

There was land for sale, and Vasili Andreevich wanted to buy it. In fact, he wanted to arrive early enough to buy the property before it went up for auction. So he loaded up his sledge and foolishly ventured out into the darkness of a long Russian winter's night. The wind was harsh, the snow was heavy, and eventually Andreevich lost his way. When his sledge got stuck in a snowdrift, Vasili had to spend the night trying to survive a raging blizzard. "He lay and thought: thought.....of the one thing that constituted the sole aim, meaning, pleasure, and pride of life - of how much money he had made and might still make, of how much other people he knew had made and possessed.....and how he.....might still make much more". But Vasili's grandiose plans came to nothing. In the morning, when the villagers dug his sledge out of the snow, they found the man frozen stiff. The story of Vasili Andreevich, which was told by Leo Tolstoy, shows how "people who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction" (v.9).

#### 1. The Anatomy of Error and Unbelief (vv.3-5)

There were false teachers in the church at Ephesus who were in danger of meeting the same unhappy end, and for the same reasons: they were in love with money. Before mentioning their greed, however, the apostle Paul reminds Timothy of their basic theological error: "If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching" (v.3). The words of Christ and his teaching are the measure of truth and error in religion and ethics. Whatever seriously departs from his standards of truth and right is fatally flawed and so heresy or false teaching. His instruction is "sound" (literally "healthy") because it alone has the power to restore genuine moral and spiritual health to those who accept it into their lives - who repent and believe the good news (Mark 1:15). When Paul adds "and to godly teaching" he may be thinking of the later apostolic teaching (such as in his own writings) which derives from that of Jesus and accords with it. Together the recorded teachings of Jesus in the Gospels and those of his apostles in the remainder of the New Testament form the final deposit of God-given truth. Its hallmark is that it produces godliness in the heart and life (2 Timothy 3:16). By contrast the false systems promise personal fulfilment and happiness but never godliness.

The difference between true religion and false religion always comes down to Jesus Christ - who he is and what he has done. The first question to ask of any cult or any religion is, "What does it teach about Jesus Christ?" Most cults - Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses would be good examples - are wrong about the person of Jesus Christ. They deny his deity, and so reduce him to the status of a mere human being. What other world religions deny, primarily, is the work of Jesus Christ. They do not accept his sacrifice for sin or his bodily resurrection. But true religion demands a true understanding of Jesus Christ, both in his person and in his work. This understanding comes only through the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

Why does the false teacher fall into such error and unbelief? Well, by his reaction to Christ's truth, the false teacher shows that "he is conceited and understands nothing" (v. 4). The real cause of the false teacher's reaction to godly teaching is that he is puffed up with pride. Heresy is not so much an intellectual problem rooted in the mind as a moral one rooted in the heart. Pride is an inborn prejudice against the truth and has a blinding effect on the person's spiritual powers. Under the claim to superior knowledge the heretical teacher is actually taken captive by a subtle form of ignorance. And "he has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words" (v.4). Such an individual is spiritually sick - and the symptoms are an argumentative and critical spirit. If these disputes were about the truth and in defence of it they might be justified, since as believers we are told to contend earnestly for the faith (Jude 3). But such a person loves controversy for its own sake. He regards it as a mark of someone who is truly religious. But this type of controversy is normally based on ignorance and leads nowhere. Such controversial arguments "result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions" (v.4). The

destructive and divisive results of these controversies point to the evil root from which they arise. Those results are the total breakdown of trust and respect in the church community. Conflict, hostility and mutual vilification become an accepted way of life. The evil root of pride produces a bitter harvest of broken relationships. Indeed there is no end to the conflict generated by such contentious attitudes.

## 2. Content with Christ (vv.5-10)

It is a measure of how far such false teachers may depart from the true intention of the gospel that they are able, without shame, to measure godliness by its monetary rewards. They thought that “godliness is a means to financial gain” (v.5). In other words, they were in the ministry for the money. How were these false teachers turning a profit? Well, remember that religion was big business in Ephesus, the home of the goddess Diana. So the false teachers may have tried to market Christianity. More likely, they were teaching an early version of the health-and-wealth (prosperity) gospel. They were not interested in religion for its own sake. Instead, they taught that good morals were the pathway to financial security. They had turned their training and position as religious teachers into a lucrative business.

