

3. Simplicity

Date: 12 February 2023, 6th Sunday after Epiphany

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Generous - The Bible on Wealth

Texts: Proverbs 30:7-9; Matthew 6:19-24; 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

What happens when you are thankful and content? Over the last two sermons we have heard the call of God to thankfulness and contentment. To so luxuriate in the provision that God our Father has made for us in Christ, so that in him we are unspeakably rich. To recognise that everything we have is a gift of his grace. To rest in the security of an eternal future won for us by Christ. The more we get this in our heads and in our hearts, the more we will not live desperate, grasping, clawing lives, full of anxiety at what might go wrong next; but will live in contentment, a peace that passes all understanding, a peace even in our financial lives. This is the call to contentment, which is not a call that diminishes and lessens our lives, it is a call that sees us flourish and mature. And the question is, what happens then?

Over the next 2 weeks, we're going to sketch out a picture of a financially contented life, first this week in relation to oneself, and then next week in relation to others. Really, they belong together like the arms of a pair of scissors, but there's enough to say so that we'll need to split them up over the 2 weeks. Next week we'll look at the joyous opportunity of generosity, and this week, we look at simpler living. We'll look at 2 points this morning. The anatomy of simplicity and the anatomy of greed.

The anatomy of simplicity

We saw last week that Paul teaches in 1 Timothy that if we have food and clothing, that is the necessities of life, we will be content with these.¹ On the other side of the spectrum, the letter of James speaks into a situation where financial snobbery had become terribly destructive in a church's life, and he criticises the wealthy because "you have lived on the earth in luxury and pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in the day of slaughter".²

Beyond the encouragement to contentment and the warning against luxury, the Bible teaches about our economic responsibilities to those around us. Paul urges children and grandchildren to look after ageing relatives who are unable to look after themselves and to provide for them, and to provide for their households.³

¹ 1 Timothy 6.8

² James 5.5

³ 1 Timothy 5.4,8

Similarly, Paul for people as far as possible to take responsibility for their own financial circumstances. So for example ‘Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.’⁴ Likewise, when Paul hears of people bludging off others in the church at Thessalonica, he commands them to earn their own living, on the principle of “the one who is unwilling to work shall not eat”.⁵ James says that the religion that God accepts is this, “to look after orphans and widows ... and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”⁶

In other words, there is both a recognition that we need to provide the basics of life for ourselves and our families, to care for those in need, as well as a warning to avoid a kind of luxury that seeks merely to gratify our desires or our hunger for status or glamour or pleasure. Simplicity is the settled pattern of life that limits the use of the gifts God has given you to what you need, and avoiding what is sheer luxury. That is not to say we can't enjoy the good things in life. But, as Dallas Willard writes,

The spiritually wise person has always known that frivolous consumption corrupts the soul away from trust in, worship or, and service to God, and injures our neighbours as well.⁷

Christians have long said that this pattern of living simply is a spiritual discipline that requires sustained attention and deliberate effort. I have 7 tips to help you cultivate a simple lifestyle, that doesn't fall for the false promises of materialism:

1. First and most obvious, we need to take seriously the distinction between needs, wants and sheer luxuries. Ask yourself the question, how many pairs of shoes do you need? How often do you need to eat out? How many gadgets, paid apps, and subscriptions do you need? Is shopping a leisure exercise for you? If you have food and clothing, will you be content with these?
2. Second, keep luxuries luxuries. The more frequently you indulge in luxuries, the less you will enjoy them. The less frequently you have them, the more you can savour them for the treat they are.

⁴ Ephesians 4.28

⁵ 2 Thessalonians 3.10-13

⁶ James 1.27

⁷ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Harper One, 1991:169

3. Third, it is rarely a good decision to buy the best. Most top of the range items have a prestige component built into the price, that is a sheer conspicuous consumption. Conversely, don't necessarily buy the cheapest. That is bad value for money, because the cheapest things often break and create waste. It is worth paying for things that will last.
4. Fourth, a good rule of thumb is 'don't replace until broken' (except perhaps to give away the old to someone who needs it).
5. Fifth, be a canny purchaser. Watch out for bargains. Buy in bulk. For household goods, it's worth considering second hand. Second hand stores, Gumtree and other online platforms are great ways to find bargains and share things you don't need.
6. Next, watch out for fashion, entertainment and sport. These are difficult categories to justify biblically, and yet are the serious focus of billions of dollars of the marketing industry. On one hand, there is a place for aesthetics in the Christian life – God is a God of beauty as well as truth and goodness. But, do you really need 5 streaming services? Probably not.
7. And finally, apart from very major purchases like a car or a house, it makes a great deal of sense to spend only what you have, rather than spend what you don't have with the intention of getting it later. This is what will enable you to avoid credit card debt and 20% interest, which is what keeps so many people in poverty.

Simplicity brings many benefits. It helps break our dependence on things and cultivates trust in God. It helps us live within our means. It releases money with which to be generous. It makes us happier and more content. It helps us be more environmentally friendly. It can free you from the burden of debt. It can free you from the paralysis that comes from too many choices. I should also say that if you're finding yourself in financial need, we do have small grants available to cover essentials. And if you find yourself in debt, Anglicare offers financial counselling, and I'd be happy to come along as a support person.

The Anatomy of Greed

Living simply sounds easy, but like all spiritual disciplines, it never is. And it isn't because of, point 2, the anatomy of greed. Listen again to the brilliance of Jesus in Matt 6:

19 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. **20** But store up for yourselves treasures

in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. **21** For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

22 “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. **23** But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

24 ‘No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

Jesus here gives the anatomy of greed, focussing on the eye and the heart.

