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 1 Timothy 6:2b-10
 Fourteenth Message
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OUR RICHEST GAIN

SERIES: HOW TO RESTORE A CHURCH

In the concluding section to his first letter to Timothy, the apostle Paul addresses the issue of Christian discipleship and its impact on our material possessions. The global economy, coupled with man's age-old obsession to pillage the natural resources of the world, make Paul's final words even more relevant to us today than they were in the first century. I suspect that the ever-widening gap between rich and poor is the major cause behind much of the world's turmoil and terror. Even the violence that appears to be instigated by age-old religious hatred and strife, as in the Middle East, is more often than not economic exploitation operating under the guise of religion. Sadly, we in the West often hide behind our free market values of capitalism. Like Cain, we refuse to face our global responsibility. Chris Wright gives voice to this pressing concern in his book *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*:

Claims of ownership are privatized and regarded as absolute, unfettered by any sense of transcendent responsibility for others. "Am I my brother's keeper?" has become the selfish abdication of responsibility on a global scale. Resources are extracted from some countries over centuries in a way virtually tantamount to robbery. Then manufactured products, including foodstuffs, are sold back to the same countries at a subsidized cost that undercuts and eventually destroys local industry and agriculture. These grossly unfair trading arrangements are then compounded by the morally horrendous phenomenon of international debt, which contrary to all natural and historical justice, is said to be owed by the poor and plundered to the rich and rapacious. The problem is now global; but it is not new, for it was observed by the sage of Proverbs...

A poor man's field may produce abundant food,
 but injustice sweeps it away.¹

Paul's inspired words to Timothy give an excellent starting point to understand the addictive forces that drive materialism. The apostle follows with some practical steps we can take to overcome our drive to consume, by cultivating contentment and laying hold of what truly gives life.

I. The Lust for Gain (1 Tim 6:2b-5)

These are the things you are to teach and insist on. If anyone teaches otherwise and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, they are conceited and understand nothing. They have an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between people of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain. (1 Tim 6:2b-5 TNIV)

A. Discern the source of the teaching (6:3-4a)

Materialism, that insatiable quest to consume, is a powerful force that is difficult to combat. It is especially evil when it invades the church, which it had done in Ephesus through the false teachers. Throughout the letter, Paul has been identifying their morbid obsessions and speculative teachings. Now he concludes by exposing their underlying motivation of greed that is so destructive to relationships. By contrast, Timothy is to stay focused on "sound teaching" that fosters healthy congregations.

What makes teaching "sound"? The term "sound" (*bugiaino* - "healthy, sound") is a favorite word of Paul. Found eight times in his letters (1 Tim 1:10; 6:3; 2 Tim 1:13; 4:3; Titus 1:9, 13; 2:1, 2), it speaks of words that produce health. Like a good nutritionist who exhorts us to read the labels to make sure we know the nutritional value of the food we buy, as well as any

additives that might be harmful to our health, so Paul gives Timothy the acceptable standard for all "sound teaching." First, we can discern whether teaching is "sound" by its source, and secondly, by its long-term effects.

There is but one source and fount of all acceptable teaching: that is Jesus and his "words," which have been faithfully delivered to us by the apostles. We know God only by his revealed word, and the culmination of that word is Jesus Christ:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son...[who] is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being." (Heb 1:1-3)

This alone is "pure spiritual milk," which causes us to grow strong in our salvation (1 Pet 2:2). We must accept no substitutes that rely on additives to sweeten the taste (i.e. by removing difficult doctrines of Scripture, like God's judgment on sin), or that are overly processed, leeching out all the life-giving nutrients for the sake of marketability.

B. Observe the long-term effects of the teaching (6:4b-5)

The second way to discern if teaching is "sound" is by carefully observing its long-term effects. A number of years ago, I watched a program documenting the escalating problems of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease among the Pacific Islanders. Before the tourist industry invaded the islands, most islanders were the epitome of health. They lived off the natural, vitamin-enriched foods that were high in fiber and low in fat, found in the islands. But with the tourist explosion, fast food chains and imported foods high in fat and sugar began to dominate the landscape, transforming the diet of the population. The net effect is that today, "Obesity among Pacific Islanders is among the highest of the world, regardless of the island."² It doesn't take a genius to discern the cause of the problem. The same is true for our spiritual health.

