

Loving God's gifts rightly

Littlebourne - 13th April 2024 - 1 Timothy 6:3-10

This week's passage speaks to what pulls at our hearts. Paul writes to Timothy in Ephesus —a city that was overflowing with wealth, where glittering temples to false gods like Artemis fed greed and pride. People chased riches and status, often twisting truth for their own ends. The world hasn't really changed. But these things, money, ideas, influence, are things that can lead us towards or away from God, depending on how we view them and love them.

v3-5

3 If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, 4 he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, 5 and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain.

We revisit the false teachers again for the last time, in this passage talking especially about their divisiveness and greed. The characteristics of these false teachers is that they crave a disagreement and a controversy, they want to quarrel about words, and want material gain as a result.

Verse 3, Paul describes these people as those that do not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ. This isn't a problem of teaching about an opinion around that which is unclear, or making mistakes well meaningly. These aren't confused beginners. Paul is saying that the false teaching is deliberate - they have the sound or healthy words of Christ, and yet want to have an argument.

Timothy has been told to present the truth rightly - to take on the false teachers. He's called to argue for the right position and rebuke the false teachers, to teach the correct position as opposed to theirs. So there is a difference between having an argument because you like to stir things up, and having an argument to defend the truth. There are good reasons to argue, and debate things, and bad reasons. The false teachers are those that have an unhealthy craving for controversy.

The same problems of Ephesus happen today - we have plenty of people that distort the scriptures and seek their own gain from this. We might think of rich televangelists, for example. We also have those that are more in love with argument than truth, that like to nitpick theology to flex their intellect rather than to improve their real relationship with God. We might be tempted to pick a less important doctrinal position because it's interesting or controversial instead of because it's true or well evidenced.

Remember back in Galatians chapter 5, the characteristics of those that were following the desires of the flesh, rather than walk in the Spirit, are a similar list to what we see here, Galatians 5:19-24:

19 Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, 21 envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. 24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

The two lists of bad things are similar, because Paul is addressing similar concerns - false teaching in both Ephesus and Galatia, and the two lists lead to the same place - a disjointed and disunited church, where people are divided. Those that have the fruits of the Spirit are not like this, those that have the works of the flesh are like that. Jesus says that 'by their fruits you will know them' - a church that is filled with division and divisiveness is one that where the people, the leaders and teachers especially, are not walking by the Spirit.

The last phrase in verse 5 can cause us trouble: "imagining godliness is a means of gain". Are there not blessings for godliness? There are places in scripture where God promises blessings for the godly, for those that obey Him.

Deuteronomy 28 outlines the blessings and curses for either keeping or breaking the covenant God has made with Israel:

1 And if you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. ...

... 11 And the Lord will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your livestock and in the fruit of your ground, within the land that the Lord swore to your fathers to give you. 12 The Lord will open to you his good treasury, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hands. And you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow.

This tells us that material blessings are in view for those that obey God and keep His commands. Proverbs 3 (9-10):

*9 Honor the Lord with your wealth
and with the firstfruits of all your produce;
10 then your barns will be filled with plenty,
and your vats will be bursting with wine.*

There are blessings for those that really do practice godliness, who really do trust in the Lord. I think what Paul is getting at is that these people profess godliness, put on the appearance of godliness, and do so in an ungodly way. If their motivation is their own gain, they are not really doing things in a godly way. It is only the veneer of godliness, a hollow godliness of no substance.

The contrast to what they are doing is given next in verse 6.

v6-10

6 But godliness with contentment is great gain, 7 for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. 8 But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. 9 But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into 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 evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

Godliness with contentment is the alternative to godliness as a means of gain. Where the false teachers were thinking that some measure of godliness, or at least the appearance of it, would lead them to material gain, the real gain is in godliness with contentment - a gain that is far beyond mere material wealth.

Paul says in Philippians 4:11-13 that this kind of contentment is something he has learned:

... for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. 12 I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Lasting joy and contentment is found in that which is eternal - Paul says here that we have brought nothing into the world and will take nothing away from the world. If we want lasting contentment, it can't be found in the material things of earth, for these will all pass away. When we die, we lose all wealth that we have on earth.

This is the kind of contentment that can survive the terminal diagnosis or the fire that destroys your home. The kind of contentment that doesn't flinch at the stock market drop or the newspaper headline.

We all know Psalm 23 (verse 1), where David captures this type of contentment:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

When we truly have God, there is no wanting for anything else. Paul can say, from his prison cell, in Philippians 4:4 "Rejoice in the Lord always".

