

2. Contentment

Date: 5 February 2023, 5th Sunday after Epiphany

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Generous - The Bible on Wealth

Texts: Ecclesiastes 5:10-19; Matthew 6:25-35; 1 Timothy 6:6-10

When I was a child growing up as a missionary kid in PNG, I remember visiting friends who managed a nearby coffee plantation. Their kids had the most incredible toys. By comparison, mine were paltry. I would complain to Mum and Dad, "Why can't I have what they have?" Looking back from this distance, Mum and Dad were actually generous with me, for the resources they had, and my childhood was happy. But I also remember occasions when they gave some of my toys away. Never mind the fact I hadn't played with them for some time. I clung to what was mine and was filled with jealous rage and resentment.

This is the second in our series looking at what the Bible has to say about wealth and possessions. I've called the series Generous, because that is at the heart of what we are called to do with the wealth and possessions God has given us - to be generous and willing to share. It's something I had to learn as a child, one I'm still learning.

The Bible has lots to say about money. Nearly half of Jesus' parables are about how people should handle earthly treasure. Around 1 in 10 verses in the Gospels speak about money. Jesus speaks far more about money than say, heaven and hell. The Bible itself has over 2000 verses on wealth and property. It's a big deal for God, you might say, the great alternative to God. Jesus famously says, "You cannot serve both God and money."¹

Money is a big deal for us too. A 2015 survey in the US found that Americans think about money more than they think about sex.² We think about how to make money, how to save it, how to spend it, how to invest it. We can tell how important money is to us even by how uncomfortable we get when the subject arises. In Australian culture, the one thing we know about our money is that it's no one else's business.

Well, money, like the rest of our lives, is God's business. My prayer is that in this series we would hear God's word speaking powerfully into our lives and giving us a sense of joy and adventure when it comes to our money and possessions. Joy, because everything we have is the gift of God, to be enjoyed with thanksgiving. Adventure, because we'd be excited at the opportunities we can bless others through generously sharing what God has given us.

¹ Matthew 6:24

²

<https://www.nbcnews.com/better/money/americans-think-about-money-work-more-sex-survey-finds-n-424261>

We began last week with the foundational reality that everything we have is a gift from God. This truth evokes from us a countercultural stance - a posture of thankfulness instead of entitlement. This week we look at the next step - Contentment. If God provides richly all that we need, then we can respond with thankfulness, and find a sense of abiding contentment. The alternative to contentment is anxiety, and that is so often how we can approach money - worrying about how we'll pay the bills, or how that nest egg is going. The question for us as individuals, and for us as a church, is how can we cultivate contentment instead of anxiety?

Our text for today, 1 Timothy 6, shows us how. Have a read with me.

But godliness with contentment is great gain. **7** For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. **8** But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. **9** Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. **10** For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

We'll look at 2 points for this text: (1) Godliness with Contentment in verses 6-8 and (2) the Love of Money in verses 9-10. But first, a little note on the context to help orient us.

Context - everything God has created is good ... to be received with thanksgiving

Paul is writing to his protege Timothy who was leading the church in Ephesus. The church was under threat from within. Some members were teaching false doctrines, particularly that the material world, including the body and wealth, was evil. In the following century this view would be one of the key beliefs of what was known as Gnosticism. But actually, it's a pretty common view. Many religions throughout history have been anti-material. Eastern religions see the world as fundamentally an illusion, a veil of tears through which we need to see the deeper and higher, more spiritual truths. Greek thought went one step further and said that matter, physical stuff like the body and physical comforts, and therefore physical pleasures like food and sex, were actually evil.

Paul has stern words about this anti-material, world denying teaching. He writes in 4:1:

The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. **2** Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. **3** They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. **4** For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, **5** because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

You do hear Paul's point, don't you? Banning marriage or certain foods is grotesque, because everything God created is good. Marriage, and therefore within marriage sex, and food and drink and the whole material world is good; there for us to enjoy; as we recognise God as the source, receive

his gifts with thanksgiving, and use them as he has taught us. Whatever we have to say about wealth and possessions, one thing we can't say is that they are bad. The doctrines of creation, the incarnation and redemption, that we confess each week in the creed, mean that we are not, we cannot be anti world, anti material.

Now, just as an aside, this also means that we as Christians are to care about the physical, just as God does. When we see people in need - the poor, hungry, sick, homeless - we don't just say, "Ah, the physical is just an illusion. What you really is need to meditate, adjust to your circumstances and understand the deep oneness of things." NO! If God's great program is to redeem the physical, then we are to be agents of redemption in this hurting world. We care for people, body and soul. We minister in word and deed.

My guess is that the temptation for us in the affluent West is not to despise wealth and possessions but rather to put too much stock in them. Jesus warns us that a person's life does not consist of the abundance of possessions.³ It is to this temptation that Paul addresses his counsel in 1 Timothy 6. Paul makes 2 points. Godliness with Contentment is great gain. And the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Let's look at each.

Godliness with Contentment is great gain.

