

Godliness and contentment

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[0 : 00] I thought I'd start this evening with a confession. Last week, I bought a lottery ticket. Specifically, I bought a ticket for the Euro Millions.

Why? Well, my granddad, who most of you know died a little over a month ago, amongst other things, granddad quite liked to gamble. Every week, he would sit down with the racing papers open on the table, and he would paw over them, assessing and calculating and working out which horse he was going to back.

And then he would go down to the bookies, and he would place his bet. 55p, I think, was his regular weekly amount. Really, throughout his life, the same amount, 55p.

It never went up. Hardly high stakes, very sensible and restrained. And in later years, he started playing the Euro Millions as well. But he had a policy on it.

You only buy a ticket for the Euro Millions on games when the jackpot is over 30 million. I mean, anything less than that. It's really not worth bothering with, is it?

[1 : 08] That policy amused my family enough that we agreed that once he died, the first one that was over 30 million, we would each go and buy a ticket. For the record, no, I didn't win the jackpot.

I'm not going to be jetting off around the country, around the world tomorrow. And I have no intention of buying any more tickets either. The thing is, though, that I was thinking as I did this, why people buy lottery tickets.

Because I presume for most people it isn't a kind of homage to their granddad. That's why most people buy them. I think maybe the major part of the motivation, whether people admit it to themselves or not, I think the major motivation is discontentment.

I mean, the motive surely isn't sound financial planning, is it? I guess some of it is just the thrill of the possibility. But even that kind of daydreaming about the possibilities, the what would I do with 30 million?

Well, is that not, at root, discontentment with our current situation? And as Paul comes around in these verses, as he comes to challenge the false teachers once more, what we discover here, we discover a comparison between the false teachers for whom godliness is a means to financial gain, between them and Paul and Timothy for whom godliness with contentment is great gain.

[2 : 39] So we reflect on the nature of true contentment in the Christian life. And as this section of the letter flows through, we have that introductory statement of the second half of verse 2, as Paul encourages Timothy to kind of return into a teaching and correcting mindset after the community concerns of what's gone before.

And then Paul comes and he attacks the false teachers in a number of ways, and that culminates at the end of verse 5 with the accusation that they think godliness is a means to financial gain.

And he elaborates on that basis on the place of money in the life of a true Christian as compared to where the false teachers have put it. So let's follow that flow through for a few minutes together now, and we'll see what it has to teach us, particularly about the nature of contentment in the Christian life.

So first we have this transitional statement that's part of verse 2, but which the NIV and most other translations put as the start of a new section here.

And so we began with it in our reading this evening. The main reason why it gets brought down into this new paragraph is in order to make it clear that it covers much more than just the first two verses of chapter 6.

[4 : 05] The start of the new section here begins with kind of a reflection on what to do with what has gone before. So these things that Timothy has to teach and to insist on, those are a reference back to the preceding, not to what's coming ahead.

And it seems that it's much more than just those first couple of verses. Certainly the reference seems to go back at least as far as chapter 5, verse 3, that whole section on family life in the church.

And quite probably goes back even further, right back to the start of chapter 2, that this verse kind of functions as a summary of what Timothy is to do with what has come before.

Timothy needs to go and teach these things. This is what he is to insist on in contrast to what the false teachers are doing.

So they serve as a contrast to everything that has gone before, everything that accords with true godliness that Timothy is to teach about. So verse 3 then begins this indictment of the false teachers.

[5 : 18] Verses 3 to 5 is originally one big long conditional sentence. So it begins with the if there at the start. But don't be fooled by that if. Just as in English, in Greek, the fact that it's phrased as a possibility that it's got the if there doesn't mean Paul doesn't think this is actually happening.

This isn't just hypothetical. In fact, the way it's phrased in the Greek means something like, if it is the case that, and it is, then...

So sometimes we translate this more as since rather than if, in order to convey that sense. This is the reality on the ground. Paul isn't preparing Timothy for a hypothetical future.

Paul is rather equipping him to respond to these very real, very current false teachers there in that church. And in verse 3, he gives four different descriptions of these people and the problems that they have.

The first problem, they are teaching otherwise. If anyone teaches otherwise. They're teaching something different to what Paul has just finished saying. They're preaching something other than what Paul and Timothy preach.

[6 : 31] They are not proclaiming the apostolic gospel. They're not proclaiming the same gospel as Jesus proclaimed, as the apostles proclaimed after him. And therefore, their teaching, secondly, is not healthy.

