

NAILING THE GREED THAT SLAYS US: Contentment or Covetousness for the Love of Money

Theme: Covetousness is desiring things so much that you lose your contentment in God.

Text: I Timothy 6:6-11

In our Lenten series on the seven *deadlies*, as one person called them, we turn to our cultural obsession, greed, otherwise known as avarice or covetousness. We will consider the Scripture this morning that contains one of the most well known biblical lines, "the love of money is the root of all evil" or "all kinds of evil" (NIV). This is often wrongly quoted as "money is the root of all evil." Let's turn to I Timothy 6:6-11.

Read I Timothy 6:6-11

Max Lucado personifies contentment by picturing it as a street vendor who goes door to door attempting to get people to open their lives to his product. When asked why so few people will open their doors to contentment, the street vendor says, *"I charge a high price, you know. My fee is steep. I ask people to trade in their schedules, frustrations, and anxieties. I demand that they put a torch to their fourteen-hour days and sleepless nights. You'd think I'd have more buyers."* Scratching his beard he added pensively, *"But people seem strangely proud of their ulcers and headaches."*

In our passage this morning the apostle Paul tells us that *"godliness with contentment is great gain."* In v. 6-8 he defines what contentment is and how we can have it. Then in v. 9 & 10, as if he were looking down the centuries to consumer America, he tells us that the enemy of contentment is covetousness, greed, or the love of money. He paints a picture of the false allure and the destructiveness that the pursuit of things has on our life and how they rob us of contentment. Finally, in v. 11 he exhorts us to flee from the trap of covetousness and invest in the eternal qualities that lead to contentment.

I. Contentment (v. 6-8)

First, let's get a sense of what contentment is from v. 6-8.

1. Contentment is a settled and satisfied heart that transcends ever changing circumstances. *"But godliness with contentment is great gain."* (v. 6) Paul had just warned the Christian community that there are those who will use religion to line their pockets. People will teach bizarre and unusual things and charge you for the privilege. But there is another kind of gain that comes with true godliness, which is *contentment*. Paul deliberately selects a popular word for "contentment" that was the byword of the Greek philosophers.

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Contentment was a highly prized virtue. So the use of this word would have been immediately recognized by his Greek gentile readers. To the Greek philosophers contentment was a state of "self sufficiency", a life of satisfaction, independent of external circumstances.

Two philosophical schools of thoughts had two very diverse ways of attaining contentment. The Stoics went about achieving contentment by teaching themselves not to feel. One way to live apart from changing circumstances was to deaden one's response. If something bad happened to them they repeated a mantra, *"I don't care."* One stoic philosopher, Epictetus wrote, *"Begin with a cup or household utensil, if it breaks, say 'I don't care.' Go on to a horse or pet dog, if anything happens to it say, 'I don't care.' If you go on long enough and try hard enough, you will come to a state when you watch your nearest and dearest suffer and die and say, 'I don't care.'"* Detachment. Contentment meant becoming numb to the changing circumstances. This is at the root of much Eastern thought. The Epicureans made up the other school of thought and taught something far more akin to our contemporary culture. Contentment to them was to insulate themselves from life's changing circumstances through pleasure. Personal peace through self absorption in the comforts of affluence was their means to buffer their spirits against the changing circumstances of life.

Paul takes this philosophical term for *contentment* and adds entirely new content to it. Paul uses the same word for contentment in Philippians 4. He writes in Philippians 4:11, 12, *"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 want."* (Phil. 4:11, 12) Paul, what is this secret? Well, it is not numbing yourself so you don't care, nor it is insulating yourself from other people's pain through pleasure, it is attaching yourself to the loving constant Jesus Christ. There is One who is the anchor for our soul who does not change no matter how life shifts around us. *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."* (Phil. 4:13) Over and over again Paul describes the Christian life as being "in Christ", "through Christ", "Christ in us", "rejoice in the Lord." Why? Because no changing circumstance can ever change the truth that God is for us and that nothing can separate from the love of Christ. I have observed it over and over again in life, we can endure almost any circumstance, if we are surrounded by love, the love of God and the love of his people.

In Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, Part 3, he pictures a king wandering *incognito* through the country without his regal garb. The king meets two gamekeepers

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and he tells them he is a king. The gamekeepers respond, *"But, if thou be a king, where is thy crown?"* To which the king answers,

*"My crown is in my heart, not on my head;
Not decked with diamonds and Indian stones,
Nor to be seen; my crown is called contentment
A crown it is that seldom kings enjoy."*

The heart rooted in Jesus is content.

