



## Giving Up Control

### 1 Timothy 6:6-19

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While November 1 is technically All Saints' Day, we celebrate this special day in the life of the church during worship on the first Sunday following November 1. The celebration of the saints invites us to pause and to reflect on the faithfulness of those who have come before us. We are invited to remember our spiritual ancestors: those who mentored us; those who taught us the stories of our Biblical heritage; those who forced us from the warmth of our beds on cold Sunday mornings to ensure we were *at* church; those who built the foundation on which this building stands.

What strikes me as odd regarding the timing of All Saints' Day is that, following this day of remembrance, as a culture, we will move forward into the seasons of Thanksgiving and Christmas with a pattern of behavior that often diverges from the teachings of the saints whose memory we have just celebrated. Following our gratitude towards those whose faithfulness proved to be the foundation of our communal existence, we launch into a season of seemingly unrestricted spending and extravagance. It's anticipated that, in America, nearly \$1 Trillion will be spent on Christmas-related expenses between now and December 25.

Gratefully, our expenditures are not all related to frivolous gifts; our philanthropic willingness also tends to increase around the holidays. Nationally, over 25% of charitable giving happens in December. But we should hold in tension the amount of money given to non-profits compared to the amount spent on Christmas. In the 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter of 2022, almost \$930 billion was spent on holiday purchases. In comparison, if you look at the full year in 2022, non-profits received just less than \$500 billion. So, as a nation, we spent twice as much on retail sales at Christmas than we gave to non-profits over the course of the entire year.

To help us prepare for the bombardment of holiday advertisements encouraging our holiday spending, which (at least at my house) have already started coming in the mail, and to help us follow in the footsteps of the saints who have paved a path for us, our focus this November will be on *giving* ... more specifically, on Giving Up. Giving Up *Control*; Giving Up *Wastefulness*; Giving Up the *Benjamins*; and Giving Up *Allegiance*. My hope is that we might claim the path of the saints before us whose own giving, and whose giving up, provided for us the time, the space, the relationships, and the foundation of hope we cling to in Christ so that we might do the same for the generations that follow us.

This morning, we begin with the invitation to Give Up Control.

1 & 2 Timothy are considered part of the Pastoral Letters. These letters are assumed to have been written by Paul, though there's some scholarly belief that they were written by a follower of Paul. Regardless the author, they have been recorded in the history of Christianity as letters of instruction for how Timothy might be faithful in his call to pastoral leadership. With such a purpose, the writings have been extended to offer guidance to all who provide leadership in the church. Yet, while they were

written to a single person whose calling was to the pastoral office, the teachings included in this text are quite applicable to any who seek to be faithful disciples of Christ.

Our passage today is comprised of three sub-sections. There is an exhortation made regarding godliness and contentment, followed by a reminder of Timothy's call to ministry, bookended by another follow up regarding wealth and riches.

The first section follows on the heels of the author discussing concerns around false teaching. The invitation of verse 6, which reads, "There is great gain in godliness with contentment" is associated to the concern of false teaching that had been discussed in the first 5 verses of the chapter. These issues of godliness and contentment align with the concern of false teachers. Listen to verses 9 and 10 again, while holding the thought that the focus is on false teaching, not simply wealth: "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 the 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."

Yes, there is a message here regarding wealth and money for every person of faith, but the invitation of the author in *this* moment is centered on bearing weary of false teachers. Be careful, the author urges, of those who want to be rich, for the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.

While our 21<sup>st</sup> Century American culture is vastly different than that of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Greco-Roman world to which our author wrote, it seems there is at least one similarity: you will find preachers and teachers in both ages who claim that the quest for wealth is aligned with the path of discipleship. And I'm not specifically speaking here of the prosperity gospel, which pervades our modern day culture by saying that if you're faithful to God you will become wealthy, or that God will bless you with financial stability ... I'm talking about pastors who teach that becoming wealthy, amassing riches, and stockpiling funds is not just acceptable, but is the preferred path for a disciple of Jesus Christ.

As this text begins, it is not *having* money that the author is concerned with, it is the desire for money – the quest for wealth – the teaching that we should be earnestly seeking to acquire that which drives the commercial world. The author instead encourages contentment – being content with the food and clothing we have – being content that we have the basic necessities for life. It is not having wealth that the author discourages, it is the love of wealth that is the root of all kinds of evil.

In his commentary on this text, Rev. Doug Bratt recalls a Roman proverb that compares wealth to seawater: instead of quenching one's thirst, it only intensifies it. "The more seawater and wealth a person gets," he writes, "the more they want."<sup>1</sup>

After this exhortation on turning from the false teachings that encourage the quest of amassing wealth, our author turns back to Timothy and his call. "As for you, a man of God," the author writes, "shun all of this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness."

