

Rich in Good Deeds

1 Timothy 6:6-10,17-19

This year the social-concerns conference focuses on local needs, under the theme, 'rich in good deeds'. We review one of the passages that Pastor Tom spoke on, as well as a preceding paragraph from the same chapter. The two passages form a matching set: the earlier text addresses those who are not wealthy but wish they were; the latter text addresses those who are wealthy and happy that they are.

God's word to those who wish they had more money

Day 1: 1 Timothy 6:6-10 Real gain is not financial: the pursuit of godliness

Paul begins by reorienting the perspective of those who hope to accrue greater wealth: the real gain, he affirms, is not financial but 'godliness with contentment.' This guideline has two components: 'godliness' and 'contentment'. We consider the former today, the latter, tomorrow.

Paul changes the direction of our pursuits: not wealth, but godliness; not money, but holiness. Notably, he does not call us to renounce ambition. Instead, he redirects ambition, from making money and accruing wealth to growing spiritually.

We typically expend a lot of money training for a career, and a lot of effort making money once we have a career. In a competitive, developed economy, this is necessary for comfortable survival. Yet Paul urges us to reflect on the wide gulf that exists between making a living, and making a life. There is no shame or sin in working hard enough and long enough to provide for our own needs and for our families. Beyond that, though, God calls us to a higher ambition: the pursuit of godliness. Money does not come easily, but requires effort and discipline. The same could be said of virtue. So the fundamental question is: beyond what is required to earn a basic living, how do we prioritize the remainder of our time and effort? Toward the pursuit of additional financial gain? Or toward spiritual gain?

Day 2: 1 Timothy 6:6-10 Real gain is not financial: finding contentment

Paul's second guideline for the pursuit of profit is 'contentment'. All of us have experience with the short-term pleasures and long-term discontents of financial gain and consumer spending. Our desired level of income will vary: some of us may be content with a mid-to-high five-figure salary; others would be frustrated with anything lower than six figures. Our favorite purchases will differ: mine are books, and quality clothes at discount prices; yours may be consumer electronics, cars, jewelry, or real estate. Whatever the differences in detail, though, we share one fundamental commonality: no amount of money, nor any amount of stuff, is ever permanently satisfying. A promotion or raise brings happiness for a short time, but before long, our ambitions increase, and we aim yet higher. A shiny new car makes us happy for a little while, but before long, we get a scratch in the paint

or a dent in the fender, and within a year, manufacturers produce new models precisely to capitalize on our dissatisfactions. All that we have achieved, and whatever we have purchased, soon ceases to satisfy.

In contrast to the pursuit of more and better, Paul urges 'contentment'. And he does not leave us with this vague term, but defines precisely what he has in mind: "If we have food and clothing, we will be content with that." Just food and clothing: by that standard, few of us have grounds for dissatisfaction. This guideline is truly hard to follow. In earlier days, I spent about 25 years below the official U.S. standard of poverty (only for about one year of that did I lack three meals a day). Still, I spent a fair bit of that time neither godly nor content, but discontent and disgruntled. Yet it is hard to argue with an apostle who, because of his ministry and due to persecution, sometimes went hungry, and other times suffered cold from lack of clothing. By his own testimony, contentment in such circumstance does not come automatically; it has to be learned. Still, and again by his own testimony, he did attain satisfaction despite privation: "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. 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" (Philippians 4:11-12).

Likely few of us will ever need to learn contentment in comparable levels of hardship. So, at the very least, we do well to learn contentment at a much higher standard of living, contentment with whatever stuff we have now, so that we can give the savings to help the poor. Here is an excellent ambition: to live each year at a slightly lower standard of living than the previous, and to give the savings toward poverty relief or toward the advancement of the gospel.

Day 3: 1 Timothy 6:6-10 Being rich is not a sin ... but wanting to become rich is a huge risk. Paul multiplies sinister terms to underscore the hazard facing those who want to get rich: temptation, trap, foolish and harmful lusts, plunge into ruin, destruction, all kinds of evil, wander from the faith, stabbed themselves, much grief. One wonders how he could have packed more sinister language into such small space. This is the opposite of godliness with contentment: discontent that promotes greed. The pursuit of wealth can become so all-consuming that its pursuit drives out all other things, including time with family, and time for God: "Some people, eager for money, have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs."

