science*. He explored the possibilities of God acting at the subatomic level. Where do we find the “real” and the “transient” at that point?



† *Matthew 6:22–23 On the sound eye*

²²“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; ²³but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!”

1. How do you understand this passage?
2. What difficulties do you have interpreting it?

The teaching on the sound eye is perplexing to our twenty-first-century minds. To resolve the difficulties it presents, our first step is to wrestle with ancient versus modern understandings of human anatomy.

In ancient times, the eye was viewed as an organ that provided illumination. Its function was not simply to receive and process light. According to the Boring commentary on Matthew, “the eye was like a lamp (Prov. 15:30; 2 Sam. 12:11; Dan. 10: 6; Tob. 10:15), an instrument that projects the inner light onto objects so they may be seen.”³ Jesus’ audience would have understood “the eye is the lamp of the body” in this sense.

³Boring at 210 (citations omitted).