

“Godliness with Contentment”
1 Timothy 6:3-10, 17-19
October 25, 2009

INTRODUCTION:

For one final time in his letter to Timothy, Paul returns to the problem the church in Ephesus was having with false teachers. Though he has repeatedly referred to this problem, a new concern is brought up in this chapter, one related to their motivation. The false teachers pretended to be motivated by a spiritual concern for God, when they were really filled with covetousness. They thought that godliness was a means to financial gain. So in this section, Paul seeks to correct this problem by giving a proper perspective on that important intersection between faith and money.

There has always been a tight correlation between one’s use of money and one’s faith. Jesus spoke about this frequently, teaching that **“where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”** (Matt. 6:21). Unlike some unscrupulous preachers today, Jesus wasn’t interested in people’s treasures so that he could make their treasures his own. He grew up in a poor family and lived during his adult life as a poor, almost homeless man. He wasn’t trying to get people’s money, he was trying to get their hearts. Those who preach the same message that Jesus preached will also need to talk about money. When the good news of God’s grace is grasped, one of the results will be to produce a heart of generosity.

One of the best preachers at proclaiming the grace of God in such a way that it led to generosity was George Whitefield. When Whitefield preached in America in the 18th century, he would always collect an offering for an orphanage he had started near Savannah, Georgia. Benjamin Franklin was a friend of his, and whenever Whitefield preached in Philadelphia, Franklin would go to hear him. Franklin reports that when Whitefield would begin asking for money, he would take out a copper coin in preparation for the passing of the offering plate. But as Whitefield continued in his preaching, he would take out a silver coin, and then finally a gold coin, so that Franklin would leave the meeting with no money in his pockets. One day, he decided to prepare for Whitefield’s preaching by taking no money with him. But then as Whitefield preached and asked for money, Franklin so much wanted to give that he began asking those around him if he could borrow some money. And Franklin never professed faith in Christ, but as far as we know remained a deist until he died. The proclamation of the grace of God has a way of promoting generosity in the human heart.

The existence of this connection between faith and giving is subject to abuse, and these teachers of false doctrine were abusing it. Paul seeks to correct their teaching by introducing the virtue of contentment. The way to know if your heart is right in this matter of money is to check for the presence of this virtue. Since

this is the case whether or not one is rich or poor, let's look at contentment in both conditions.

I. How to Be Poor and Content – v. 6-10

The false teachers believed that godliness was a means of financial gain. We've looked at this idea of godliness before, because it's a common theme in 1 Timothy. Of the fifteen occurrences of this word in the New Testament, 8 of them are in 1 Timothy. John Stott's definition is helpful. "Godly people are God-fearing people. They have experienced the Copernican revolution of Christian conversion from self-centredness to God-centredness." When we understand the meaning of godliness in this way, an irony is revealed. They are pretending to be God-centered in order to get more money, revealing themselves to be self-centered instead. They are simply using God to get what they want. Many since this time have fallen into this error. The television evangelist urges his viewers to get rich by sending in seed money to the evangelist. Both the evangelist making the promise of riches and his viewers who send in money hoping for riches reveal that their hearts don't really want God. They merely want God's money.

Paul counters this error by agreeing with their basic claim of godliness leading to financial gain, with two significant additions. Godliness does indeed lead to gain, but with a gain greater than they know. It leads to great gain. To seek monetary gain from God is to settle for too little. C. S. Lewis famously remarked that our problem is not wanting too much from God, but too little. His second addition is to add the words "**with contentment.**" Godliness brings this great gain only when accompanied by contentment, which is an indication that Paul is talking about more than mere financial wealth. So for the next several verses, he addresses this area of contentment for the poor. He addresses both the contented poor and the covetous poor who want to be rich.

Paul helps us learn contentment first by reminding us of two times in life when every person has both poverty and no ability: birth and death. How much did you have when you were born? You started with nothing, being completely naked and powerless. Did God take care of you then? And how much will you have when you leave this life? The same amount as you did at birth. And in that time of poverty and weakness, will God take care of you? If you are in Christ, not only will he take care of you, he will bring you into your inheritance in Christ, into riches so astounding as to be unimaginable now. Poverty is no great enemy to be feared, because you have a God who has taken care of you before when you had nothing, who will take care of you again in the future when you will once more have nothing, and can also take care of you now if you should be poor again. Our current life is bracketed by these two events of birth and death, and the material possessions accumulated during this brief interlude is like monopoly money. It may mean something while you're playing the game, but once the game ends the amount of monopoly money you acquired means nothing.

The second thing necessary in order to live with contentment is to be able to distinguish between needs and wants. Paul says, **“But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content”** (v. 8). We do live in a world where there are material needs. We certainly need food and shelter. Perhaps in our world in Birmingham, most of us need some kind of transportation. But it’s a short list, and one of the reasons we lack contentment is that we allow a type of bracket creep in which things that are really just wants become needs. This is especially the case in an affluent society where we grow so accustomed to things like central air conditioning, multiple bathrooms, a car for every licensed driver and a cell phone for every person over about 14 that we begin to think of these things as necessities. As a result, we lose our contentment and joyful gratitude for the things that really are necessary.

Paul turns next to the negative side of this, to a warning to poor people who want to get rich. He gives three warnings. First, covetousness leads to increased desires. **“Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction”** (v. 9). The great lie of covetousness is that the next thing desired, once acquired, will be the end of desire. The exact opposite happens. Instead of coming to an end, desires only increase. If you say, “I will be content when I get my school debt paid off, when the kids’ orthodontist bills are paid, when I get that next raise, when we can get a new car,” you need to understand that you will never experience the joy of contentment. If you aren’t content right now, you won’t experience it by getting that next thing. Covetousness plunges one into many harmful desires. Unexpectedly, covetous desires increase, not decrease, as they are satisfied. Notice that Paul calls this a snare. A snare is a trap that contains some kind of bait. The animal thinks that great satisfaction will come by acquiring that bait, but finds instead that it only turns out to take away its freedom.

