

Be Content

1 Timothy 6:6-19

⁶ Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷ for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸ but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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 ¹⁴ to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹ 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.

I think you may have figured out by now that I struggle with issues of money. As Leroy and I raised our four sons, supported the two children who lived for their mom in South Carolina, paid the mortgage, paid the car notes, as we both worked outside the home, paid for car insurance while living in “red lined” Detroit, made sure our growing family had food, clothing, school supplies, and all the other things that made it difficult for those on limited salaries to cover, we have focused a great deal on money. This week I even had a conversation with a representative of Bank of America to discuss the offers available as we start our second year of business with the corporation. Remember last year we opened a credit card account to pay for Leroy’s dental work. The representative said we could open a bank account and be given \$300 if we signed up for direct deposit and put in a minimum amount in the first ninety days. Then he told me about a new credit card that would have no foreign transaction fees. I’m sure we stayed

on the line for a half hour and I was very tempted by his suggests! Although I don't know whether I will go for either of the offers, it reminded me of my relationship with money and how my quest for it can become troublesome to my spiritual growth. So I have confessed about my issue with money, but that's not everyone's issue.

A recent article headed "How to Hide Figure Flaws" described how one can cover up thunder thighs and flabby necks with nifty apparel tricks—a scarf here, bell bottoms and vertical patterns there. It espoused a view that if we do not fit into a certain body shape, we should. If our noses do not measure up, they can be surgically resized—as we can have chins tucked and thighs liposuctioned.

Being "stuck on ourselves" or on "money" is *idolatry*. Most of us are well acquainted with that term, even if we are vague about how it applies to us. Anyone might get in trouble as we attempt to make our house a candidate for better homes and gardens. We can get in trouble with gambling, prescription drugs, relationships, even our careers. It is not just imaged, heathen others, who are guilty. Even for us, it is easy to slip into loving a good thing too much.

Idolatry's grip is subtle but choking. In our church we give rightful attention to our physical plant, the yard, the carpet, the leaky eaves. That is being a good steward of all with which we have been entrusted. Caring too much about those things is idolatry. Putting new carpet in the sanctuary while letting the food pantry for the hungry go empty is dubious at best. If we spend all our resources on the building and have nothing left for "Angle Tree," or Carriage Town Ministries, or our contributions to Reconciliation or Week of Compassion offerings we have forgotten our purpose of begin. We know what we are willing to sacrifice for and what we are willing to go undone in our ministry.

The church in Germany before World War II struggled with such lines, on a large scale. In the 1930s, as the German church and the Third Reich became increasingly cozy, Christians who agreed with and supported the government were rewarded. If

Christians chose to express views contrary to the government's point of view, they were called "unpatriotic," and those "so-called" Christians could be jailed without a trial.

As the 1930s wore on, being patriotic began to take an increasingly radical turn: from a "pure" Germany, to a "pure race," to the extermination of Jews as the "final solution." Arguably, what started out as a movement summarized by the slogan "God and Country" became more and more about "Country and God." This was no subtle shift.

As some Christians saw the strands of Christianity, militarism, and nationalism being woven into a noose, they fought against it. In 1933 Martin Niemöller established the Pastor's Emergency League. In May 1934, they convened a synod meeting in Barmen, out of which came what we now call the Barmen Declaration.

In this Declaration, the word "idolatry" is never mentioned, but that is what this Declaration is about. Hitler is not God's miracle for the world; Jesus Christ is. God's claim upon us is complete; the government's claim on us is *not*. Christian allegiance is to God and to God alone as revealed in Jesus Christ. Nothing comes before God.

This notion of idolatry is a peg on which we can hang what Paul says here about money. It is very important to note what Paul does *not* say, that money is the root of all evil. It is *not* money that is either good or bad; it is the *love* of money that is bad. In fact, "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (v. 10a).

Those who love money fall into the lot of those who, in their eagerness to be rich, "have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains" (v. 10b). This is a pain Paul wanted believers to avoid, but this is more easily said than done. At what point does our desire to earn, spend, and save money become idolatrous? When does our patriotism blind us to our kinship with brothers and sisters of other nations? At what point does our family commitment to the traveling soccer team compromise our service of God through Christ's church?

Our congregation and congregations around us are assailed with pressure to do more, to be more, to collect more. This hyper caffeinated accumulation of this kind of so-

called *wealth* has become synonymous with the American dream. Just as a Barbie doll-proportioned woman could never actually walk, it is impossible to be on this driving, burn-the-candle-at-both-ends track and experience the "gain in godliness combined with contentment" (v. 6) about which Paul wrote. Sheryl Crow suggests that "It's not having what you want / It's wanting what you've got" ("Soak Up the Sun"). While we sing that catchy song when it comes on the radio, we do not believe the words. Paul wants us to, because *we have a lot*—"a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over" (Luke 6:38), has been put into our lap. We have every reason to be content and rejoice!

There are echoes of Jesus here—when he reminds his disciples, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them" (John 14:23). This is a home not built with human hands. Shalom (peace) lives here. Serving others is part of the daily pattern. Worship punctuates each day and evening. This home with God-on-earth offers but a glimpse of that eternal home in which we will join Christ in "unapproachable light" (1 Tim. 6:16). Because of God's grace, we have every reason to be content.

Paul urges his readers *not* "to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (v. 17). A life with this focus will have to do not with bank accounts and body shape, but with wealth beyond mere *stuff* that rusts and can be eaten up by moths (Matt. 6:19).

This is the full life no idol can replace.

Paul would say that it is vitally important to put wealth (and other potential idols) into proper perspective. Take hold of the life that really *is* life, Paul would say. Do not get stuck on money, or nation, or CNN, or church growth or ... anything else. "Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness" (1 Tim. 6:11).

Not even the quest for perfect thighs is more important than this. **William P.**

"Matt" Matthews