Jesus' life-giving words produce visible fruit that results in "godliness." The reason for this is that they are divinely inspired. Like a surgeon's scalpel, they are able to pierce the thick walls of our defenses, penetrating deep into our hearts to expose, rebuke, encourage, and revitalize, so that we "may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:17). As the author of Hebrews writes,

The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Heb 4:12-13)

Paul does not mince words when he states that those who have the audacity to compromise the "source" and teach otherwise are "conceited and understand nothing." This is a clear warning to Timothy that he must not engage false teachers on an intellectual level, for their deviation is not intellectual but rather, as Townner observes, "a failure of the heart that involves willful rejection of God's pattern":

The term "controversies" describes discussions that have gone beyond the stage of a useful exchange of ideas. They result in "quarrels" (lit. "word battles") that serve only to draw out and fuel even baser sinful activity.³

The apostle lists five character traits that are clear indicators there is such evil at work in the midst of a congregation. The first is "envy" – an internal craving for what others possess. If left unchecked, envy can make you "sick"

with malicious thoughts towards others. When it takes root it gives birth to “strife,” the dissension that is fomented by competition; to “malicious talk,” using verbal abuse and personal attack to enforce one’s opinions; to “evil suspicions,” assuming the worst of others so that all trust is removed from relationships; and finally, “constant friction between people of corrupt mind,” which implies that no matter how hard you try to reason with them, the debate never ends. Like a dog that refuses to let go of a bone, so these teachers refuse to let go of controversy, because there is no teachability in their hearts.

C. Expose the underlying motive: MONEY!

After giving Timothy two benchmarks of “sound” teaching, Paul plays the trump card, exposing the underlying motive that drives all the controversy. The irony is that, while their corrupt teaching does not lead to “godliness,” these teachers definitely have an interest in just that, for they believe that “godliness is a means of financial gain.” What is it that is driving this factory of religion? In a word, it is MONEY. Beneath the layers of pomp and religion is greed. And it is the most vile kind of greed, for it makes its appeal to the most vulnerable and precious part of a person’s soul, his or her hunger for God.

This has been a perennial place of vulnerability for the church throughout the ages. But the apostles were consistently ruthless in their censure of it. In Samaria, a man named Simon, renowned for his magical powers, relished his fame and the control it gave him over people. When Peter and John came to Samaria to continue the work of the gospel which Philip had begun, many believed and were baptized, including Simon. But when this man sought to purchase the gift of the Holy Spirit, Peter challenged the sincerity of his commitment, exposing the evil motives of his heart:

Peter answered: “May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.” (Acts 8:20-23)

Religion was big business in Ephesus. Travelers flocked from all over the world to visit her temple, the Seventh Wonder of the World, and participate in its worship, which involved cultic prostitution. Like the sensual casinos and sex clubs of Las Vegas, the Temple of Artemis became the foundation stone of the thriving economy, serving as a depository for the wealth of the city. As Chris Wright explains, the problem is nothing short of demonic:

So evil has woven its way into every aspect of humanity’s economic life. Furthermore, the Old Testament hints at the extra dimension of the problem; namely, that the whole realm of the material, economic order has become prey to demonic forces, which both incite human sin and amplify and solidify its effects.⁴

D. Expose the modern heresy

Just as Paul is ruthless in exposing the materialistic greed of false teaching, so we must be on constant alert to guard our souls from the invasion of these tenacious demons whose aim is to get us to buy things we don’t need, with money we don’t have, in order to impress people we don’t know. Before making any purchase we should ask ourselves three questions: Do I need it? Will I use it? Have I asked God and waited sufficient time to discover if he wants to give it to me as a gift?

II. Everlasting Gain (1 Tim 6:6-8)

**But godliness with contentment is great gain.
For we brought nothing into the world,
and we can take nothing out of it.
But if we have food and clothing,
we will be content with that. (6:6-8)**

A. The true quest: Contentment (6:6)

But godliness with contentment is great gain.

