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1 Timothy 6:17-19

Thirteenth Message

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RESCUING THE RICH

SERIES: HOW TO RESTORE A CHURCH

In this final chapter of his first letter to Timothy, the apostle Paul warns Timothy about certain forces that Satan uses to destroy churches. In our last study Paul addressed the matter of false teachers: men of deviant character who sought to infiltrate the church with their false doctrine and sow devilish seeds of discontent among the congregation. The evidence that these seeds had germinated became apparent when people began to assume that godliness was a means of gain. Greed began to motivate people to ministry, doing great damage to their souls in the process.

The church in Ephesus, a very wealthy city, was a prime target for such an attack. The greed of idolatry had financed the building of the Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The temple not only made Ephesus the center of world tourism, but a chief center of investment banking, as temples also served as banks for the deposit of monies in those days. Paul's second admonition here in this chapter is that Timothy do everything in his power to prevent this desire to become rich from creeping into the church. This, of course, placed Timothy in somewhat of a dilemma: What about those who already were rich? It was a great tribute to the church in Ephesus that a number of the rich had come to Christ. The church might very well have been meeting in their homes of these rich Christians. The fact that they were in the church, however, did not absolve them from the need to be warned about the dangers of riches.

The three verses that we will look at today form a single sentence built around the word "riches." Here Paul uses this word four times in four different grammatical forms. First, it is used of "the rich," who form the subject; secondly, it is used as an object of pursuit: "uncertain riches"; third, it is used as an adverb describing God who gives "richly"; and finally it is used as a verb: "to be rich" (in good works). In these words, Timothy will learn how to rescue the rich from the snare of riches, that they might find a richer life and dispense true riches.

Paul begins with a reminder to the rich.

I. Remind them of the dangers of riches (6:17-19)

Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed. (NASB)

Perhaps you remember the opening scene from the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, where the poverty-stricken Tevya prays, "Lord, it's no shame to be poor, but it's no great honor, either. Would it spoil some vast eternal plan if I had a small fortune?" Then he goes on to sing the song we all know so well, "If I Were A Rich Man." Paul

would respond, "Yes! It would spoil some vast eternal plan." Why? Because there is a tremendous cost to riches.

The apostle lists five dangers that riches lead to. First, riches tend to produce arrogance. He writes, "Command those who are rich... not to be conceited."

Second, riches can be deceptive. Rich people tend to rely on their riches for their future hope and security. But riches are very uncertain; they cannot guarantee an eternal return.

Third, riches can tempt people to isolate themselves from being personally involved in the lives of others, so Paul has to remind the rich to be rich in good works.

Fourth, the more people become rich, the more they tend toward hoarding and selfishness. Oftentimes the poor are more generous than the rich as they give freely out of their poverty.

And fifth, riches bring entanglements, not only in the acquiring of them, but in managing and protecting them. Rich people can miss out on what is truly valuable, and life becomes artificial.

I know of a family that fell victim to the dangerous cost of riches. They began with very humble beginnings. The mother was orphaned by the time she was 9 years old and she was adopted into an abusive home. Some years later she fled this home to marry a man who was very committed to his career. Following World War II, they bought a little home and there they raised three daughters. There was a simplicity about their lives in those days. They found joy in the simple things. They enjoyed their cocker spaniel, horseback riding, and music (the mother was a concert cellist). Both husband and wife were tenacious workers, determined that their children would not have to endure the things they endured. The husband worked hard to make ends meet, so much so that they didn't take a vacation for the first 20 years of their marriage. They saved enough to buy a bigger home, with a swimming pool. Ten years later they bought an even bigger home. Now, everyone had their own bedrooms and their own cars. They had a membership in an exclusive country club, shopped in the best stores in Beverly Hills, and were able to travel all over the world. They offered their girls the best opportunities for education and travel.

But, with the acquisition of wealth, they lost the closeness and simplicity they once enjoyed. Each member of the family became more independent and isolated. They never took family vacations together (their last one was in 1957, when their youngest child was 6). Soon they began to take separate vacations. Then the husband and wife began to take separate vacations. The children were never encouraged to cultivate friendships with the extended family of aunts and uncles and cousins. In their isolation the daughters began to experience difficulties. One became pregnant at 15, and almost died when she had an abortion. The mother had a nervous breakdown. Another daughter got married at 22 but, tragically, the marriage lasted only 16 days; then she had a nervous breakdown. Feeling

unloved, the other daughter began to experiment with drugs. She fled the home to marry a writer, divorced him, and went back to live at home. She married again, but her marriage lasted only 16 days. Her husband was an alcoholic, and he died at the age of 38. Now the couple are in their old age, living in the midst of their wealth. They have scarcely any friendships. Two of their girls remain unmarried and are still financially dependent on their parents. In accumulating his wealth, the father lost much of it in unwise investments. The hope that riches once promised was a vain hope that failed to deliver. Wealth was a deceitful idol. Instead of fulfilling their dreams in life, riches led them down a dead-end street named loneliness.