Notice what he says about the eye in verse 22-23. On one level, it makes sense. If your eyes are healthy, you can see, everything is good. If they are bad, you’ll stumble around in darkness. But why on earth did Jesus put this here, sandwiched between talking about storing up treasures in heaven, and not serving money but God?

There’s an idiom in Hebrew and Greek that is virtually impossible to translate into English. The comparison between verse 22 and 23 is literally between a “good” eye and an “evil” eye. A good eye was an idiom for not only healthy or whole, as the NIV reads, but also generous. So Proverbs 22.9 literally reads,

Whoever has a good eye will be blessed / for he shares his bread with the poor.

And the NIV translates this as,

The generous will themselves be blessed / for they share their food with the poor.

Conversely, in Biblical thought an “evil eye” means greediness, envy and stinginess.⁸ So Proverbs 23:6-7 reads,

Do not eat the food of a stingy host, [literally “he who has an evil eye”]

do not crave his delicacies;

for he is the kind of person

who is always thinking about the cost.

‘Eat and drink,’ he says to you,

but his heart is not with you.

⁸ Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, Baker, 2017: 242, Cf. Deuteronomy 15.9. See also Matthew 20.15: “Are you envious because I am generous?” Lit. “Is your eye evil because I am good?”

The eye as the light of the body is a powerful picture. Do you see the world through a lens of generosity or greed? Generosity means you'll be a source of light and life. Greed means you'll be a source of darkness and death. And this reflects what is in your heart, that is where we fix our eyes. Do we fix them on money and what it can buy, or on God? Jesus warns, "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."⁹

I wonder whether Jesus used the picture of the eye, because Greed makes us spiritually blind, such that it's terribly hard for us to spot. As a pastor, I have had people talk to me about all sorts of sins in their life - immorality, drunkenness, unforgiveness, anger - but I can't think of one person ever wanting to see me about their sin of greed. My guess is, each one of us here can hardly even consider the possibility that we ourselves are greedy. We all know someone who is more extravagant than ourselves and so we relax.

But there is something even more important in the anatomy of greed than your eye, and that is your heart. How did Jesus put it?

Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.¹⁰

This is a very important insight. The reason that greed has this capacity to blind us is that it promises to feed our souls, to satisfy the deep desires of our hearts. Social media is terrible for this. We look at others and think, "If only I had that much money. Then I will have made it. Then my life would be easy."

In this sense, money is what author Richard Keyes calls a near idol, the tip of the iceberg, whereas the real driving force is the far idol, the deep desire of the heart that the money is serving; the desire for status and significance, or perhaps for power or comfort, or particularly for control and security. This is where greed gets its power from, its appeal to the heart.

But it will break your heart, because your heart does not belong in things, but in God and in people. So how do you break the power of greed, and find the strength to live out a life of thankful contentment? Again, Jesus is brilliant - do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, but store up for yourselves heavenly treasures. Or more literally, do not treasure earthly treasures, but treasure heavenly treasures.

What Jesus is saying is that everyone treasures something, finds something or someone they yearn for, look at, something that fills their heart with the beauty and value of that thing. We

⁹ Luke 12.15

¹⁰ Matthew 6.21

are by nature worshipping creatures, and we find a treasure about which we say, 'If I have this, everything is worth it. If I have this, I'm worth it. To get this, it's worth sacrificing everything.' It might be your career, your family, some achievement, or some status. At the centre of everyone's soul is a treasure.

The thing is, whatever it is, it will enslave you, it will demand sacrifices from you, until it demands the ultimate sacrifice. In the end, your idols will kill you. Tolkien illustrates this in *The Lord of the Rings*. The story turns on the destructive power of a treasure, a ring. This controls and ultimately destroys everyone who puts it on. Gollum, the creature who has possessed the ring for centuries, has become possessed by it. He calls it the Precious. He has become so bound to it that he has no sense of himself apart from the Precious. But there's only one treasure that if you set your heart on it won't kill you, Jesus. Jesus is the only treasure that died for you rather than kills you, and only if you treasure Jesus, will you really be free from money.

How do you treasure Jesus? Consider what he did. He had the ultimate treasure - the status of glory, the presence of the Father. Yet he came to us and was stripped, stripped of that glory, and on the cross stripped of life itself. Why? He died for his treasure, his precious. He looked at us and said, "If I have them, for the sake of the Father, it's worth it. Anything is worth it, even going to hell for them." There's a lovely thread that runs through the Bible in the way that God's people are described - his treasured possession.¹¹ You are his treasure. And when you get that, when you know that you are God's treasure, that he was willing to give up everything for you, then you will treasure him, and it will free you. It will free you from everything, and it will free you from money. And then you will live a life of thankful, contented simplicity.

Conclusion:

The fact is that there are only three things that you can do with money. You can spend it. You can save or invest it. And you can give it away. That's it. Today we've looked at how to have our spending patterns shaped by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, which so calms our fears and shreds our pride that we can live in a genuine, beautiful thankfulness and contentment.

Our wealth is one of the great tests of faith. It is where what we say we believe about God is really put on the line. And the reason is that it cuts so directly against the grain of our worldliness, our consumerist culture which always says "more", against our fears and selfishness. That's why Jesus so often spoke about Money as the great alternative God. John

¹¹ Cf. Exodus 19.5, 1 Peter 2.9

Wesley used to say that there are 3 conversions in the Christian life: The conversion of your soul, when you become a Christian; the conversion of your mind, as you let God shape your thoughts and values; and then finally and perhaps most difficult of all, the conversion of your wallet. May we hear and believe the promise of God, that my life does not consist in the abundance of my possessions, that when I have Jesus, I have everything, and so I can live a life of contented simplicity.