Paul explains that if it is gain you desire, godliness gives it in spades! But it is not financial, it is spiritual. It transcends wealth and is not dependent

on circumstance; it is a gain that breathes “contentment.” Other translators highlight the varied nuances of verse 6: “No question of it. Godliness brings gain, great gain – for someone contented with what he has” (Quinn).⁵ “A devout life does bring wealth, but it’s the rich simplicity of being yourself before God” (The Message). “Contentment” was a virtue highly valued among the ancient philosophers. Paul builds on its value and gives it even greater significance through his relationship with Christ. The word *autarkeia* (“contentment”) expresses the favorite virtue of Stoic and Cynic philosophers, for whom it meant “self-sufficiency,” or the ability to rely on one’s own inner resources...[But for Paul] that genuine *autarkeia* is not self-sufficiency but Christ-sufficiency. For Paul, therefore, the word means “contentment,” the empowering Christ gives to live above both want and plenty.⁶

This is indeed the secret that Paul had learned to live by:

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 in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength. (Phil 4:12-13)

The one who taught me much about contentment was my wife Emily’s stepfather, Sid. A Jew of the tribe of Levi, Sid’s deepest roots were Romanian. Like most Jews, he was well acquainted with pain. His grandfather was a rabbi. His father, as he explained, was demented, and often withdrew in isolation from the family. When I first met Sid we stood at opposite ends of the universe. I was “religious,” he was agnostic. I came from a conservative home of wealth, he grew up as a blue-collar welder in Bakersfield and championed the cause of the poor. My family belonged to an exclusive golf club that did not extend memberships to Jews. Sid, the Jew, was a security guard at the country club. It always seemed odd to me to enter a gate of privilege through one father and have another father in the back room with the hired help. Yet, it was Sid who taught me all about giving. He was generous to a fault. He was always adopting troubled kids who found themselves in need. He would give a stranger the shirt off his back; even stray cats found a feast at his door. After Emily’s mother died, Sid made more and more trips to visit us. These short two-day excursions were framed by profound memories of meals. The routine was simple. Sid would arrive on a Friday, and immediately we went to the produce store. There he would methodically purchase a huge basket of vegetables to make his salad. On the way home we would stop at the local meat market, where he would select the finest fish or the thickest steak. He would never let me pay; it was a papa’s prerogative. Armed with groceries, he would take over our kitchen and spend hours crafting his salad. Then he and I would retire outdoors to the patio and sit in the shade of our trellis. There in the setting sun Sid would sip wine and tell me family stories filled with sentiment and emotion. Beneath that canopy I was beginning to learn what “contentment” felt like. Contentment is the ultimate human quest.

B. The best vantage point to assess needs (6:7)

**For we brought nothing into the world,
and we can take nothing out of it.**

Considering the infinite value of this “rare jewel,” the question is, How do we cultivate it? Paul insists that the essential first step is to enlarge our horizons so that we get the largest vantage point possible, that of life and death. Without this vantage point we become tyrannized by the present and are doomed to failure. As Knight states, “this section relates the true perspective that *godliness* gives to the material side of life. Birth and death provide the vantage points from which to appraise the material things of life and to determine what is really necessary.”⁷ This truth was foundational to the wisdom of Israel’s great sages. When Job was stricken by the sudden loss of his children and possessions, it was this truth that anchored his soul and gave him the ability to worship God:

At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and 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)**

Qohelet, the author of Ecclesiastes, warns us that without this perspective we become susceptible to greed and the grief that accompanies it:

**I have seen a grievous evil under the sun:
wealth hoarded to the harm of its owners,
or wealth lost through some misfortune,
so that when they have children
there is nothing left for them to inherit.
Everyone comes naked from their mother's womb,
and as everyone comes, so they depart.
They take nothing from their toil
that they can carry in their hands. (Ecc 5:13-15)**

C. Enjoying life's essentials (6:8)

**But if we have food and clothing,
we will be content with that.**

When we understand that life is a journey and that we are just pilgrims, we are able to accurately assess what is truly necessary to experience life. Similar to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 6:25-32), Paul's motto is, "if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that." What are the absolute necessities required to live a full life? The answer is simply "food, or sustenance," and "clothing." The term "clothing" (*skepasma*) means "covering, of anything that serves as a cover and hence as a protection. Chiefly clothing... but also *house*."⁸ As travelers in life, the less luggage we take, the more we will be able to experience "life" on the journey. By contrast, the more we accumulate, the more weighed down we become with the burdens of our possessions, maintaining and preserving them. And worse, we limit our capacity to enjoy God's free gifts found in the creation, in our relationships, and most importantly, in his presence.

To help us to stay focused on the simple life, Paul tells us to take a good hard look at the ultimate price one pays in the pursuit of wealth.