One of the most unsavoury habits of religious salespeople is to use religion to make money. I remember an American tele-evangelist visiting PNG. Churches had spent thousands to fly him out. When he arrived he demanded an armed escort and an upgrade to the fanciest hotel. And then in his rallies he just asked for money. It turns out the same thing was happening in Ephesus. The false teachers who were fleecing them thought that "godliness is a means to financial gain." Paul responds by saying what true gain, what true wealth is. And it is as astonishing now as it was then:

Godliness with contentment is great gain.

What is godliness? It is a way of life that reflects God's own character. It's walking in a manner that pleases him. At the very least not trying to use an aura of holiness to con people out of money! It's what Jesus calls being rich towards God.⁴ This is the wealth that truly matters. This in fact is the wealth that will last. Paul is simply reflecting Jesus' words:

'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.'⁵

Jesus highlights the insecurity of wealth as the reason why we should seek heavenly treasure. Paul adds another reason in 1 Timothy 6.7:

For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.

³ Luke 12:15

⁴ Luke 12.21

⁵ Matthew 6.19-20

We brought nothing into this world so everything we get in this life is a gift from God. The very capacities by which we work and save and invest, the economic system of which we are a part - all of it is the blessing of God. So we don't look to what we have been given with pride, but grateful humility.

We take nothing out of this world, no houses, no cars, no share portfolio. This means two things. First, wealth does not secure our future. Second, we can enjoy God's gifts as limited, not ultimate goods. Death brings them to an end. We're not like the ancient Egyptians who filled the tombs of the wealthy with all sorts of things they would need in the afterlife. It's Christ who secures our future. He will carry us safely through death. We can hold lightly to what we have been given and enjoy it as we are able, without the need to strive for more. What does last is character. So Paul urges later in the chapter, be rich in good deeds, and lay up treasure for the coming age. Character, generosity, good deeds - these are not dependent upon wealth. And so, Paul can then say, verse 8,

But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.

That is to say, if we have the necessities of life, we can be content, because we have all we need.

Paul goes one step further in Philippians. There he says,

I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. **13** I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

What is that secret? It is a radical trust in God. That our lives are in his hands, and through his provision we can do all we need to do. That is not to say we don't plan, and work and save and all the rest of it. But rather, without that posture of trust, we will not be content.

Just for a moment glimpse the beauty and the freedom of this. Would it not be truly wonderful to not worry about money, to experience no stress, no anxiety, no conflict, no jealousy, no temptation in relation to money, because you were content with having enough food, clothes to wear and a roof over your head? The path that the Apostle invites us down here is not some grim, miserable 'gulp but it's worth it' kind of thing - it's actually the path of life.

The Love of Money is a root of all kinds of evil

In verse 9-10, Paul lays out the alternative to a Godliness with Contentment.

Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. **10** For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

Notice the cascading spiral downwards – those who are discontented, who yearn for wealth, fall into temptation, because wealth is hard to come by and often involves compromising in a whole range of areas. As these temptations are entered, so you find yourself trapped, snared in the complications of

wealth. That feeds harmful or evil desires, which of course is what greed is built on, and the end result is ruin and destruction.

We need to pause here for a moment of serious self examination. We live in an affluent society. This is an immense blessing from God. But it comes with two temptations. First, the love of money. Or, more precisely, the things and therefore the status and security and pleasure that it buys. And second, the resultant anxiety and discontent. Peace of mind through the accumulation of wealth and financial security is regarded as the right of anyone who wants it. The billions of dollars poured into the advertising industry has as its sole purpose the creation of a profound anxious discontent. We need to hear the Apostle loud and clear here.

The truth is, greed will kill you. Make no mistake about it. You cannot hold together the love of money and the love of God. Jesus was brutally direct on this point, and Paul is no less so. If you love money, you will lose your grip on God and destroy yourself – you cannot serve God and wealth. Of course, this raises the question, how do I know if my attitude to money is one of love and greed, or just a recognition that it is part and parcel of life?

Let me offer 3 ways that you can diagnose your attitude to money, 3 ways to help unhook the tentacles greed might have wrapped around your heart, 3 ways to cultivate contentment. (1) Regularly make choices not to be as wealthy as you might have been. (2) Similarly, regularly make choices not to do or buy the things you might have had. (3) Choose to be generous with what you do have, both finances and possessions, in planned and spontaneous ways.

Conclusion

Are you content? Is your heart clear that real wealth is not measured by your assets, but by your likeness to the generous, holy character of God? Do you look to your bank balance or God for peace? In the end, contentment is not related to what you have, and satisfaction is not related to what you don't have. The Western world has never been wealthier, and at the same time, I suspect we've never been more depressed, more medicated, more desperate, in other words, less content. Contentment is about cultivating that trust in God, looking to him to provide what you need, not what you want; enjoying his gifts with thanksgiving, and being generous with what he has given.

Of course, the great killer of contentment is comparison. Comparing your situation to others, or to a dream that you have, and in the comparison wanting what you don't have. That want becomes an expectation and a disappointment, and then you start thinking that God is holding out on you, after all look what he given them! You start thinking that deep down, God is not good, at least not to you. That's why this is a spiritual issue of the highest order. It's why we won't find contentment until we look to Jesus. Because in his cross we see that the Father and the Son have not held back, but given their most precious and costly gift, that we might have the life that is truly life. So we can trust that will give us what we need, and we can be content in him.