

1 Timothy: The Great Gain of Godliness

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Prayer of Illumination

Lord God, may your Word be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Background

The pastoral epistles of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus aren't written to congregations, but to individuals—Timothy and Titus who were Paul's proteges in ministry. The appointment of church leaders is the predominant concern in these three pastoral epistles. Character and faith are emphasized as the qualifications for leadership. These letters also speak against false teaching that went against the teaching of Scriptures. The author also emphasizes the importance of leaders teaching sound doctrine so that the church might be a pillar of the truth. Even in the midst of imprisonment, persecution, and lack of success by the world's standards, Christians can keep their head high.

Scripture: 1 Timothy 6:6-19 (NRSV)

There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; 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. In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

As for those who in the 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. They are to do good, to be rich in good works,

generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – 1 Timothy: The Great Gain of Godliness

You are what you love. You are what you actually love in your daily habits, not what you think you love. Your desires determine your identity and your destiny. Your desires pave the path of your life trajectory.

Russian film director Andrei Tarkovski tackles this theme in his movie *Stalker*, considered by many to be a cinematic masterpiece. Set in what seems to be a post-apocalyptic future, the story focuses on the title character, Stalker who is a guide to two characters known only as The Writer (who seeks inspiration) and The Scientist (who seeks a discovery). They make a dangerous journey into a mysterious region called The Zone. This journey into the center of The Zone is filmed as a long odyssey, almost a spiritual pilgrimage. It's rumored that there's a room found in The Zone that will grant your deepest, innermost desires. Your heart's desire will come true in the Zone. In this Room, you'll get exactly what you want.

The three finally make it to the threshold of the Room. But before venturing in, The Writer asks his guide, *"What if I don't know what I want?"*

The Room will decide for you. The Room reveals what you truly want in life—even if you yourself are unconscious of it. The Room reveals all. Not what you think you want, but what you actually want.

Like The Scientist and The Writer, each of us have to ask ourselves some pretty tough questions before we cross the threshold of The Room:

What if I'm not what I think I am?

Will I like what I actually am?

What if I don't really love what I ought to love?

Carl Jung once said, *"Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate."*

Our passage this morning teaches us that our actions bubble up from what we desire and love in our heart of hearts. Sometimes we're aware of these desires and other times we're totally oblivious to them or in denial of them. The best indicator of our deepest desires are the daily habits and actions of our lives. In other words, our character. So we need to take a look under the hood of our lives and genuinely explore what our true motivations and true loves are that drive our decisions and actions.

God can help us identify our desires and to repair and redirect our desires in ways that are holy and healthy—that help us pursue God more faithfully. God is like the Zone—he’s here to help us mind the gap and close the gap between: what we think we love and what we actually love and what we should love.

This morning we’re challenged to kick the tires of our lives, and see what our real relationship with money is.

One of the most famous quotes about money is found in our passage: The love of money is the root of all evil. Not money is the root of all evil, but the love of money. The love of money is the wearing yourself out, stressing yourself out, obsessive and unrelenting pursuit of money—at the cost of everything else. The rat race is an exhausting and soul-sucking race that can never be won. Only rats win the rat race.

Philanthropist and Former Vice-President Nelson Rockefeller was once asked how much money he needed to live comfortably: “A little more than I get.” Once we get what we want, something in our human nature keeps us from stopping there and enjoying it. We get tired of it and want more.

Our garages and storage units testify to this. Not only are we attracted to stuff, we Americans seem to be stuff magnets! We’re trying to get rid of all the stuff we once thought we needed so bad to get more stuff that we’ll soon be sick of. Our lives are crammed with stuff, yet we still feel hollow. Too often the American story isn’t one of rags to riches, but running ourselves ragged to get riches, which usually turns out to just be empty change.

Money isn’t bad. It’s the love of money, not money itself, that’s the root of evil. We all need money. We should all budget, save, invest, give, and spend money. Money can do great things. We’re to gratefully receive and enjoy and share God’s good gifts graciously given to us. To thank God for the energy and creativity he gives to be able to make money.

But the goal of life or the Christian life can’t be to acquire more stuff. Paul gives Timothy and us some advice that’s good as gold: There’s great gain in godliness when combined with contentment. Or as the Message puts it,

“The devout life brings wealth—a rich simplicity of being yourself before God.”

