

WHAT MORE DO YOU NEED?

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Psalm 84; I Timothy 6:6-19

It's seldom that you find a passage of scripture that says something positive about the enjoyment of wealth. But there it is embedded in many warnings about excess and the abuse of possessions, a clear statement saying that God has provided us with wealth for our enjoyment. Luke Timothy Johnson, a New Testament Scholar at Emory University says that this is the only passage in the Bible that has anything good to say about taking pleasure in possessions.

And he's probably right.

The actual words from I Timothy are "As for those who in this present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment."

It's the craving for more that's the villain in the piece, the issue with which the writer of the letter takes exception. This is, after all the same section of the letter that has that famous and oft misquoted sentence, that it is the love of money that is a root of all kinds of evil. Notice it's the *love* of money that's the problem, not the money itself. Some think that's a distinction without a difference, but I think it's more than that.

In a book on the new generation of younger wealth in this country, by a Wall Street Journal columnist, Robert Frank, the author reports a survey conducted by PNC Advisors among a segment of the over 7,000,000 households which have \$1,000,000 to \$10,000,000 worth of wealth and they asked the question how much money would it require for you to feel secure? And the answer, regardless of whether people had a million dollars in assets or ten million dollars in assets was *twice as much*.¹

The problem with money is that it is always playing bait and switch with us. As soon as you have some, you want more. And the more you have, the more you want. Which is the definition of an addiction.

We are the wealthiest 1% of humanity in the world, we Americans. More of us live better than everyone else. The richest 10% of Americans (25 million people) have an income greater than the poorest 43% of the world's people (2 billion).² On this World Communion Sunday, we hold a place of great privilege in the world community, and therefore of great responsibility as well.

I worry a little bit about preaching on a text that tells us to enjoy our wealth. There are so many televangelists these days, Joel Osteen, Creflo Dollar, Frederick Price, Joyce Meyer, and many others who are comfortable extolling the virtues of wealth and equating wealth with God's blessings. I think it not only a risky linkage, but also an unbiblical one, especially if it implies causality. It implies the idea that, "My virtue is better than yours which is why I am wealthy and you are poor." Clearly these evangelists, however, have hit an artery that leads right to the heart of their followers, and I suspect that if I were to promise that I had a few tricks up my sleeve that would ingratiate you with God and you, too, could have a cut in the take of God's bounty, we could fill every pew every Sunday. Nothing sells in American religion quite so much as

the promise of financial success, and nothing in my mind is less faithful than the equation of wealth with God's favor. Jesus put it this way, "God makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."³

While there's no question that there were wealthy benefactors in the early churches, like Lydia and others who helped to bankroll the early missions of the apostles, Jesus was more sanguine about the dangers of getting too cozy with money. And certainly he pointed out the dangers of loving money too much.

"You cannot serve God and Mammon," he once told his disciples. "No one can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."⁴

The truth be known, money, wealth, possessions are morally neutral. They are as our neighbors across the street at Forbes say so well, a capitalist's tool. You can do a lot of good with money, and a lot of evil. But in and of itself, wealth is more or less neutral on the moral scale.

Fr. Michel Quoist in a collection of prayers published some years ago, wrote one entitled "Prayer Before a Twenty Dollar Bill." In it he considers the journey, the history of that one symbol of currency. He writes:

Lord, see this bill! It frightens me.
You know its secrets, you know its history.
How heavy it is!... it cannot speak.
It will never tell all it hides in its creases.
It will never reveal all the struggles and efforts it represents, all the
disillusionment and slighted dignity.
It is stained with sweat and blood.
It is laden with all the weight of the human toil which makes its worth.

Through how many hands has it passed, Lord?
And what has it done in the course of its long, silent journeys?

It has offered white roses to the radiant fiancée.
It has paid for the baptismal party, and fed the rosy-cheeked baby.
It has provided bread for the family table.
Because of it there was laughing among the young and joy among the elders.
It has paid for the saving visit of the doctor,
It has bought the book that taught the youngster,
It has clothed the young girl.