It is not sound. It does not produce a healthy life. It isn't popular today, is it, to say that there is absolute truth, that one perspective is true and others are not.

It isn't popular to keep saying the same thing day after day and week after week. A commentator by the name of Barclay, he says that Christian teachers need to dare to be boring.

He doesn't mean that I should be standing here presenting truth as dully as possible, but rather that we reject novelty.

We reject doing things just for the sake of being new and different. We're willing to preach the same gospel week after week rather than looking for something new.

[7 : 33] One kind of historical fact is that so often when false teaching, wrong understandings, a rejection of orthodoxy has come into the church, so often the way it comes in is by way of the academy, by way of universities, and that kind of higher education.

And I think part of that is because of an academic requirement to say something new. If you want to get a PhD or you want to get research funding and so on, then you have to have something different to say.

You have to have expanded the sum total of human knowledge in order to get a PhD. And so there's that incentive there to say something new, to explore the boundaries, to push beyond where people have gone before.

Now that's a good thing when it comes to physics and engineering. We want people to be pushing forwards and pushing on. But that is a very dangerous attitude when it gets brought into theology, isn't it?

We must be content with the same truths as have always been true. So Barclay challenges us in his commentary. Who among us can hear too many times of the love of God for sinners, or the need for repentance, or the grace and mercy of God, or the holiness and majesty of God, or the sovereignty of God?

[8 : 57] Only the one who perseveres in teaching biblical truth will save himself and his hearers. The problem with the false teachers is that they're teaching something different.

They are not preaching the same old gospel. And then the third condemnation, they are not centered on Christ. The sound instruction that they should be teaching is the instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And that is what they have rejected. Ultimately, this is the problem, isn't it? That they've lost their connection to Jesus. They've lost their connection to their head. They've lost that link, that union with Christ.

And so absolutely everything has just unraveled. Fourthly, theirs is not godly teaching. Remember these false teachers in Ephesus, they're claiming that they have the secret of true godliness. That they know how to show true piety. That they know the secrets of true religion. True godliness. But Paul does not allow that assertion to stand unchallenged.

[10:06] Their teaching does not agree with godly teaching. So that's all the if part of the sentence. And verse 4 then picks up the then part, if you like.

What follows on. If these things are happening, then the result will be, verse 4, you will be conceited and understand nothing. And so on.

And so this is what is happening in Ephesus. But it's also phrased in this way to show that this is always the consequence of false teaching. Teaching that has lost its connection to Jesus always ends up in this sort of intellectual bankruptcy.

They have completely failed to actually know truth. These two verses show that the result of false teaching is ungodly living.

In many ways, his primary attack on this false teaching seems to be not so much actually the content of the teaching, but rather its results. Maybe these teachers don't actually have a kind of carefully worked out theology that Paul can then come and critique.

[11:17] Maybe it's all a bit loose and changeable. But what he can do is he can look at how they're living. He can see the fruit of their philosophy. He can see the results of their teaching.

He can look at it and say that something, something must have gone wrong to end up there.

Something has gone awry. That cannot be right.

And so these false teachers are conceited and they understand nothing. This is a common assessment for Paul that those who abandon the gospel frequently do so claiming to be wise.

Do so claiming that they have new insight. They think they're in the know. They think they've got it figured out. And therefore they're self-important. They're conceited because they think they know better.

But the reality is they ultimately understand nothing. And again, the same is true today. That so often this false teaching comes from people who, on a kind of secular understanding, have great understanding, have some kind of insight, have the big brain.

[12:27] And yet that brain is directed into completely fruitless paths. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

They've lost their connection to Christ and so they lack true wisdom. And one feature of this lack of understanding that they have, one feature is that they like to engage in pointless debate.

They have an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words. Now there's a place for debate, isn't there?

Some controversies need to be thrashed out and worked through carefully and figured out what's going on. Some of my fondest memories of my four years studying theology, some of the best memories are of hours spent sitting in the common room with endless cups of coffee, discussing back and forth, trying to figure out what were we really learning in that lecture.

What is this passage saying? How do these two things fit together? There's great value in that kind of figuring things through in debate and discussion.

[13:33] But there's a big difference between that kind of discussion that tries to clarify and that starts from a standpoint of what is God's word saying.

There's a big difference between that and the sort of idle speculation that Paul is talking about here. They're kind of philosophizing and wondering what if.