III. The End of the Game: What Have You Gained? (1 Tim 6:9-10)

Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For 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. (6:9-10)

A. The slippery slope of greed (6:9)

While you're visiting the graveyard, it is good to reflect on those who spent their entire lives amassing wealth. For all the passion, struggle, and cost, what did they really gain? In a word, the answer is, "death." They're dead! And the path they left in their wake is littered with abandoned children, betrayed spouses, and failed friendships. Now Paul says, "Let's go back and retrace their path step by step." His penetrating portrait of destruction is quite revealing. Greed is a very slippery slope. Just one step and we can plunge headlong down a cliff of no return. As the sage suggests, greed is insatiable:

**Those who love money never have enough;
those who love wealth are never satisfied with their income.
This too is meaningless. (Ecc 5:10-11)**

"Paul describes the dangers of this desire with a series of three terms, almost as a violent chain reaction."⁹ First comes the temptation, which then leads us into an inescapable trap of being lured into doing things we would have never dreamed possible. Then repeated acts of compromise not only dull the conscience, they also infect the soul with new desires that are more twisted and perverse, until all restraints are removed. Paul's image of being plunged under water suggests that we end up drowning in desire. This is normally the time when the attorney's papers arrive with either a lawsuit or a filing for divorce. But sadly, for many not even this seems able to curb the insatiable desire for wealth.

B. Their end is really the end! (6:10)

Then comes the famous proverb, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." Because the term "root" is placed first in the sentence for emphasis, translators debate whether to translate it with the article, as "*the* root of all evil," or, as the TNIV has it, "a root of all kinds of evil." Because of its emphatic place, Towner prefers "the bolder translation, 'the love of money is the root of every evil'"¹⁰:

It is the strongest sense that lends the argument the force required to drive home the point that avarice produces devastating results. To tame the translation is to soften the indictment of the greedy opponents."¹⁰

This does not mean that every sin is rooted in greed, but rather that greed can, in fact, produce every kind of sin. We should be terrified to think that if we give greed a foothold in our heart, it can in turn lead us to a place where no sin would be out of the question. How many of us were affected by the sudden surge of the dotcom success and the lure of instant Nirvana? I wasn't immune. I didn't want to be left behind, so I made investments with some of my savings in three different companies. They all failed.

If we are still not sobered, listen to those who are honest enough to tell you the real story: that beneath the fast-paced life and flurry of fame and glamour came the agony of loss of everything that was real – a son, a wife, a daughter, a community of friends, and God himself, who finally got tired of speaking and went out the back door. Yes, untold riches poured down, but attached to the wealth came pangs of inconsolable grief that impaled the greedy on crosses of their own making.

Where does it all end? The end is nothing short of complete moral and spiritual devastation, with no possibility of repentance because, like Judas, greed has completely turned their hearts away from the faith. Jesus asked, "What good is it for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?" (Mark 8:36).

As we consider the end of the greedy, and the generous gifts of grace given to the humble, the prayer of Agur son Jakeh comes to mind:

**Two things I ask of you, LORD;
do not refuse me before I die:
Keep falsehood and lies far from me;
give me neither poverty nor riches,
but give me only my daily bread.
Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you
and say, 'Who is the LORD?'
Or I may become poor and steal,
and so dishonor the name of my God. (Prov 30:7-9)**

To conclude, I've asked Dr. Steve Belton to share about his recent trip to Ethiopia, and how it taught him much about "the rare jewel of Christian contentment."

Dr. Steve Belton: I've just returned from a two and a half week medical mission trip to Ethiopia. It was a great time both as a team and with the Lord. We were a group of seven doctors and nurses from four different Bay Area churches. The trip was sponsored by the Ethiopian Initiative of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, which has a very strong ministry effort in Ethiopia. We went to the outskirts of Dese, Ethiopia, about 150 miles north of the capital. This is a predominantly Muslim area – 60% Muslim, 30% Orthodox, and about 10% Evangelical.

Our purpose in going was to perform health screening exams on 800 school age kids, having been invited by four different Evangelical churches in Dese. We didn't do any treatment, we didn't do surgery, and I didn't deliver any babies! Ours was only a health-screening project. The goal of the project was to begin a year long health education effort which would involve the neighbors of each of the churches. It was designed as an outreach to the non-Christian parts of the community. We partnered with our Ethiopian host churches for the project and left them with a self-sustaining, self-run education program that would require no additional Western funding or input. The education included both health education and spiritual informa-

tion. So in essence, our screening project kicked off a year long evangelism program for these partner churches.