But it has sent the letter breaking the engagement...
It has bought the liquor that made the drunkard,
It has produced the movie unfit for children,
And has recorded the indecent song.
It has broken the morals of the adolescent and made of the adult a thief.
It has bought for a few hours the body of a woman.
It has paid for the weapons of the crime and the wood for the coffin....

I thank you for all the life and joy it has given.

I ask your forgiveness for the harm it has done.⁵

Money is morally neutral. What we do with it is not.

There were in the early church, both rich and poor. Just as there were Jews and Gentiles in those early settlements. We can tell from Paul's letters that there were people of leisure who had great means, and there were those who had little. In one of the most touching of all descriptions of the early church, in the book of Acts, we hear that in the first Christian community they held all things in common and no one had need of anything, because they supplied one another's needs in a communal life in which all participated.⁶

So also, the one who uses Paul's pen to write this letter to Timothy describes a church in which there were some who were well off and some who had little. A church of mixed means. To be fair, it should be said that there is no moralizing in this passage about the virtues of poverty. But there are warnings about the abuses of wealth and the seductive nature of it. No romanticizing of a life of poverty, simply the honest and sobering acknowledgement that we brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of it. So, the writer advises, if we have food and clothing, we have a lot, and we can be content with that. Looking around this city, I would say that if you have food and shelter and clothing, you do have a lot.

The best advice for practical living, whether you be rich or poor, comes toward the middle of the passage read today, good advice for those who have much and those who have little. "Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ...take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses." And as for those who are rich, "do not be haughty, or set your hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who provides us with everything for our enjoyment... do good, be rich in good works, generous, ready to share, and storing up for yourself the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that you may take hold of the life that is really life."

I have been fortunate in my life to know many generous people. Some of them, incidentally, were also wealthy. But one thing that I have found to be a common denominator among those who are generous is that people who are generous enjoy what they have.

There is a certain contentment that comes in life that is most admirable, a quality that we would all be wise to take to heart. Those who are most generous, who give most to the church, who share their time and talent and gifts with others, whose names are on the hospitals and orchestra halls and educational buildings around this city, whose generosity has touched the lives of so many others, these are, for the most part, people who enjoy what they have, people who are able to take the present moment and see it as a gift and be content.

All the motivational books and well paid business gurus and keys to success imparted over high power luncheons... all that to the contrary, there is much to be said about contentment, about being happy where you are in life, and enjoying what you have, whether it be much or whether it be little.

“Those of you who are rich,” said the writer to Timothy, “should be rich in good works, generous, ready to share, thus storing up for yourself the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that you may take hold of the life that is really life.”

I guess all of this leaves me wondering what more we need in life? What is it that would make you happy, or content, or secure, do you know? Is it twice as much as you have right now? How much more do you need?

Is it the trophy wife, the boy toy, the new sports car, the liposuction, the diet, the trip to Antigua, the larger apartment with the better view, the more prestigious address, the new job, would it be getting pregnant or adopting the baby or having more grandchildren? Will you be more at peace when you finally get out of college, or get your degree? Will it be when you get out of New York, or move to Greenwich, or when you retire?

I wonder, “What more do you need?” To be happy? To enjoy life? To feel closer to God? To be content with what you have?

In the final analysis, this letter to Timothy is not heavy on moralism, not high on guilt, surprisingly. It’s strong on pastoral concern. It’s not a stewardship letter, it’s a love letter written out of compassion for the welfare of folks, like us, who want so much more, and don’t realize that once we attain that next rung up, we’ll still want more.

In the face of the evidence, the writer urges Timothy and the good folks in Timothy’s church, and us as well, to enjoy what we have right now. “There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment,” Paul’s emissary writes to those early Christians, “for we brought nothing into the world, [and] we can take nothing out of it...”

So what should we do? “Be rich in good works, generous, ready to share, thus storing up for yourself the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that you may take hold of the life that is really life.”

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¹ **Richistan: A Journey Through the American Wealth Boom and the Lives of the New Rich.** New York: Crown Publishers, 2007. 50.

² University of California Santa Barbara newsletter, “Points of View” by Vic Cox, November 19, 2001.

³ Matthew 5:5.

⁴ Matthew 6:24.

⁵ **Prayers,** Michel Quoist. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963. 31-33.

⁶ Acts 4:32.