Second, covetousness leads to increased sin. Paul says that the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Why is that the case? Why would a person who gets excited over a growing investment portfolio (or who gets overly upset when its value drops steeply) be led into greater sin? The answer, I believe, is that someone who loves money trusts in himself instead of God. The reason the Bible talks so much about money is that trusting in it is the most common option to trusting in God. Anything humans can do can be had with enough money. But trusting in self leads to greater sin.

Third, covetousness leads to increased judgment. Through covetousness **“some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pang”** (v. 10). Note that this happens slowly—they *wander* from the faith instead of openly rebelling against it. They have simply followed their desires, living for the next thing instead of being content with what God has given, and the result is the most catastrophic thing imaginable: wandering from the faith into eternal destruction.

II. How to Be Rich and Content – v. 17-19

It is difficult to be poor and content, but even more difficult to be rich and content. I note that Paul didn't condemn the rich for being rich. He knows the human heart too well to be fooled into thinking that rich people could be delivered from discontentment simply by giving away all their money and thus becoming poor. That wouldn't work because money is not the problem—the human heart is the problem. So Paul counsels three things that address the heart.

First, rich people need to appreciate the dangers of wealth: pride and false security. **“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”** (v. 17). The proud think they are better than others, and money makes that more likely to happen since those with money can order around a large army of servants to do their bidding. People talk about our service economy, and those who serve in the service industry serve people with money. It is easy to begin thinking you are better than others when you have such power over them. It is also easy to put your hope in money instead of in God. We all have the sinful instinct of self-trust, and money makes that more likely, not less so. John Stott comments helpfully, “In this way wealth can spoil life's two paramount relationships, causing us to forget God and despise our neighbor.”

Second, the rich are counseled to remember that all they have has come from God. He **“richly provides us with everything to enjoy”** (v. 17). We are people of faith who trust God for his provision. This is a truth that cuts two ways. For the rich, it means that God is the ultimate author of their riches, not their own cleverness or hard work. This truth also applies to those who aren't rich—God promises to be your provider. We trust him for this provision. Instead of worrying, trust God and pray. One of the reasons to do a budget is that it helps you see where you need to trust God. If your personal budget doesn't balance because your expenses are higher than your income, you have a wonderful opportunity to trust God. As you look to him, he will provide for you either by helping you lower your expenses or increase your income.

Listen to these verses and let them encourage you to trust God for your financial provision. **“The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them”** (Psalm 34:7). **“Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’”** (Heb. 13:5). **“Even the hairs of your head are all numbered”** (Matt. 10:30). **“If God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?”** (Matt. 6:30). We are people of faith, and Psalm 78 makes that point in an especially powerful way. As the psalmist recounts the unbelief of Israel during their time in the wilderness under Moses, he quotes the people as speaking against God cynically. They said, **“Can God**

spread a table in the wilderness?” (78:19). Amazingly, he did, bringing both meat and manna.

Third, the rich are told **“to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future”** (v. 18-19). As he did in the previous section on contentment for the poor, Paul reasons with the rich by agreeing with his adversaries. The rich think that their riches will help them prepare for the future. Paul says they’re right, but not in the way they are thinking. Their riches help them to prepare for the future life after death by being given away in this life. Jesus told a parable to illustrate this same point. The manager of a rich man’s estate was stealing from the rich man. When summoned by the rich man and told to bring the accounting books, he knew that his theft had been discovered. While he still had authority of the rich man’s estate, he brought in the owner’s debtors and forgave them huge debts they had incurred. In effect, he was giving them large amounts of money, funds that belonged to his master and not to him. Now, when he was fired from his job when his theft was discovered, he would have friends who would welcome him into their homes because of the large debts he had forgiven. Jesus commends the man, not for his theft, but for his shrewdness, or we would say his street smarts. Jesus is telling us to do the same, to use the rich man’s money (God’s money, because he is the rich man) to prepare for the future by giving it away now. So the rich man is telling us, “Here’s how I want you to use my money that I have entrusted to your care. Be generous with it as you give it away.”

In this area of giving, there is a danger about which I want to warn you. The danger is that of superficial agreement, by which I mean an agreement in theory but not in practice. Such superficial agreement will lead only to guilt. It is of the essence of faith to put into practice God’s commands. So again, I would encourage you to take the first step in that by putting together a budget that makes giving a priority. Then if there is a shortfall, trust God to help you see how either to lower your expenses or to provide you with more income. Such a faith approach leads to joy and freedom.

CONCLUSION:

As we prepare for the Lord’s Supper, let me take us back to the cynical, unbelieving question Israel asked in the wilderness. **“Can God spread a table in the desert?”** God has spread a table for us in the desert. It’s called the Lord’s Table. Do you see in this the lavish generosity of God? The bread from heaven he has given us is not the manna of the Old Testament, but the Bread of Life that comes down from heaven, his own Son, Jesus. Everything was given to us, so that the Bible says that Jesus became poor. God gave until he was impoverished. Now we are enriched. As we partake of this table today, I would like to remind you that God is enough. Ask him for the grace of contentment, to find God enough for you whether you are rich or poor. And ask him to make you godly, that you might learn generosity, just as God is generous.