2. Contentment does not come from the passing things of the world.

"For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of the world." (v. 7) You hear in these words an echo from Job. Job you will recall lost all his possessions and his children. This was a test. Would Job still praise God even if all his worldly blessings were taken away? Would he serve God for naught? Or did he simply believe in God because He supplied prosperity and filled his quiver with children? After all was gone Job said, *"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, may the name of the Lord be praised."* (Job 1:21) Paul's point in I Timothy is that contentment cannot be found in those things that are impermanent. In other words, you can't take it with you. As the saying goes, *"There are no U-hauls behind hearses."*

The Scripture is clear that a settled and satisfied heart does not come from the impermanent things we accumulate through life. Our Lord Jesus warned us, *"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."* (Luke 12:15)

If this is true, why do we keep falling for the lie? Our whole culture is a monument to the belief that life consists of the abundance of our possessions. We fail to make two distinctions. First, like the Epicureans we think that contentment or happiness is the same as pleasure. We fall for the short term and immediate gratification of pleasure and think it will give us satisfaction or contentment. Pleasure stimulates our senses: A sugar coated, jelly filled donut (Crispy Crème); great sex, surround sound, a movie that is a visual feast, the next vacation in an exotic location, retiring to play golf 5 days a week, etc. These are all transitory experiences that bring no long term satisfaction to the soul. It is simply going from one stimulus to the next which anesthetizes our soul, but does not satisfy it. The other allure of possessions is that we confuse comfort with contentment. We can fill our world with beautiful things, the gadgets that makes life easy: a luxurious car, a house where we can be at ease, but comfort does not touch the soul.

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We must look deeper, more permanent investments for contentment.

3. Contentment is rooted in gratitude. Gratitude comes when you can be thankful for what you have, rather than chafing over what you don't have. This is v. 8, *"But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that."* The writer of Hebrews underscores this truth, *"Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have, because God said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'" (Hebrews 13: 5)* Let me borrow again from Max Lucado who has an arresting line. He was reflecting on those all too fleeting moments when our hearts are at rest in contentment. *"An hour of contentment. An hour when deadlines are forgotten and striving have ceased.* [Here is the line that jumped off the page.] *An hour when what we have overshadows what we want."*

That is the best definition for gratitude I have ever seen. Gratitude is the emotion that comes when we recognize that what we have overshadows what we want. I am not sure if there is anything better in life than the feelings that come with gratitude. Dr. Lewis Smedes, a friend and seminary professor, offers the best description of the gratitude of contentment I have ever heard. He was in a hospital bed, having just been congratulated by the doctor for surviving against 20 to 1 odds. His lungs had a buckshot full of blood clots. His immediate response was somewhat ho-hum, because he had not entertained the thought of dying. He rolled over and went back to sleep. A couple of nights later at 2AM in the dark and aloneness of the same hospital room—he was *"seized with a frenzy of gratitude"*. In his words, *"My arms rose straight up by themselves, a hundred-pound weight could not have held them at my side. My hands open, fingers spread, waving, twisting, while I blessed the Lord above for the almost unbearable goodness of being on this good earth in this good body at the present time."* Contentment: An hour when what we have overshadows what we want.

Contentment then is a soul anchored to the love of Jesus Christ apart from circumstances, not found in the accumulation of things, and thankful for what you have and not focused on what you don't have.

II. Covetousness (v. 9, 10)

Then Paul goes on to say that the enemy of contentment is covetousness or greed. Paul doesn't use the word covet, but speaks about *"people who want to get rich"*, *"many foolish and harmful desires"*, *"the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil"*, and *"some people, eager for money."* The phrase that has

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always been troubling for me is the one we traditionally translate, *"For the love of money is the root of all evil."*

What is Paul saying here? Can all sin be ultimately traced to the love of money? When I sin is it because I have the pursuit of money on my mind? If I lose my temper, and lash out in an angry tirade, is it sub-consciously an inordinate desire for money?

Let's dig below the surface of what Paul is saying. Money is a symbol of human resources. Paul is speaking of the heart that pins its hope on human resources, pursues the pleasures it can buy, and places its trust in the material to satisfy. It is a faith in money, a belief that money can meet our deepest needs, that concerns Paul. In other words, Paul is speaking about a form of idolatry here. The Scripture draws a close connection between idolatry and covetousness. John Piper writes, *"Covetousness is desiring something so much that you lose your contentment in God."*

How does covetousness destroy contentment? Paul shows us in v. 9, 10.

1. First, the desires for riches causes us to fall into temptation and sets a trap. One of the greatest temptations and traps is to equate having things with security. Security is a very fundamental and basic need. To feel safe in a world of harm is something we all desire. We can be lured into believing that if we have enough, which is always more than we currently have, then we will feel safe, defended, and protected. One person was quoted in *Time* magazine after a shopping spree at Bloomingdales, *"Possession is the whole point. I like seeing the stuff around me like a security blanket."*

Have you monitored your feelings of anxiety during the stock market decline over the last three years? I have. I observed twinges of fear and frustration float through my spirit. Will I have to work forever? How easy it is to get used to the 30% annual rise in the stock values as we watch our portfolio increase. We then get to expect that this will always be the case. Then we transfer our trust from the Lord into the ability for us to make money with ease. When that which we have counted on, fluctuates, what happens to our soul? What a trap and temptation to begin to trust the wrong thing.

I remember vividly a conversation I had with a Lebanese Christian a few years ago. He was on his way back to Beirut, Lebanon within the week. Immediately images of buildings riddled with bullet holes, and shells of bombed out facades filled my mind from the television pictures. The time was the mid-80's during all the turmoil in Beirut. Rival factions controlled sections of this once pristine city. I asked him a rather stupid question, *"Is it safe to go back there?"*

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He looked at me intently, yet with a serenity of spirit I will never forget. Then he tapped the breast bone of his chest and said to me, *"It is safe in here."* I didn't doubt him for a moment. That's a security that only God can provide.

