

Nothing
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1 Timothy 6:6-19

⁶Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹But 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. ¹⁰For 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.

¹¹But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. ¹³In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you ¹⁴to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. ¹⁶It 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.

¹⁷As 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. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹thus 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.

Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹‘There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ ²⁵But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ ²⁷He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house—²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’’

It’s not always easy to find a quote from the Bible which clearly and unambiguously addresses, or counters, something in our modern culture. Here we have one of them. I think it grew out of the

greed which has become a hallmark of the 80's – a bumper sticker which read: He who dies with the most toys wins. Paul tells Timothy “we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it.” You can't take it with you when you die – this idea has been our secular version of Paul's writing. At one time or another, though, we disregard this wisdom and shun the “nothing” in favor of “something,” or more rightly some things. We say “money can't buy happiness, but it probably couldn't hurt, either.” We may joke but we can't ignore the nine **million** iPhones bought a week ago Friday. While I didn't upgrade, I fully confess to considering it. That green one **is** pretty cute. Some “things” are just cool, or cute, or comforting, or rewarding.

Paul tells Timothy, and us, “if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.” I've spoken with the Bible Study group before about an idea that intrigues me. There is a general movement out there which encourages people to simplify their lives by simplifying their stuff. One specific practice presented is to limit one's stuff to one hundred things, clothing included. I came here today wearing eleven things. And yet, this idea speaks to me, sometimes in a whisper, often in a voice that would not be considered an “indoor voice.” The point of this lifestyle is not to become ascetic monks but to spend less time thinking about, worrying about, planning around, and tending to our stuff. Paul describes the effect as taking “hold of the life that really is life.” **That** is why this minimalist way of life appeals to me.

Paul is not saying we can't or shouldn't have stuff, things. The nature of stuff is not good and the nature of stuff is not bad. But stuff doesn't point to God. Paul says, “As 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.” I suspect I may sound like a broken record but I cannot help it when I must relay the message of the gospel. There are so many things which cause us to turn away from God, which we let turn us away from God. The more we turn **to** God, the less we notice the things, the less we want the things, the less we dwell on the things, the less energy we give the things. Today, we're talking about physical things but the distracting things toward which we turn can also be power, anger, self-righteousness – you get the idea. Perhaps a simple summary of the Bible could be “turn toward God.” It seems every lesson is either a how-to or a how-not-to. Today's lessons are both.

The rich man, with his royal clothing, purple and linen, and his sumptuous feasts was not looking toward God, for if he had been, he would have seen Lazarus. Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me... His five brothers, he knew, were not looking to God either. They all had Moses and the prophets telling them what was important but they “set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches.” It is implied that Lazarus, who had no riches to rely upon, set his hopes upon God to provide for him. Now,

the Wednesday Bible Study group is talking about the Beatitudes and just recently talked specifically about the one that goes “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” if you’re Matthew, or “Blessed are the poor,” if you’re Luke. Author James C. Howell points out: “Jesus didn’t glamorize poverty, and neither should we. But maybe when we have much, we miss lots of things.”¹ Paul doesn’t say to give everything away but he does suggest we might be better off.

If every Bible lesson helps us understand how we should turn to God, then one of the many selling points, because we **do** need to be sold on the idea of God above all else sometimes, one of the many selling points is that turning toward God means taking hold of “the life that really is life.” You’ve also heard it described as life abundant, life eternal. Paul also uses the word “contentment” as a result of our redirection, of our aim toward godliness. This is, indeed, a great selling point.

But I interrupt this planned sermon to tell you that knowing that I’d be better off with less stuff and desiring in my heart to turn more toward God sometimes just doesn’t cut it. During the process of writing this sermon, I took Jim shopping for a winter coat. Did I mention I was in the middle of writing this sermon? The idea of “nothing” was at the front of my mind, and on the tip of my tongue. And STILL I looked longingly at sweaters I didn’t need and water bottles, even though the ones I have are perfectly fine, and socks, despite the fact that I have a drawer full of them. In the end, I, very consciously, chose not to buy anything I didn’t need (which was everything) but the back-and-forth in my head couldn’t even get to God. I was too preoccupied reminding myself how I really didn’t need any of those things. I didn’t have space in my head to even consider the “living the life that really is life” that could be the consequence of my good decision.

This takes practice. This turning toward God. This Christian life. This pursuit of “righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.” It’s no wonder the rich man’s brothers were in trouble. It’s a whole lot easier to give in to the things that preoccupy us than to resist them as a stepping stone to contentment in God. The other night, we sat down as a family and culled all the things Jim has amassed (mostly the things we have amassed on his behalf) through his childhood. We held up the first grade karate uniform and the cards from confirmation. We sorted through the favorite toys and fondly-remembered books. And we laughed and said our “awws” over childhood artwork. In the midst of it all, our goal was not walking down memory lane, although it was a joy-filled experience, but to throw away, donate, or pass on the things that were kept for a reason which was forgotten or had lost its significance. These “things” aren’t the trappings of wealth, although my parents may have spent a small fortune in Lego bricks, but they aren’t “nothing,” either. I can’t imagine letting go of things we **did**

¹ James C. Howell, *The Beatitudes for Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), p. 35.

keep, or asking Jim to do so. There is so much sentimental value in, and so many memories tied to, these things that to lose them feels like giving up part of my life, part of his childhood.

If it's not these items, it's other things that will always be in my way. Moses and the prophets and another man who rose from the dead are all reminding me that my life could be abundant in ways I have yet to experience, life without those things. I don't know that I have enough years of life in me to ever reach that goal but I will continue to strive toward it and I'll take Paul's advice to help me keep striving. I will try "to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share." By the grace of God, I pray to turn ever more toward God in this way. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: Holy God, we set our hopes on you who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Amen.