Greed has always been a great danger for the church. This was true in the Middle Ages, when the sale of indulgences made salvation something that only money could buy, but it is equally true today - with catalogues full of religious books and merchandise and Christian television programs spending a great deal of time appealing for money. The world can hardly be blamed if it concludes that Christianity is mainly about money. The scandals of the church often involve money. This is why Paul himself was so careful in his use of money. He refused to “peddle the word of God for profit”, as he put it in his first letter to the Corinthians. Paul understood that the Holy Spirit’s work does not require money.

Godliness is not the means to financial gain. No, godliness is the gain. Paul says in v.6 that “godliness with contentment is great gain”. By “godliness” we mean the knowledge of Jesus Christ in the mind and the heart that is worked out through the Christian life. Such godliness is not merely gain, it is great gain. The great gain of knowing Christ is not only for this life, but it is also for the life to come. Faith in Jesus Christ is the ultimate investment because it yields eternal life.

Godliness is great gain, provided that we learn how to be content with our present circumstances. The word “contentment” was often used in Greek philosophy to describe a man who had all his resources within himself. He was completely self-sufficient. When Paul talks about contentment, however, he means something slightly different. A Christian is not self-sufficient, but Christ-sufficient. Anyone who has Jesus Christ has everything he or she needs. The trouble is that we are not always content. Some of our discontent comes from the natural frustration of living in a fallen world - we are waiting for Jesus to make everything new. But a good deal of our discontent also comes from not being satisfied with Jesus himself. We want something more or something else. Discontent robs every other experience of its God-given joy.

The only way to make great gains is through “godliness with contentment”. There are 3 reasons for this. The first is that “you can’t take it with you”. Here is the apostle Paul’s version of that famous expression: “For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it” (v.7). We see this in the case of our first parents. Adam and Eve came into the world with nothing, and they left the world with nothing. “For dust you are and to dust you will return”, God said to Adam (Genesis 3:19). The same was true of Job, the wealthiest man in the ancient world. He had fabulous possessions, riches beyond compare, but they were all taken away. In rapid succession he lost his oxen, his donkeys, his sheep, his camels, his servants, his children.....everything. When it happened, Job “fell to the ground in worship and said: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and

naked I will depart” (Job 1:20-21). We see it in the Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21).

The second reason to be content with what you have is that what you have is enough (probably more than enough). If you come into the world with nothing, and leave with nothing, then what do you need in the meantime? Not much: “But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that” (v.8). It may seem surprising that the Bible fails to mention shelter along with food and clothing. Yet the word for clothing means “covering”, and thus also refers to shelter. Every Christian ought to be content with the basic necessities of life. The Westminster Shorter Catechism answer to Question 104 (what do we pray for in the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer - “give us this day our daily bread”) puts it well when it speaks of “a competent portion of the good things of this life”. We do not need luxuries, only necessities. If God provides more than we need, there is nothing wrong with that. In fact, there are instructions for the rich towards the end of this chapter (vv.17-19) commanding them to be “generous and willing to share” (v. 18). One good set of guidelines for sharing comes from the Evangelical Commitment to Simple Lifestyle produced by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization in 1980: “We resolve to renounce waste and oppose extravagance in personal living, clothing and housing, travel and church buildings. We also accept the distinction between necessities and luxuries, creative hobbies and empty status symbols, modesty and vanity, occasional celebrations and normal routine, and between the service of God and slavery to fashion. Where to draw the line requires conscientious thought and decision by us, together with members of our family”.