So that's what we did. But what actually happened was so much more than that. What really happened is that we all had our hearts changed. We went to give medical care, but we ended up being the ones to get a heart transplant instead. We traveled to a faraway land – as far away from the Silicon Valley as is possible, culturally, geographically, economically, educationally – and found people who love Jesus! People who are spiritually rich. People who love their kids. And people who want to reach out to others. We found this small group of Christian believers – these four churches and their leadership – who had a deep faith and who lived their faith. Materially they have nothing. They live in simple adobe or stick houses; most have no running water or toilets; they have very little food; their clothes are the ones they have on their backs. Driving around the area is like being transported back in time a thousand years. Manual labor is all we saw. People walked everywhere; they rode donkeys or they traveled on carts, just like the biblical times. They have nothing. Yet they have a deep faith, and they have a smile on their faces.

We met a young man who was born with a large hole in the inside wall of his heart. This would have been corrected surgically here or anywhere in the West. But in Dese, in Ethiopia, in all of the horn of Africa, there is no cardiac surgery, so he lives with it. He lives with the limitations, the chest wall deformity from his enlarged heart, the knowledge that his life will be shortened, but he radiates a joy in his smile and countenance that draws people to him. Just as his physical heart has enlarged, so has his spiritual heart. He is touching lives, and he'll be remembered by many long after his time on earth is up.

We met a young pastor and his family. Waynu is an incredibly bright, energetic, fervent man, with a heart as big as the sun. He did the translation for the puppet shows and the gospel presentations. But he didn't just translate. He exuded the story, putting his whole body into the translation. Later, we said, "Waynu, you seem to have a real heart for evangelism." He responded, "That's why God made me!"

We saw the heart's desire of this group of young pastors in reaching out to their unsaved neighbors, Muslim and Orthodox. We wondered at first if this would work, but after the first clinic, the Lord gave us a glimpse that it would. At that meeting, the first parent to speak up was a Muslim woman – in full Muslim dress with her face covered, head veiled, the whole deal. After she spoke, the others gave her a great ovation. Here was a Muslim woman in a Christian church, addressing a group led by men, and being respected and well received by everyone. This response showed us that this model of health education evangelism was working.

After the last clinic we saw another evidence of the acceptance of this program among the community. The parents' meeting was scheduled for 5 o'clock, but about 4:30 it started to rain – a torrential downpour. We looked at each other and at the empty building, and said, "We might have to cancel the meeting. Nobody will come in the rain. They have to walk miles here and back in this downpour." But then, about 4:55, they started coming, streaming across the field, running in the rain, to hear about the health of their children. Such was their commitment, over 300 came that day to hear our report, to get involved in this health education effort.

One of our devotionals one morning was from Psalm 103:22: "Bless the Lord, all His works, in all places of His dominion. Bless the Lord, O my soul." The devotional included this quote by Henri Nouwen: "Gratitude is one of the most visible characteristics of the poor I have come to know. 'Thanks for your visit, your blessing, your prayer, your gifts, your presence.' The poor are grateful for life and they celebrate life constantly. A visit, a reunion, a simple meeting are always like little celebrations. All of life is a gift, a gift to be celebrated, a gift to be shared. The poor are a Eucharistic people, people who know to say thanks to God, to life, to each other. For them all of life is a long fiesta with God."

We asked ourselves: Are we really the rich ones, or are they? I wrote a poem about my experience with the living God in Dese.

What love is this, Lord,
I see so pure
Streaming across a rain soaked field
Filled with children and parents
Giggling, running
Even amidst our own excitement
"They're coming! Look, they're coming!"

What love is this, Lord,
Holy and pure
In each mother's plaintive cry
"My child. Please, here, my beloved child."

Yes, what love is this, Lord,
You've shown us true
In Dese, your Dese,
With a brother's touch upon
Neighbor for nothing but
To worship the King.

Love, Lord, love
Is what we've met this day
In heart and song
And smile and hug.
In touch and tears,
By faith we cry to you
Abba, Father's love.

We went to give, yet we received
We went to teach, yet we learned
We went to love, yet we were loved.
We went to show Jesus, yet we saw Him in a new way.

Thank you – and Amen!

1 Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 152-153.

2 Delores C. S. James, "Diet of Pacific Islanders," <http://www.faqs.org/nutrition/Ome-Pop/Pacific-Islanders-Diet-of.html>.

3 Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 393, 395.

4 Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 153.

5 Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (ECC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 501.

6 Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (NIBCNT; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2005), 143.

7 George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles, A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 253.

8 (BAGD 1973, 761).

9 Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 402.

10 Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 404.