What if Adam hadn't eaten the apple and only Eve had? Well, what does it matter? The historical facts are that's what happened. Friends, there is a great danger in playing devil's advocate because you might just manage it.

And for these false teachers, the list of the results of their behavior at the end of verse 4. Envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions, and constant friction.

It makes for sobering reading, doesn't it? Doctrine that does not result in unity. Doctrine that produces discord amongst believers.

[14 : 41] Doctrine that does not accord with godliness. Doctrine that does not produce holy lives is to be rejected. And that brings us to the closing critique of the false teachers.

That they think godliness is a means to financial gain there at the end of verse 5. As it's phrased here at the end of the section, I think we're meant to see it as their true motive for the whole thing. All of their false teaching, all of this strife and anguish that they've produced, all of it has been a means of lining their own pockets out of selfish greed. And it shouldn't surprise us that that is so, given verse 10.

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Now, the charge of using godliness as a means of gain was not an unusual accusation.

Indeed, Paul himself had to defend himself against precisely that same accusation. A common charge, indeed, because it wasn't unusual behavior. People did use apparent godliness as a means of financial gain.

[15 : 55] Think about Paul's visit to Ephesus back in Acts chapter 19. You remember Demetrius, the silversmith who made those shrines of the goddess Artemis? And as he comes to the authorities and tries to get Paul thrown out, he pretends godliness, doesn't he?

He says that the problem is that they're doing down Artemis. But the reality is that that is a thin veneer over the fact that he doesn't want to lose his income from selling those silver shrines. His motives are greed. And however they're going about it, these false teachers have that same motivation. They are profiting from their supposed godliness.

And to Paul, that is utterly abhorrent. And so, so Paul turns the tables on them. Paul says, well, you're right in some fashion.

Verse 6, godliness is great gain. But when Paul picks this up, there are two key changes. The first is perhaps subtle. The false teachers think godliness is a means to financial gain.

[17 : 03] Verse 5, but Paul says godliness is gain. Godliness is the end. Godliness is the result. Godliness is the objective, the purpose.

Godliness is not a means to an end. Godliness is not a byproduct. Godliness is not an intermediate step. No, godliness, holy living, is the end goal.

And secondly, Paul tweaks it by saying that true godliness is allied with contentment. When you think about contentment, I wonder what comes to mind for you.

One interesting thing is that the word Paul uses here could be more literally self-sufficiency.

Contentment, self-sufficiently, they're close ideas, aren't they?

Paul seems perhaps to be picking up an idea that actually comes from Stoic philosophy. So the great idea of Stoicism is that self-control and fortitude, that kind of inner strength, is a means of overcoming destructive emotions.

[18 : 15] And so the Stoic needs nothing outside of himself. He is truly an island. He stands battered by the winds, utterly indifferent to everything, because he has all he needs from within.

Well, that's the theory anyway. And Paul picks up that idea of sufficiency. He picks up that word, self-sufficiency. But surely he can't mean that the Christian needs nothing outside of himself, can he?

No, the self-sufficiency of the Christian is relative, isn't it? The self-sufficiency of the Christian is an independence of the world by means of dependence on God.

See, that Stoic self-sufficiency, it pretends to be absolute, doesn't it? But the contentment of the Christian is the contentment of faith, not the contentment of pride.

And we can bear in mind what Paul has to say about contentment in Philippians chapter 4. As he talks there about the variety of different circumstances, I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty.

[19 : 33] I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. What is that secret of contentment in any situation?

I can do all this through him who gives me strength. Through him who gives me strength. The Christian's contentment is based on dependence on Christ.

Your contentment in life rests on the foundation, not of the strength that you can summon up from within to be able to withstand whatever is thrown at you.

No, your contentment stands on the basis of the upholding hand of the Lord. We would have sung it tonight, but I already chose it for next Sunday morning a few weeks ago.

But that hymn, How Firm a Foundation. Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed, for I am thy God and will still give thee aid.

[20 : 30] I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand, upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand. Friends, we are content because we are upheld.

And Paul develops this idea in verses 7 and 8, the idea of what it is to be content, and he echoes an idea from Job chapter 1. 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. That is Job's contentment in the face of all of his crops and cattle, and his sons and daughters being taken away from him.

The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. May the name of the Lord be praised. Friends, we cannot take anything out of this world any more than we've brought anything into it.

Now, that doesn't mean that we can't enjoy the pleasures of this life. God has given us a beautiful earth to enjoy. God has surrounded us with people to enjoy relationship with, and good things that can give true pleasure, in which we can delight as they help us to give glory to God.