Discontent always wants something more or something else. It always thinks about what it lacks. But even when you get what you think you want - a new home, a better job, new clothes, a new phone, or whatever - you soon find that you are discontent all over again. Why? Because discontent is rooted in the heart. Discontent comes from what a man or woman is, not from what he or she doesn’t have. This also explains why contentment is completely unrelated to how many possessions a person has. In fact, often the more possessions a person has, the more empty life becomes. A German philosopher observed that, “Gold is like sea water - the more one drinks of it, the thirstier one becomes”. But Christianity has more to offer and what it offers satisfies. What it offers is Jesus Christ, the true treasure of the soul. What the human heart really craves is not gold, but God. Anyone who comes to God through Jesus Christ finds meaning, purpose, joy and even satisfaction with life. Hymn 507, “O Christ, in You My Soul Has Found”, which we will sing at the end of the service this morning sums it up so well, doesn’t it?

One man who discovered that Jesus Christ was all he really needed was the apostle Paul. Paul shared his secret to the Christians in Philippi: “..... I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. 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 everything through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:11-13). The secret of contentment is to be satisfied with Jesus Christ who dwells in the Christian through the Holy Spirit.

The third and last reason to be content with what God has given you is that discontent leads to disaster. Paul concludes this section: “People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men 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” (vv. 9-10). One thing leads to another. First, there is the desire to get rich, which seems harmless enough. Then there is some temptation to get rich by immoral means. But that is actually a snare of the devil which leads to more and more evil desires. Eventually the greedy man plunges into ruin - that is moral failure in this present life - and finally destruction - that is spiritual death in the life to come.

(1 Timothy 6:3-10; Luke 12:13-21; 2 Kings 5:15-27)

Notice that it is not people who are rich who fall into this trap, but people who want to be richer than they already are. It is the love of money that causes the trouble. Money itself is alright - it can be used for many good and noble purposes. Greed is not rooted in money but in the fallen sinful nature of the human heart. As John Stott observes this passage from 1 Timothy is "not for poverty against wealth, but for contentment against covetousness".

Notice as well that money is not the root of all evil, which is the way this verse appears in the King James version. Strictly speaking, there are many evils in the world that do not come from greed. Some come from the lust for power, or the desire for sex, or the longing for fame. If anything, pride is the root of all evil. But greed remains one radical source of evil - it is the kind of sin that leads to many other sins. As Paul says, "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (v.10a). Almost wistfully, Paul remembers what happened to some of the money-lovers he knew. They wandered from the Christian faith, of course. They gave up faith in Christ as the central desire and love of their life. They had to, because the love of God and the love of money are incompatible. Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters. You cannot serve God and money" (Matthew 6:24). Either you love God and use money, or you love money and use God to get it. Paul no doubt often witnessed this dilemma in the early church, maybe even in Ephesus. Later, he would lament the loss of Demas, who deserted him because he loved this world (2 Timothy 4:10). He would also warn that in the terrible times of the last days, people will be "lovers of money" (2 Timothy 3:2). Nor is it hard to come up with examples from the Old Testament. Consider Gehazi who we read about in 2 Kings 5:15-27. He was unhappy that Elisha was giving God's grace away free to Naaman the Syrian. By the time he was finished, Gehazi had told lots of lies in order to "get something" from Naaman. But God witnessed his deception and theft, and Gehazi was punished with leprosy as a result. The wounds caused by greed are self-inflicted. The Bible means what it says: The love of money leads to no end of evil, and ultimately to eternal death.

The frightening thing, of course, is that so many of us have money-loving hearts. Our greed must be rooted out. The only thing to do is to repent of every covetous desire and ask God to fill us with love for Christ, which is what Vasili Andreevich did. As Vasili struggled vainly to keep himself warm during the last night of his life, he had what can only be described as a conversion experience. He heard the call of God, responded in faith and repented of his greed. This is the way Tolstoy described his dying moments: "And again he heard the voice of one who had called him before. "I'm coming! Coming!" he responded gladly, and his whole being was filled with joyful emotion. He felt himself free and that nothing could hold him back any longer". What Vasili Andreevich heard was the voice of God, calling him home. What he repented of was his greedy, money-loving heart. And what he discovered in the life beyond this world is the truth of what Paul said to Timothy: "Godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Timothy 6:6).

Amen

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