Paul’s using a technical Greek philosophical term when he mentions contentment. Aristotle, the Stoics, and Cynics spoke of contentment as:

“the virtue of independence from material goods.”

God alone can fill the hunger in our souls that money never can. As Jesus says,
“you can’t serve both God and Money.”

When we’re content and trusting in God’s provision and abundant life, we’re free and freed to enjoy the good things of life and to put them in their proper perspective. When we’re content we can actually enjoy what we have and what’s all around us. Instead of scurrying about, we can live in the moment—and be fully present to the beauty around us.

There was a fascinating story in the Washington Post a few years ago telling about a little experiment:

A man stood at an arcade outside the metro station in Washington DC and began playing the violin. He played six classical music pieces for about 45 minutes. During that time, since it was rush hour, it was calculated that 1097 people went through the station, most of them on their way to work.

Three minutes went by and a middle-aged man was the first to notice there was musician playing, he looked at him, but never stopped. Less than a minute later, the violinist received his first dollar tip: a woman threw the money in his hat, but didn't stop to listen. A few minutes later, someone leaned against the wall to listen to him for several minutes, but the man looked at his watch and started to walk again. In the 45 minutes the musician played, only 7 people stopped and stayed for a while. He ended up collecting \$32.

Only one person during this experiment recognized that the man playing the violin was the world-famous violinist Joshua Bell. He was playing some of the most intricate pieces ever written for the violin. The violin he was playing with is worth 3.5 million dollars. Three days before his playing by the Washington DC metro, Joshua Bell sold out at a theater in Boston, where the average ticket cost \$100.

This is the power of contentment. We won't fly by the beauty that is in us and all around us. We can treasure what's right in front of our eyes and ears in the moment. We're not restlessly and relentlessly pursuing what we don't have. We know we're cared for in the loving hands of our Maker.

Let's have some fun and think creatively here. Let's imagine that all of us in this room will live to 100 years old. That's 100 laps around the sun, right? To break it down, we may be given up to:

1200 months or 5200 weeks
36,500 days or 876,000 hours
52,560,000 minutes.

Roughly a third of that time is sleeping. So in your waking hours, 2/3 of your life—don't waste all your energy and all your time on things you can't take with you in the next life. Invest in and pursue the true riches of a godly life—where your priceless and treasured belongings are your relationships—with God, with others, with yourself, with God's creation.

The Beatles had it right. Money can't buy me what? Love.

When you entered this world, you brought nothing in with you—all you had was your birthday suit. When you leave this life, you won't take anything with you that you worked so hard to get. There are no luggage racks or u-haul trailers on hearses. Whether we live or we die, we belong to God. We can always bank on God. But money? Money's so uncertain. Money comes and goes. You can even do all the right things that you're supposed to do with money, and it still can vanish if the market goes bad.

And, don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that we should be careless stewards of our resources either. Instead, let's set our hopes on God who gives life to all things and richly provides us with everything for our own enjoyment. That's where real life is—the abundant life in Christ.

Paul tells us what not to pursue—the love of money. Now he says what we should pursue in our lives:

justice, godliness,
faithfulness, love,
endurance, and gentleness.

Pursuing these things gets us in shape for the life to come. By the grace of God, a life pursuing these things is a little bit of heaven on earth. The Bible teaches our life is a preparation, a training ground for the life to come. So let's live a life that really is fit for heaven. Let's enjoy the eternal and abundant life now.

But character in our lives doesn't just develop by happenstance or osmosis. Christian character needs to be cultivated by deliberate effort and diligent prayer so that these heavenly virtues become second nature to us. Like learning a new language, you have to regularly speak it to become fluent in it. To put it another way, our faith is like playing an instrument, where we need to be well-practiced.

We pray for the desire to daily choose again and again to live the new kind of life God has called us to, where we joyfully and resolutely:

Fight the good fight of faith.
Lay hold of eternal life.
Make the good and noble confession.
Do good.
Seek to obey God's commands without fault or failure where we're rich in good works and generosity.

If you've been blessed with a lot of earthly resources—give thanks to God. Be humble and generous with this responsibility and set your hopes not on the uncertainty of wealth, but on God who richly gives us all that we need for true and lasting joy. And of course, it's all grace. All a gift to be cherished and shared.

Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, Immanuel. A life of righteousness and mercy is a rich life. And something that you can take with you in the life to come, by the grace of God.

Amen.

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