[21 : 46] God has given us a beautiful earth to enjoy. But this attitude does relativize things, doesn't it? Significantly so.

John Chrysostom, one of the fathers of the early church, in his sermon on this passage, he says, If we consider the vanity and the unprofitableness of wealth, that it cannot depart hence with us, that even here it forsakes us, and that whilst it remains, it inflicts upon us wounds that do depart this life with us.

If we see that there are riches in heaven compared to which the wealth of this world is more despicable than dung, if we consider that it is attended with numberless dangers, with pleasure that is temporary, pleasure mingled with sorrow, if we contemplate rightly the true riches of eternal life, we shall be able to despise worldly wealth.

If we remember that it profits nothing either to glory or health or any other thing, but on the contrary, drowns men in destruction and perdition.

These are serious words, aren't they? If we reflect truly on the true riches of eternal life, we shall be able to despise worldly wealth.

[23 : 12] Because the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people eager for money have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

Love of money is a great danger. Love of money is a root into all kinds of sin. That was true for these false teachers whose avarice had lured them into these controversies, into envy and strife, ultimately lured them into wandering away from the faith and being plunged into ruin and destruction.

Verse 9. Their love of money has lured them to destruction. And we see the selfsame thing played out time after time in the world around us, don't we?

We see the celebrities who have more than enough money and who choose to use that on a lifestyle that has nothing to do with the Bible and that so often ends up resulting in discontentment and despair.

And the rate of suicide is staggering. It puts a lie to the idea that money brings happiness. This is a very serious thing, to have one's heart set on money.

[24 : 34] And yes, Paul is starting from the standpoint of these false teachers with their profit motive there. But he looks more broadly to all who want to get rich. Verse 9.

It is a grave danger for many. And the society that we live in, the world around us so often, our own attitudes, we live in a time when a profit motive is regarded as normal, even virtuous.

If you ask someone, why did you do it that way? And the answer you get is, because we'll make more money that way. What's the end of the conversation, is it?

What more do you need to know? That's enough. What other questions are there to be asked? That is sufficient reason for doing something. And the trouble is that so often, so often people pay lip service to the theory that money can't buy you happiness.

We say we believe it, don't we? You ask 100 people on the street, does money buy you happiness? 99% will say no. Money can't buy you love.

[25 : 42] Money can't buy you true happiness. And yet, those same 99 people will be organizing their lives around the hope that it just might buy them happiness after all.

Most of us behave in a way that shows that we really do think that more money will make us more happy. And a fascinating aspect of that is that that belief that more money will make you more happy doesn't change based on your income.

Leaving aside the sort of abject poverty where you don't have food and clothing that Paul uses as a baseline in verse 8, if we leave aside that kind of poverty, people's attitude to money from poor through to rich is basically the same.

We all want more. The poor are not immune to the love of money, are they? It is perfectly possible to be absolutely consumed by the desire for something which you do not possess.

And so the very high levels of people in lower income brackets playing the lottery, that dream of having more, the dream of happiness that comes from wealth.

[26 : 56] But it doesn't go away when you have more money than any of us in this room ever will. Unless one of us does win the lottery, I suppose. Nelson Rockefeller, one of the richest men of his day, asked by a reporter, how much money do you need to live on comfortably?

And his reply, a little more than I get. One of the richest men of the time. What do you need? A little bit more. Always a little bit more.

It's so easy to be fascinated by money. So easy to think that it will solve all of our problems. To spend our time contemplating the things that we could buy if we had it.

The problems that we could solve. We have become consumed. And it is profoundly dangerous. Why would you want to be wealthy?

Having money doesn't do you any long-term good. Pursuing wealth, indeed possessing wealth, brings a raft of dangers along with it. That desire for money leads to other desires that end up in ruin and destruction.

[28 : 07] And these false teachers are exhibit A. May we not be the next exhibit ourselves. Let's pray.

Lord God, we thank you that you are sufficient for us.

We thank you that if we have Christ and nothing else, we have everything. Lord, would you impress that truth upon our hearts? Would you give us the kind of contentment that comes from a contemplation of the riches of eternal life that allows the cares of this world to fall away, that allows our consuming desire for more money to be set to one side because we know we have sufficient.

We know we have a God who provides for us. We know we are upheld by your hand. Would you give us that contentment we ask in the name of our precious Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.