

Sermon – September 25, 2022
“Be Rich in Good Works”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: 1 Timothy 6:6-19

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill us with open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words, making them a blessing for your people that transforms us into Christ's image and guides us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here right now. Amen

Good morning! It is really starting to feel like fall. As I drove the roads to and from Tennessee this week, I was able to see many leaves that are starting to give up their deep green colors and starting to show the bright yellows of fall. Fall is on the way.

Our reading this morning was from the last chapter of Paul's first letter to Timothy. We have skipped some of the instructions Paul gave Timothy and find ourselves in the midst of Paul's comments to Timothy on riches, wealth, or money. Let me remind us that much of this letter is written in response to false teachers that have come to Ephesus where Timothy is leading a church. Evidently these false teachers are also those who desire riches and, in that context, we will find that part of Paul's response is aimed at those teachers and their desire. We will also find comments to Timothy about how to guide those in his church who are rich.

At the very top of Paul's instructions is advice for great gain. The gain Paul speaks to is not better returns from our stock market investments or our savings, but how we can all find true, lasting, eternal gain. The gain Paul speaks to is a gain in godliness combined with contentment.

Let's develop a definition of godliness. At the surface level, godliness is reflecting the revealed nature of God as found in Jesus. To reflect this nature, we need to grow in our knowledge of Jesus, or grow in our understanding of what Jesus, through his life, death, and resurrection, revealed to us about the Father. We are to be those who are in the world and do not live as the world does, but live as Jesus did. We are to be those who understand the realities of life in the culture and yet are not seen as those who live in a manner that accommodates those realities, but instead live so as to reflect or project the image of Jesus into those realities. Godliness is our response as those who have faith in God and are living as a people who are responding in the world within that faith. We are not those who are seeking material gain in the world, as we understand that as we came into the world with nothing, we will also leave the world with nothing.

Godliness is to be combined with contentment. If you are from West Virginia, and probably many other rural areas where cows are raised, then the idea of contentment is pictured as a cow lying comfortably in the warm sun slowly chewing its cud. Cows are the picture of contentment; their needs are satisfied and they appear to be enjoying life. They are content. For a Christian, Paul's idea of contentment is to have food and clothing. Not an abundance of these items, but enough. Food is an easy idea for us to grasp. We desire to have our daily bread, a gift from God. We are not to seek an abundance of food, but enough to sustain us for the day. The idea of having clothing needs to be placed in the context of the first century. Because making clothing was labor intensive, material for clothing was very expensive and as such, having enough clothing represents a major investment of time or money. I should point out that John Wesley includes having a place to live in his discussions about these instructions. The idea Paul is expressing is that we are to live a simple life. Seeking to dress modestly, not having an abundance of clothing and not seeking to accumulate food as God is the one who meets our daily needs. We are to seek a balance between using well the provisions God has given us and not wasting the provisions for life God has placed in our hands.

Let me read verse 10 again as I want to stress what words are there: "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." First, we should notice that Paul does not condemn money as evil, but speaks to the love of money or the desire to earn money. Money is neither good nor evil. It is how we use the money we have and how we approach the earning

of money that are the issues. Paul's concern is that many who have a desire to earn or acquire money put that work over seeking God and become separated from their faith in God. Recall that Paul is speaking to the false teachers who seem to hold that a desire for money and wealth is godliness. They are seeking to get rich from their teaching. We should not read Paul's instruction as money is bad. How we use and seek to acquire money are the issues. These are the root of all kinds of evil. Paul is expressing a fear that the desire for money will replace a right focus on God and our growing into the image of Jesus.

Paul gives Timothy a list, one of many occurring in Paul's letters, of what we are to pursue, to accumulate. As men and women of God, we are to desire or pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness (forbearance). The list is not a complete list of the attributes we are to seek to exhibit in our lives as we live in the world. It is a list that is tailored for Timothy as he encounters the false teachers in Ephesus. It is also a list that we will want to pay attention to as we seek to balance our own desire for money and our investments of time and energy to carry out our desire.

What Paul is seeking to explain is how to balance our own desire for money so that we do not sin. When you spend time at a conference like New Room, where I was blessed to be last week, you cannot help but encounter new ways of expressing difficult ideas. For me, one example is our concept of God and sin. Our typical understanding of sin is that God gives us a list of rules, think the Ten Commandments, and if we break one of them, or any of them, we have displeased God and must be punished. Let me suggest that a better way to think about God's reaction to our sin is not from a punishment view but from a love view. A different way to think about sin is that God understands that our sin will destroy us. God's love for us doesn't say don't sin because of the consequences, even though those consequences lead to our destruction. God's concern over our sin comes from God's love for us and His desire that we not be destroyed, but that all might be saved. God's response to our sin is love for us, love that will send His only Son to die for us that we might be set free from our sin. Yes, God gave the Law that we might know what sin is so that we may avoid sin. When we find ourselves struggling with temptation or have fallen to sin, we need to realize that God has steadfast love for us and has made a path through Jesus' shed blood and death on the cross for us to fully experience steadfast love. God is faithful, even if we are not.

