

Godliness with contentment

1 Timothy 6:6-19

A sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

1 Timothy 6:10 states: "The love of money is the root of all evils." You've heard this saying, quoted like a proverb, but also recognized that it's a verse in the Bible. It's rather sweeping. It doesn't say: "The love of money is the root of a lot of evil." Or: "The love of money is the root of many kinds of evil." But rather: "The love of money is the root of all evils."

Money is a frequent theme in the Bible. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) at first seems to be about riches. Amos 6:4-7 is about the rich, and Psalm 146 is about riches.

Throughout the Gospel of Luke there is not only an emphasis on the poor, women, lepers, and the weak, but also an emphasis on riches.

In Luke 12:13-21 there is the account of the man who had a good crop and built more barns for his future but that night his life was required of him.

Luke 16:1-9 has the parable of the steward and how he made use of his master's money. Luke 18:18-30 is about the rich young ruler who asked: "What must I do to be saved?" And when the answer came: "Sell all that you have and follow me," he left sadly. In that same chapter and in two other gospels is the saying: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 19:24, Mk 10:25, Lk 18:25).

Luke 19:1-10 has the story of Zacchaeus, the little man who climbed the tree to see Jesus, and says: "Half of what I have I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold" (Luke 19:8). Luke 21:1-4 is about the widow who gave everything she had, even though all she had was what was called, the widow's mite. Look at James 5:1-3:

"Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days."

These are some of the well-known passages about riches.

Throughout the Bible covetousness is condemned. For example, both the Ninth and Tenth Commandments. There is something about money that grabs us. What if when we have the offering and pass the collection plate, we ask you to put in the deeds to all your property, your stocks and bonds, and all the rest?

But this is not what the Bible is trying to tell us. It's wrong for three reasons. First, it's wrong because of what it says about creation. In the ancient world as well as today we have that idea that the material world is evil, and what we need is the "spiritual" world. That's eternal and that's good. We should detach ourselves from this material world. In ancient times as well as today there were and there are people who withdraw from the world. They are called ascetics. They want a simple life. We see it in monasticism. Remember that monasticism is found in Hinduism and Buddhism as well as in Christianity. It is the idea that we have to get away from this world and live in a "spiritual" world. In the Nineteenth Century there were all kinds of experiments in simple, communal living. And all of these experiments collapsed of themselves. A good example is Tolstoy, who spent his fortune in the last part of his life trying to live according to the Sermon on the Mount. It collapsed.

The second error is about the use of the Bible. For example, the text about the rich man and Lazarus is not about the rich and the poor. It's a parable and parables have one point, which comes at the end of the parable. In this parable that is verse 31: "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead."

In 1 Timothy 6:6-19 the first four verses are about money as the root of all evils. Then come about six verses about the Lordship of Christ. And then three verses which say something quite different about the rich:

"As for the rich in this world, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on uncertain riches but on God who richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous, thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life which is life indeed" (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

Furthermore, if one stays the love of money is the root of all evils, what does that do to the First Commandment? The First Commandment says the root of all evils is idolatry.

The third reason for putting the texts about riches in a proper context is creation itself. It says in the first chapter of Genesis that creation is good. God created it, it's

good, and it's to be used for his purpose. Earlier in 1 Timothy there is a warning to watch out for deceitful spirits "who forbid marriages and enjoin abstinences from food which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving" (1 Timothy 4:3-5).

So how do we sort out what the Bible says about covetousness? In 1 Cor 3 Paul talks about laying a good foundation. 1 Cor 3:11: "No other foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ." 1 Cor 2:2: "For I decided to preach nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

What is the basis for our lives? The logo for Prudential Life Insurance features the Rock of Gibraltar. That's understood to be that which you can depend on. The Rock of Gibraltar is a formation from the early Jurassic age, 200 million years old. Before that there was no Rock of Gibraltar. It's not eternal. It reminds us of the famous parable at the end of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:24-27 about the one who built his house on the rock and the one who built his house on the sand. Which is it going to be?

First, we look at this in a practical perspective. Luke 12:34: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." 1 Timothy 6:7: "For we brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of the world." Naked we came. Naked we leave.

Second, what is it to be rich? A young American college student traveled to Botswana in Africa. She wrote back to her parents: "You have no idea how bad it is." We in the West have many serious problems; nevertheless, we are rich.

Third, we have the illusion that we can manage to get away from the temptations of this world. But "the simple life" is not really so simple. Some say we should withdraw from all the temptations of the world. This idea is that we can only escape from the "world" itself by doing simple things. The Amish only go through eight years of education and only use simple tools. But they use our modern roads. And when needed, they use our modern medicine. Even their "simple life" takes advantage of this modern world.

A Roman Catholic nun told of her effort to live in the slums among the poor. She came out of it saying the experience was hokey because: "If I needed to, I could always leave. And if I needed medical help, I could get it through my Order."

How then can we as Christians live practically? Matthew 10:16 says: “be as wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” It’s counter-cultural but not in the way we think of counter-cultural. What does it mean to live “in but not of” the world? (“in but not of” is not a Biblical phrase but helpful here.) It means that we’re just tourists here. We’re just visitors. “Here we have no abiding city” (Hebrews 13:14). As Paul writes in Philippians 3:20: “Our commonwealth is in heaven.” We are to have this perspective.

What are we to do here and now? Not build the kingdom of God. The Lord builds his kingdom by himself, without our help. Matt 3:8-9 says the Lord does not need you and me. John the Baptist was disputing with the “sons of Abraham” who had a high regard for themselves and John says to them: “God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.” Church slogans like “We are the kingdom builders,” and “God’s work, our hands” are not correct. The Lord builds his kingdom.

Luther saw this. He “let God be God” and said our job in this world is to use common reason and common sense in order to restrain evil. Heiko Oberman used the term “betterment” to describe what Luther did in his time (*Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, 79-80). Luther was no theocrat. He used practical reason to address the problems of his day. He was like Paul. In Romans 13 when Paul talks about the Ten Commandments, he sums them up in Romans 13:10: “Love does no harm to the neighbor therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.” We are to use our best common reason to figure out how to minimize harm in our day, knowing we live by forgiveness.

This brings us back to 1 Timothy 4:4-5: “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving; for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.”

We are called to live in this world with a gospel sense of what life is about. As Luther wrote in his Small Catechism: “I believe in Jesus Christ . . . who has redeemed me . . . in order that I may be his own, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as he is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity.” Amen