The family I am speaking of was my own.

Riches, warns the apostle, can bring arrogance, hopelessness, loneliness, selfishness, and emptiness.

Yet God in his grace loves to pull off rescue operations for the rich. So in these three verses Paul tells Timothy how to rescue the rich from these dangers and make them useful for the Kingdom of God. Each verse, as we will see, has an antidote.

I. Rebuke their false security (6:17)

Instruct those who are *rich* in this present world not to be conceited nor to fix their hope on the *uncertainty of riches*, but on God, who *richly* supplies us with all things to enjoy.

(a) Rebuke their arrogance

It is easy for the rich to become “conceited”—to think, or cherish, exalted thoughts about themselves. The OT law warns about this. Moses admonished the Israelites concerning the rich land they would be given as a gift from God,

“Beware lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; lest, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them...then your heart becomes proud, and you forget the Lord your God...and you say in your heart, ‘My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth.’” (Deut 8:11-12, 14, 17)

Therein lies the dangers of riches. The proverb says, “Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him” (Prov 26:12). And in Proverbs, of course, as we know, there is no hope for a fool.

Righteous men throughout Scripture were wary of riches. Agur, the son of Jakeh, had quite a different prayer to God than Tevya:

**Two things I asked of Thee,
Do not refuse me before I die:
Keep deception and lies far from me,
Give me neither poverty nor riches;
Feed me with the food that is my portion,
Lest I be full and deny Thee and say, “Who is the Lord?”
Or lest I be in want and steal,
And profane the name of My God. (Prov 30:7-9)**

Rebuke the arrogance of the rich, says Paul.

There is a second thing.

(b) Redirect their hope

Admonish the rich, he says, “not to fix their hope on uncertain riches.” Most people today would cry, “I have a future,” if they won the California lottery, but the proverb says,

The wealth of the rich is their fortified city.

They imagine it an unscalable wall. (Prov 18:21; 23:4-5)

Some years ago I stood in front of the palace of the Romanian dictator Ceaucescu. This man robbed his country to build this palace, which is five times bigger than the Palace of Versailles. Then my friend Arthur Halliday opened up the Old Testament and read,

“Though you build your houses of well hewn stone,

Yet you shall not live in them...

because you turn aside the poor at the gate.” (Amos 5:11-12)

Not very long afterwards, on Christmas Day, that anti-Christ, met Christ, his Judge, and he never lived in his house of well hewn stone.

Prophets like Amos tried to warn the rulers that there was coming a new world order—the one that Jesus inaugurated with his death and resurrection. This world of flesh is an illusion. Thus Daniel could warn Nebuchadnezzar that his world was an illusion, while the prophet himself was having dreams of a coming Messiah who would create this new world order.

Paul warns the rich of this present age of the same thing. Thus he tells them to fix their hope on God who richly supplies things for our enjoyment. Life is a gift, says the apostle.

When I studied in Italy as a college student, I went to Greece for 16 days once on a field trip. My friends and I chose the island of Mykonos for our adventure. In Athens we bought old army backpacks and filled them with provisions—Spam and canned peas and other “heavy” luxuries to provide for us in what we thought would be a wilderness experience. We landed on Mykonos and hiked three miles to the other side of the island, laboring with our heavy backpacks all the way in the summer heat. When we got to our destination, we were amazed to find all our friends sitting outside a harbor restaurant and eating souvlakia (grilled lamb and vegetables on a skewer), for about 15 cents apiece. So much for our canned Spam! But this is how many of us live life, isn't it? We bring along our canned Spam, trusting that to sustain us, when God has already gone before us and prepared a party.

This is the theology of the Bible from the Garden of Eden onwards. Adam's first day on the earth was not a work day, it was a sabbath, a day for a party. God took him on a tour of the garden and gave him everything as a gift to enjoy. As the OT unfolds, man was asleep during every covenant that God made with him. Everything was a gift from God. The first public appearance of Jesus was at a wedding where he turned water into wine—not just any wine, but the best. I calculate that he probably gave that couple a \$4,000 gift. What was he declaring by this? He was saying that he was not on earth to take but to give life on a higher level than it had ever been experienced before. And he even wants sinners to enjoy this party; that is why we have the story of the prodigal son. The Father is extremely generous, and anxious to spend his joy on sinners. But most people won't take life as a gift, and this grieves the Father's heart. How true are the words of Henry David Thoreau, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”

This is why Paul tells Timothy to encourage the rich to redirect their hope from riches to the God who richly gives us all things to enjoy.