Covetousness seeks security in the accumulation of things, contentment comes from a heart settled on the Lord.

2. ***Covetousness is stirred by "harmful desires"***, Paul says. (v. 9) The reason that covetousness can never provide contentment is that it is rooted in dissatisfaction. Greed is the desire to always have more and never be satisfied with what you have. The writer of Ecclesiastes captures the insatiable nature of greed, *"Whoever loves money never has money enough, whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income."* (Ecclesiastes 5:10) The entire American economy is built upon creating discontent. This is the whole point of advertising. The New York Times estimated that the average American is exposed to 3500 ads per year. Advertising teaches people that they have wants that they didn't know that they had, and that the product being advertised is what can satisfy that want. So what is sold today is satisfaction or image or prestige or...

A popular office chair is advertised to enhance your prestige. The ad shows a man in a plush office. The headline reads: *"His suits are custom tailored. His watch is solid gold. His office chair is _____.* Below the man's picture is this quote:

"I've worked hard and had my share of luck; my business is a success. I wanted my office to reflect this and I think it does. For my chair I chose_____. It fits the image I wanted...If you can't say this about your office chair, isn't it about time you sat in a _____? After all, haven't you been without one long enough?" I've got to have one of those to feel good about myself, we are supposed to say.

The person whose life is full of gratitude is content with what he has and is not continuously stirred up by these incessant desires for more.

3. ***Covetousness destroys the soul.*** Do we believe that? *"People who want to get rich... plunge into ruin and destruction."* (v.9) The word plunge means to submerge as if drowning in the sea. Ruin and destruction are more than just losing contentment, it means to lose one's soul. Paul underscores this in v. 10, *"Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs."*

Ray Stedman speaks of what he calls "destination sickness." This is a common illness of our day. Destination sickness is arriving at your destination,

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being where you have always wanted to be, having everything you have always wanted to have, but not wanting anything that you've got. This pursuit of things, leads only to grief and emptiness.

A vivid picture of the destructive capability of the pursuit of riches comes from the ashes of Vesuvius. One of the embalmed bodies dug from the volcanic ash was that of a woman whose feet were turned toward the city gate, but her face was turned backward toward something that lay just beyond her outstretched hands. The prize for which those frozen fingers were reaching was a bag of pearls. The image one is left with is: Though death was at her heels and life was beckoning beyond the city gates, she could not shake off the spell of the pearls. She had turned to pick them up with death as her reward.

Some of us are killing our souls, because we are consumed with acquisition. Some of us may even have crossed the line to illegal activity. For what? We are pursuing that which cannot bring contentment and we are killing ourselves for it.

Paul says, "*Flee from all this*" (v. 11) The Message reads, "*Run for your life from all of this.*" When you sense greed, covetousness, the lust for things starting to claim your spirit, run as if you were escaping the jaws of a lion.

Instead, "pursue" or "take aim" at those things which you can take with you, that will last, that are permanent.

Pursue...**righteousness**--behavior that is upright. Happiness is the long term satisfaction that comes with doing right, whereas pleasure is immediate gratification. Do what is right.

Pursue...**godliness**—literally *piety*. This is a heart set on the love of God. It means that the person truly is defined and ordered around their faith.

Pursue...**faith**--fidelity, faithfulness to God

Pursue...**love**--When all is said and done, what you have in this life is your loves. I have seen it over and over, when tragedy strikes, life becomes very simple. It is the people who love you and whom you love that count.

Pursue...**endurance**—steadfastness. Finish well.

Pursue...**gentleness**--a heart with a broken and contrite spirit.

Pursue these eternal qualities and you will be content.

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*"But godliness with contentment is **great gain**."* Paul appeals to us to live for great gain. Our problem is that we settle for too little. Our desire for happiness is not too strong, but too weak, we settle for fleeting pleasures, the pursuit of the comfort of things, when awaiting us in the Lord and service to him is the deepest satisfaction of our soul. C. S. Lewis wrote, *"We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."*

I was speaking to one of our retirees in our congregation recently who had gone through a spiritual awakening. His heart was evidently alive with a fresh experience of the love of God. I said, *"Tell me what difference it has made."* He said, *"I used to play golf 5 days a week. Now that seems all so unfulfilling. I still play occasionally, but growing in my relationship with Christ and helping others discover what I have experienced is the deepest joy of my life."* A content heart is rooted in a life and mission bigger than oneself

You don't have to wait until you retire to experience contentment. There is a battle in our souls between covetousness and contentment. The street vendor peddling contentment doesn't get many takers. The price is high: we must trade in the pursuit of drink, sex and personal ambition, 14 hour days and sleepless nights. But for those who are willing to buy what the vendor is selling infinite joy is offered. Which is it, mud pies in the slum, or will you take up the offer of the holiday at the sea? Contentment: **in this hour, does what you have overshadow what you want?**