Let me skip down to verse 17 as there Paul gives guidance for those in this age who are rich. Let me remind us that we who are blessed to live in the United States, when compared to the rest of the world, are rich. Even those who are poor by the standards we have developed and need assistance are, by comparison to the rest of the world, rich. To help us understand how blessed we are, let us look at where we rank in the world by income. Let me give one example this morning and if you are interested, I can share more information later. If we have an annual income of \$40,000, then in 2015 we would be the 33,982,065th richest person in the world. That means we would have more income than 33,982,065 people in the world. We may be struggling to meet our living costs and desires in the U.S., especially in light of inflation, but we are richer than millions of people. In fact, we would be in the upper 2% of all people in the world.

Paul's comments to Timothy let us know that there are rich people in Ephesus and that Timothy is working with them. Paul gives Timothy advice on what is expected of those who are rich. That includes us, so let's look at Paul's guidance to the rich and how it applies to us. The first instruction is that the rich are also to seek to be godly. They also are to learn about God through Jesus' revelation of God. They are not to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but are to focus their hopes on the certainty of God. God is the eternal lasting focus and it is to God in Christ that the rich also are to hope. Next, the rich are to do good, to be those who are rich in good works. They are to be generous, meeting the needs of those they have the opportunity to know who have needs. They are to be ready to share what they have with those in need. These acts, or good works, become true riches, riches that are accumulating in heaven. Good works are treasures in heaven that will be there when the rich die in Christ and are reconciled through Christ to God.

John Wesley was at work in England at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. The people who had once lived in the countryside and farmed had flooded the cities in search of work and were not able to find employment. England's population was at one of its poorest points in history. In this time of great need, Wesley wrote and preached about the response of a Methodist to those who were poor. His guidance could be summarized as, "Save all you can, earn all you can, and give all you can." Now many of us are beyond the years of generating savings and earning from work, but we can all still benefit from Wesley's guidance. And as it turns out, Methodists were able to do well with the first two of these general ideas for money management. As Methodists moved into a more holy lifestyle in the world where they lived, they saved all

they could and lived frugal lives. They worked hard and provided honest work for the time they worked. They had honest prices for their goods and dealt honestly with those they worked for and with. As a result, Methodists begin to accumulate wealth. Wesley realized that he needed to give additional advice and so gave more specific guidance on how to use riches. First, he taught that we are to provide necessities and conveniences for those of our households. This would be food and clothing, a home, and other necessary products that are needed to live. Next, he advised that those in business are to lay up funds required to carry on their business. They are to set aside what is needed to allow their businesses to function, grow, and develop in an economic time that was marked by changing markets. The idea is to be able to continue to sustain a business in difficult times. Next, he instructed parents of children who were still dependents to leave funds for their children that will supply them with necessities and conveniences after they, the parents, have left the world. Parents were to save enough so that they could meet their obligations to their families. And finally, Wesley advised that Methodists were to owe no one anything, have no debt. In today's economics, we see it as acceptable to have a mortgage to purchase a home, but we are not to have debts. When Methodists had met these aspects of guidance, Wesley advised that they were to do good to those of the household of God (if there were funds left) and that if they still had funds left after meeting those known needs, Methodists were to do good unto all men as they had opportunity. This is Wesley's idea of giving all you can. Methodists in Wesley's day turned out to be pretty effective at the first two of these steps, but they were not as effective at giving all you can. Instead, they began to become affluent, to be those with riches in this life.

In response to the growing wealth among the Methodists, Wesley began to develop a new concern for the people called Methodists and would end his sermons with a very pointed warning to the Methodists about how they were handling money. They did well with learning to earn all they could and to save all they could. They were known for being a plain, frugal people who set aside former vices and sought to live as they understood God was leading them to live. Wesley feared that they would grow rich and that the desire for money would be the end of the people called Methodists. This is our struggle with riches today, to learn to be those who are doing good, rich in good works and known as generous, always ready to share from the abundance we have been blessed with by God. Let me encourage us to look at our own approach to the blessings God has placed in our hand and to seek to be a people who are living out Wesley's

guidance for our riches. Seek to be a people who are earning all we can, saving all we can, and above all, giving all we can so that the household of God might be cared for and, as we have opportunity, great good may be accomplished in the world

Pray with me: Jesus, we ask that you would guide us to be those who, having received blessings, are now growing into those who are found doing good works as we learn of needs in this place. Help us to be rich in good works and give to us generous hearts that we are always ready to share from the abundance we have received from God. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.