This brings us to the apostle's second antidote for the rich.

III. Retrain them in their investments (6:18)

Instruct them to do good, to be *rich* in good works, to be generous and ready to share...

(a) Invest your time in people

The rich make rationalizations for their pursuit of money. They say they are making money so that they can leave something to their family, or to the church, whomever. But Paul says that by itself, money is a very poor gift. What is money compared to the best gift you can give, which is yourself and your time? What is the good of fathers working until they die so that they can leave their children houses, furniture and jewelry, but no memories? Life itself is the sweetest gift of all. The best investment I have made all year is a badminton set. I have spent many happy evenings lately playing badminton with my middle daughter.

This text may suggest that the best ministries are not capital-intensive, but labor-intensive. You remember the great fire that swept the hills of Oakland last year. How would you feel if the insurance company that insured your home built you a brand new, completely decorated home; or if, by comparison, you were an Amish family whose home burned down, and in the morning you saw scores of workers coming to rebuild your home. Then the men worked all day while the women cooked wonderful meals, and you saw your home rebuilt in a day. The home that was built by the insurance company had no memories, but the home built by your friends was full of memories. Which would you prefer? The capital-intensive method or the labor-intensive method? When it comes to good works, the rich are poor. Paul tells Timothy to help the rich with the joy of getting down and dirty, as we say, to enjoy the simplicity of life.

In this respect, I'm very impressed with former President Jimmy Carter. He is not going around using his role as an ex-President to enrich himself. Instead he is using his title to help launch Habitat for Humanity, a ministry of building homes for the poor. He and his wife even spend their vacations building homes, working alongside the poor. His next project is working with sexually abused girls in Atlanta. As a former governor of the state of Georgia, he feels he has got to play a part in solving some of these extremely difficult problems.

(b) Invest your money in people

Next, says Paul, "Be generous, ready to share" Someone asked me recently about tithing. He said that he saw nothing of this in the New Testament, so I shared with him the theology of tithing from the OT. The first gift in the Bible was the gift of Abel, who gave to God the first and the best of everything he possessed. He was saying to God, in effect, that everything was his to begin with, and his gift was a symbol of that. Cain, on the other hand, gave "some" of his possessions, not the firstfruits, to God. Cain determined to take care of his own needs first, then he gave God what amounted to a tip. But this was a stench in God's nostrils. In Israel, the tithe (the first tenth) symbolized that everything belonged to God. With the coming of Jesus, however, no longer is there any mention of the 10 per cent. It was because Jesus had created a whole new world order. He lived in poverty and gave everything to God, and though poor he made many rich.

Nature teaches this too. Last fall, I planted six rose bushes in my yard. I like to go out in the morning and pick a rose and place it my Emily's plate before I make breakfast. A couple of weeks ago, when one of my daughters suffered a severe disappointment, I picked six roses and placed them on her bed with a note saying, "Dad loves

you." Next evening a woman who lives near us came to our home in tears over something she was going through. I went out and picked every last rose on my rose bushes and gave them to her. I had no difficulty giving every last rose away. But two days later I went out and discovered that 44 new rose buds had sprung up! It is the same with this new world order that Jesus has inaugurated. Give, and be generous, because you can't out-give God. The more "roses" you harvest for the benefit of others the more life you receive.

Remind the rich of the dangers of their riches, says Paul. Rebuke them of their pride, and retrain them in their investments so that they will begin to invest themselves in people.

What will be the result if the rich begin to follow these steps?

IV. Secure for them everlasting returns (6:19)

storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.

(a) Secure them a future

There are two questions you need to ask whenever you want to make an investment: 1) what is its present yield? and 2) what is the ultimate future return? Usually, you have to play one against the other. A good future return usually demands sacrificing present yield. Paul says the rich sacrifice their life for future return, but the tragedy is that in so doing they not only lose out in the present, they have no future either.

