

THE ETHICAL TEACHINGS OF A GALILEAN SAGE:  
COMMENTARY ON THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT. PART III OF A IV-PART SERIES

“JESUS, AND THE ULTIMATE “SELFIE”



PREFACE:

These comments in this series considers the introspective journey as precursor to examining in Part IV of this series the externals of economic justice, earthly possessions and a little charity.

PART I: FINDERS KEEPERS

*“Heaven’s imperial rule is like treasure hidden in a field.” Mt.1344*

Recently in the news, a couple -- who only want to be known as John and Mary for fear their new-found notoriety will bring thieves and treasure hunters -- were walking their dog along a portion of their extensive Sierra Nevada foothills property they call Saddle Ridge, when they noticed an old tin can sticking up out of the ground. When they opened it they discovered what has been estimated to be \$10 million in 19<sup>th</sup> century gold coins. Rare coins experts say it’s the largest discovery ever of its kind in the United States. What good fortune.

Not so fast, says the taxman, and what some might consider legalized thievery to add to their new found worries. It was subsequently reported the lucky pair with the \$10 million will end up paying about half that amount to the state and federal government; regardless of whether they sell their new found treasure or hoard it. Render to Caesar that which belongs (or doesn’t belong) to Caesar, right?

But still, I know what you’re thinking in response to anyone who might wonder what they’ll do with the remaining \$5 million in chump change? Would that we had such a problem, right? So what, if their new found treasure means they’ll now have to worry about being found out; and have every long-lost friend they never knew they had start coming ‘round to renew old acquaintances?

PART II: MEASURE WHAT YOU TREASURE

*Instead gather your nest egg in heaven, where neither moth nor insect eats away and where no robbers break in or steal. As you know, what you treasure is your heart’s full measure.”*  
Mt.6:20-21

When the gospel writer we know as Matthew composed his compilation of Jesus sayings from available source material in an oral tradition to which he had access, the parable of the treasure hidden in a field must have seemed to fit with his characterization of the itinerant Galilean sage he’d heard so much about. Despite the likelihood Jesus himself never came across such good fortune, Matthew’s early faith community of Jesus-Jews were probably wrestling with what to do with some small degree of modest affluence that they eked out for themselves in the harsh economic conditions of Roman imperial rule.

The parable of hidden treasure was akin to extreme likelihood of winning the lottery. It's never going to happen, but everyone dreams about what they'd do differently if they did. In the face of such extreme unlikelihood, the parable prods one to "measure what you treasure." And it seems an obvious and universal theme in every age that we treasure financial wealth, and all it can bring. It can trump almost anything else.

The Arizona governor, for example, recently vetoed a state assembly bill that would have allowed businesses -- based on moral convictions of high-minded religious types -- to refuse service to members of the LGBT community. The governor's actions however was not prompted by any personal moral or ethical stance; but rather under pressure from the larger business community who -- based on public opinion polling -- feared such a law would hurt profits by offending a larger consumer base.

The only thing that beats religiously driven bigotry, I thought to my cynical self, is a threat to the profit margin of the business community. But is that just human nature, or a distortion of our true self?

The matter of one's true self is one of the questions with which we began this series on the Jesus Ethic found in that compilation of teachings known as the Sermon on the Mount (Mt.5-7) with the so-called beatitudes, originally meant to convey comfort and reassurance to those who found themselves on the margins of society and at the very bottom of the economic system. Those who first heard Jesus' words constituted those "invisibles," which societies typically prefer to remain out of sight and out of mind.

But more so, when you look at the sum total of Jesus' teachings, and particularly the collection of parables, there is either an overt or underlying theme to nearly all of them that has to do with the question of wealth and poverty; either literally, metaphorically, or both. Taken as a whole, the gospel message could be considered an economic manifesto of an entirely different kind. Every honest preacher will tell you there only have one sermon that they deliver in numerous different ways, and Jesus was no exception. Consider:

As a parallel to the hidden treasure in the field and the prized pearl, there's the woman who turns her house upside down to find one lost coin. There's the Rich Fool who builds bigger barns to store all his excesses. There's the chasm between wealth and destitution in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus that cannot be breached. There's the parables of the Talents, the Shrewd Steward, the Day Laborers in the Vineyard, for whom "equal pay for equal work" is irrelevant when it comes to a kind of generosity that exceed economic justice in God's "imperial rule."

Even in the background of the stories, there's the Prodigal's greatest sin is regarded as squandering his early inheritance. The Samaritan's magnanimous gesture of coming to the aid of someone left for dead is compounded with his instructions to the caretaker to spend whatever is necessary for his new friend's convalescence and it will be repaid.

Jesus didn't seem to care about a kind of economic justice that was compensatory, reciprocal (measure for measure), or bore strict adherence to any set of rules. The "imperial reign of God" that he was forever going on and on about had to do with sufficiency or adequacy for all; measured with reckless abandonment when it came to generosity and compassion, and over and against obligation and what is merely fair. And it usually starts with removing ourselves from the center of our universe.

As with so many of the parable, so too in the Sermon on the Mount that began with the assurances of blessing to the poor and the disenfranchised -- and after a summary of instructions certain other matters regarding fractures in human relationships -- Jesus returns to these matters of economic justice, charity and earthly possessions. The injunction to "measure your treasure" is an introspective journey, however, that requires more depth perception than the average "Selfie."

### PART III: THE ULTIMATE “SELFIE”

If you watched the Academy Awards this year you witnessed the host vamping it up with the celebs in the front rows; when Ellen Degeneres got some of the top talent in Hollywood to pose for an instant group “Selfie,” which she immediately posted from her smart phone to Twitter. In a matter of minutes, Twitter got so many hits the entire site presumably crashed.

What was different from the usual fare of self-adulation by Hollywood's stars was the pizza delivery guy who'd been called in by the show's host as a comedic stunt. There he was with a somewhat startled look on his face; right smack dab in the middle of the photo with all the affluent and glamorous elite. Living on tips and minimum wage, he was the one feeding the hungry, dressed in their tuxedos and \$10,000 gowns. If only one were to look a little closer and think a little deeper into such a picture, and find the message about treasure that lies just below the surface.

The *Selfie* phenom is hardly a new invention since the invention of the flip lens on your hand-held device. But it certainly is a craze that reflects the fact we seem to be enamored with the idea of a reflection of ourselves just about everywhere you turn. Of course self-reflection on a deeper level has been around for a long, long time.

In the last commentary in this series, we considered how the historical Jesus's message deviated so radically from the “you-have-heard-it-said-but-I-say-to-you” literary device employed, that it constituted a world view that did not simply turn everything around or upside down. Rather, it attempted to right what becomes a distorted “default” assumption of human nature that too easily concedes it is only human instinct to regard ourselves as self-centered creeps. Jesus' teachings to “turn the other cheek” and “love one's enemies” was an invitation to an inward journey of the self; and a call to reclaim our true human nature.

The proscription to wrestle with how we *measure what we treasure* would appear to be part of the same journey. How we might actually undertake such a task will be considered in Part IV of this 4-part series.

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