In the midst of teaching about false teachers, the author reminds Timothy that there is only one *true* teacher. There is only one faithful path. There is only one who is worthy to be followed. "In the presence of God," he writes, "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, 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.”

It is a charge and a prayer for this leader of faith to maintain his call toward faithfulness.

But let us not skip too quickly past this charge, because within it are a few key indicators of what the author will address in the following exhortation about being rich.

Notice the statement of Jesus’ testimony before Pontius Pilate. This is the only place in all of the letters of the New Testament that Pilate is mentioned. As such, we should give this some weight. What was Jesus’ testimony before Pilate?

The narrative of Jesus and Pilate is found in all four Gospel accounts. In each account, Pilate asks Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews.” And in each account, Jesus denies the charge, saying in the Gospel of John, “My kingdom doesn’t originate from this world.” In Matthew and Mark, Jesus responds with the retort, “That’s what *you* say.” Pilate was only concerned about power that would conflict with his own power, or, any power that would challenge the power of Rome. Jesus indicates his power is quite different than the empirical power held by Pilate or his Roman hierarchy. Jesus wields a different kind of power, and reigns over a different kind of kingdom.

In the final sentence of this middle section of our text, the author describes Jesus alone as being immortal and dwelling in unapproachable light. These are both accusations against Caesar, who was thought to be immortal in the Roman empire. The author belittles the empirical powers of the Roman empire, indicating that they pale in comparison to Christ.

In this exhortation by the author for Timothy to maintain his calling as a pastoral leader in the Christian faith, he offers some indication that this work requires an understanding of true power and a willingness to stand up to empirical powers. There are many false preachers who teach that the goal is to amass wealth, because, in our worldly ways, wealth is power. ... Money is power. ... But in his own witness, Jesus’ teaching was centered around reframing power and acknowledging that true power, that which even has power over death and the grave, lies in the person of God.

We may be reminded of Jesus’ own teaching, that we can only serve one master. In Matthew 6, Jesus says, “you cannot serve God and wealth.” Throughout this text, wealth ... riches ... money, they are likened to the power of the empire. Wealth is understood to be the tool of the powers of this world.

This all leads into the final subsection of this text, which begins in verse 17. The author begins, “As for those who in the present age are rich ...”

The author is encouraging Timothy to acknowledge that there are some in the community of faith who are already wealthy. These are not necessarily people who have given in to the love of money, but in whatever way, whether because of generational wealth or perhaps a higher paying occupation, there are folks who have amassed great wealth. Beyond his earlier instructions to avoid false teachers who say we should be trying to get rich, the author gives this following pastoral guidance for how Timothy should instruct those who are already rich.

“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. [These folks] 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 author offers that there are a few important lessons one must understand about living faithfully as a disciple of Jesus Christ if they are wealthy. The first is to avoid the trap, which was named earlier: do not let your money become your hope or your certainty – do not fall into the false teaching that encourages the love of money, or pursue the never-ending quest for greater wealth. Continue to rely on God as the one who provides. Trust not in the wealth you have, but trust in the Lord who has already provided everything we need for life, for abundant life, and for eternal life.

Secondly, for those who are rich, they are given the instruction to *do good*. Don’t just be rich in money, but be rich in good works. Be generous. Be ready to share. Use the wealth you have to care for others who do not have such wealth. Be sympathetic to the needs of others, and use the abundance that you have to share with those who do not have.

And then, in something of a summary statement, the author finishes with a closing exhortation, offering again in regards to those who have great wealth: “store up for yourselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that you may take hold of the life that really is life.”

With this closing statement, we find that the author is not simply telling rich people to give assistance; “he is talking about the rich being converted to a new way of seeing and living,” ... “of the freeing, joyful, life-giving experience of seeing their wealth not as their own but as a river of God’s grace to all of humanity that just happens to flow through their yard.”<sup>ii</sup>

The rich are invited to see their wealth not as some personal glory, but as part of the resources God has made abundant in this world for the purpose of ensuring the *shalom* and wellbeing of all of God’s created.

On this All Saints’ Sunday, this is our invitation: that we give up control of what great wealth we have to acknowledge how such wealth might be a greater benefit to God’s created, offering love and life to those who are often left without, that we might help create a good foundation for the future.

So let us claim the call to faithfulness, even as we hear the author instruct Timothy to claim his own calling. Let us acknowledge the glory of the *one* who is worthy to be praised and served. And, in worship of the one, may we give up control of the abundance of wealth in our own possession that God’s love might be known to all. So may it be. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Doug Bratt. “1 Timothy 6:6-19.” September 19, 2023. <https://cepreaching.org>. Retrieved October 31, 2023.

<sup>ii</sup> Thomas G. Long. *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.