Solomon, the fabulously wealthy king of Israel, would agree. Here is what he wrote in the book of Ecclesiastes:

There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun: riches being guarded by their owner to his hurt. When those riches were lost through a bad investment and he had fathered a son, then there was nothing to support him. As he had come naked from his mother's womb, so will he return as he came. He will take nothing from the fruit of his labor that he can carry in his hand. And this also is a grievous evil—exactly as a man is born, thus will he die. So, what is the advantage to him who toils for the wind? Throughout his life he also eats in darkness with great vexation, sickness and anger. (Ecc 5:13-17)

When you invest your time and money in the kingdom of God, however, you get both—a secure future and a present yield. And there no threat to your investment, so you can sleep at night.

Ecc 5:12 says,

The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, But the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep.

And the proverb says,

A man's riches may ransom his life, But a poor man hears no threat. (Prov 13:18)

The thief may enter a poor man's home, but what is he going to steal? When one of our pastors, Ron Ritchie, first moved to Half Moon Bay to settle in their little beach house, a policeman came knocking on their door one morning. He told Ron that he had come to mark all the valuables in the home in case they were ever stolen. Ron, in his typically humorous fashion, called out to Anne Marie, "Get the dog!" There was a family that could sleep at night! They were investing in people, not in possessions.

What Paul really desires for the rich is that they might find true riches, and with them, life itself.

(b) Grant them a joyous present return

The great danger the wealthy face is that their lives will become utterly artificial. The apostle, however, wants to teach them to live at a higher level.

And what does this higher of level of life look like? Note the example of Jesus in the wilderness. He was tempted by the devil to make bread from stones. If indeed he was the new Moses, and if he was going to feed Israel, then he should be able to do that, insinuated the devil. The temptation was not to use his Messiahship to make food, but rather to feed himself through his office. But Jesus refused. He came to feed others, trusting that God would feed him. At the close of that incident in the wilderness, angels came to Jesus and fed him a meal of heavenly food.

The next scene where this theme occurs is in John 4, when Jesus taught the disciples about this heavenly food. They were hungry, and the Lord sent them into the city to buy food. While he was sitting by the well of Samaria, waiting for them to return, he was thirsty and longed for a drink of water. But, rather than taking a drink, he imparted a drink to an abused woman who came by to draw water, and she found a well of eternal life in her soul. She returned to her village and told all the men. Later, when the disciples returned with the food they had bought, Jesus told them, "I have food you know nothing about." And looking on the horizon, he pointed out the harvest of souls from the village coming to meet him, having heard the woman's testimony about him. Later these people fed all of the disciples a meal. Where would you rather eat? At the local hot dog stand, or at the home of people who prepare a meal with tears of appreciation for you?

I learned much in this respect in Romania. When I was getting ready to depart that country after my first visit there, all of our host families came bearing gifts for us (at 5 a.m., no less!). Although these dear people were living in poverty, they brought dolls for each of my daughters—and each doll cost the equivalent of a week's wages. If I could afford to buy the most beautiful doll in the world, from the most expensive store, nothing could match those gifts that were made to me that day. This is eternal life. If we will take hold of this life now, our hearts will become enlarged so that we will appreciate things more and more. Our souls will become content, and we will find ourselves dealing less and less with everything that is artificial. Those whom you have loved in this life will welcome you in heaven, and no one will ever take those riches away from you.

If the rich do not trust in their riches, but in God who richly gives all things, and if they become rich in good deeds by investing in people, they will secure a rich future.

So Christians will not pray the prayer of Tevya: "Would it spoil some vast eternal plan?/If I were a wealthy man?" Neither will we pray the prayer of Agur, who prayed that he be neither rich nor poor. We learn, with Jesus, that we can live in poverty and yet be spiritually rich, with a greater heart for God than we could ever have if we were rich in the things of this world. Does it not amaze you, as it does me, that God has rescued us from our riches so that we might have true riches? We could have gone on in our wealth—arrogant, headstrong, entangled, lonely, empty—and for us the proverb would have rang true that "it is harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle." But, because all things are possible with God, he saved us, even the rich. To me this is the hallmark of his grace—that he rescued a rich man like me and trusted me with true riches.

I would like to close by reading a poem of appreciation to God for rescuing me from the uncertainty of riches.

Who am I, O Lord?
It seems contrary to your ways.
You take the poor and the meek,
And place them to sit at nobles' feet.

But I was among the privileged, the only son
Of a surgeon, the apple of his eye.
Handed wealth, and station;
Kept in a cocoon, protected by Thee.

Emerging from timidity, I knew only success.
Academics, athletics, relationships,
All mine.
What is this, that You would choose me?

Even Thy call to the cross, was joy not pain.
Not from darkness, but in thanksgiving for the light,
Did I call out to Thee.
Is it written this way in Thy Book?

May we all walk worthy of such grace, building and restoring his church in love. Amen.

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