Jesus says in Matthew 6 (v19-21):

19 "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Where our treasure is, what we most value in life, is where our heart will be. When our heart is set on the things of earth, it's not set on heavenly things.

Practically, we can all be more consciously thankful for all that God has given us - we can pray daily prayers of thankfulness for what He has done and for all that we receive from Him. In this way, we focus on the right things, and begin to learn with Paul to be content in all situations.

When we look at baby Charlotte and say 'she's contented', what we really mean is that she looks sleepy. But for us grown ups, contentment shouldn't mean laziness or lack of drive - godly contentment is in trusting God enough to pursue things without idolising the outcome. Paul was very content, and this meant nothing stood in the way of his mission. His contentment meant that he could do more, not less.

Verse 9 says that those who desire riches fall into temptation - there is always the desire to get riches by underhand means, to gain riches in a way that is not godly. If our desire for riches wins against our desire to please God, then any kind of fraud, exploitation or deceit is on the table. Paul says that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evils.

Lesser things

Christianity has often had an ascetic streak - we see in the history of the church things like vows of poverty and hermits. We see some places in scripture where people might get this from - the rich young ruler told to sell all he had and follow Christ, and where Jesus says "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." (Matthew 19:23-24).

But there are also scriptures about God providing for people and scripture that indicates riches as a good thing. The proverbs are full of verses that take for granted that material wealth is good. For example Proverbs 8:18-21 links righteousness and wealth, where wisdom says:

*18 Riches and honor are with me,
enduring wealth and righteousness.
19 My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold,
and my yield than choice silver.
20 I walk in the way of righteousness,
in the paths of justice,
21 granting an inheritance to those who love me,
and filling their treasuries.*

Our attitude to wealth and earthly things should take both types of passages into account.

Just like we saw when we looked at the issues of the family a couple of weeks ago, there is an order to things. It's not wrong in itself to want to earn good money or to invest well. It's not wrong to want a bigger house or nice things. When we look at the descriptions of how things will be when Christ returns, it's materially opulent. The streets are paved with gold. As we saw, one way that God blesses people is in material wealth.

But just as with people, who should be loved in order - God first, then radiating outward from those closest to us, who we love the most, down the hierarchy - so too with material things, we must love in right order. And just the same, we must put God in the top spot. Our love for the things of earth must not come before our love for God. There are many things that are perfectly good to love - food and drink, sport and games, intellectual pursuits and knowledge, our houses and gardens, even a healthy bank account - these things are good and should be loved, but not loved more than God. These things are gifts from God and we should love God and His gifts.

His gifts of course point us to Him - in chapter 4 we read (v4-5):

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.

All things that we have, all material wealth, all earthly gain, is ultimately from God. And we're to love both the gift and the giver, but in order.

To give an example, if Chelsea gave me a good gift, whatever it might be - a good meal or a clean house, or a birthday present - there's a couple of ways I might go wrong. I might fail to love the gift - if it's something good, then I should enjoy and appreciate it, and to not do so is error. But I might also go wrong if I loved the gift more than the giver - if I loved what Chelsea gave me more than I loved her, that would be wrong. Both errors would be sinful misordering of love. But when I receive a gift from my wife, and rightly enjoy it, it should lead me to love her more.

This is exactly how it is with the gifts God gives us - everything from the sun rising each day to our Sunday lunch should point us to love God more - He has richly provided for us all these things.

Conclusion

If we love money in its right place, that is, we appreciate it as a gift from God that we neither deserve nor unduly put our trust in, we can enjoy it as we ought. But if we put money in the place of God, if we worship wealth, then it will rule over us. Whatever we put first and foremost will ultimately control us, whatever we love most is functionally our god.

Money as a god is a harsh taskmaster, never satisfied, always demanding and never enough. No earthly thing is like the God of grace and abundance who brings true contentment. When people put other things first, they may be seeking the most they can, but they don't realise that they're settling for less.

Enjoy the gifts of God - even money, wealth and riches - as those things that point us towards God, but love God more. All earthly good is but a dim reflection of the ultimate Good, and should point us in His direction. The true God of abundance and grace satisfies in ways that no earthly thing can. He is the giving God. Christ has the claim over all riches in the world, but He became poor for our sake, that we might experience the riches of His mercy. Because of Him, we can rest in God's provision.

It's all summed up well in verse 17:

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.