We may find safety in the prayer of Proverbs: "Lord, give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the LORD?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God" (30:8-9).

God's word to those who are wealthy and happy about it

Day 4: 1 Timothy 6:17-19 Short-term vs. long-term investments

Paul's theology of wealth is founded on a distinction between this age and eternity. Money lasts only so long as this life does. A recent saying claims, "Whoever dies with the most stuff wins!" But, of course, this is tongue-in-cheek, even sarcastic, highlighting the futility of spending all one's effort pursuing the wealth accumulation. To what end? Whatever you have left when you die, you can pack into your coffin (if your survivors cooperate!), but it does you no good. It just goes into the ground and rots. As the old saying goes, "You can't take it with you." But you can send it on ahead.

So Paul urges his readers – and us – to store up wealth not for this life, nor even for retirement, but for the coming age. Saving money in a 401(k) or other retirement fund is perfectly reasonable. Under current longevity projections, most of us have a 50% chance (or greater) of living to be 80-85 years old. But there's a much lower than 50% chance that we will still be lucid and strong enough to work at that age. So saving up for the future is essential. Yet we will live much longer after this life is over, and it will be too late at that point to accrue assets. So we do well also to save up for our eternal future. Paul warns us not to focus solely on the short-term to the neglect of the eternal. As we invest funds for what remains of this life, let us also invest for eternity.

Day 5: 1 Timothy 6:17-19 High-risk vs. secure investments

Paul warns that wealth in this life is 'uncertain'. No one has to convince Bernie Madoff's investors of that. Or anyone who bought a house in 2006 in the hopes of accruing equity. Or anyone who invested in mortgage derivatives. In contrast, Paul notes, wealth accumulated in the coming age supplies a 'firm foundation'.

This does not imply that we should invest nothing at all in high-risk ventures, or spend nothing at all on the pleasures which this life affords. Yet it is to suggest that we should not devote the bulk of our assets to such risk investments, any more than an informed investor would put the bulk of his retirement funds in such instruments. Additionally, in this life, high-risk investments necessarily offer the promise of proportionately higher yield: that's the only factor which attracts investment. But, as Paul points out, investments in material wealth are simultaneously high-risk and low-yield. So as we execute an investment strategy, let us at least balance our funds between high-risk, low-yield instruments, and low-risk, high-yield instruments. Let us at least balance our investments between this world, and the world to come.

Day 6: 1 Timothy 6:17-19 A long-term, secure investment strategy

Concretely, what are these long-term secure investments? Paul explains in the form of 'not a, but b' contrast.

Not 'a': Paul urges those who are wealthy not to be 'arrogant' nor 'to put their hope in wealth'. Probably most of us have sufficient wealth to recognize how money promotes the growth of these particular noxious weeds. Those with money often consider themselves superior, an attitude encouraged by closed-gate communities and exclusive clubs designed to keep out the non-elite. Arrogance and confidence in wealth occurs even with Christians from developed countries going on short-term ministry trips to developing nations. We are wealthier and more technologically advanced, which makes us and our ways somehow superior. So, too, whether we have as much money as we need or not, we are all under temptation to trust in money. To assume that *now* I have enough money to take things a little easier, and to spend a little more freely. Or to assume that if only I had just *this much more* money, then I could be secure. Security comes, Paul reminds, only in God, "who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment."

But 'b': Instead, those who are rich in material possessions should also become 'rich in good deeds.' Specifically, they should use their money to do good, being generous and willing to share with those in need. This is the perfect antidote to arrogance; it is the antidote to trusting in wealth. Generous giving stores up wealth for the coming, eternal age; it firms our grasp on the life that really counts for something, both in this age and the next.

The bottom-line? As you assess your portfolio, where are you investing the bulk of your assets? In short-term, high-risk, low-return products? Or in long-term, secure, high-return products? Are you investing the greater part of your assets in this life and on yourself, or in the life to come and on those in need? The 2011 social concerns conference – and the related social concerns fund drive – provides a suitable opportunity to review your investment portfolio with a view to both your immediate and long-term priorities.