

TAKE HOLD OF LIFE

1 TIMOTHY 6:6-19

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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There are some passages in Scripture that require a lot of explanation. Passages where it's not immediately clear what's going on or how it relates to the present day, where it takes some work to understand historical and cultural context in order to make connections.

Today's text is not one of them. ☺

Paul's language to Timothy is clear. It is a warning against the lure of riches, a call to lives of generosity, and an invitation to contentment.

I want to orient my sermon this morning around two important words from verse 6: "Godliness" and "contentment."

I will begin with contentment, but I want to talk less about the actual dangers of pursuing wealth in place of God and loving money—because you've already heard Paul speak quite plainly about this—than about the underlying causes for the lack of contentment that is just as prevalent in our day as it was in Paul's.

CONTENTMENT

I recently listened to an interview with British psychotherapist Adam Philips called "Lamenting the Road Not Taken." It was a fascinating conversation.

Phillips has written a book called *Missing Out* where he probes the human tendency to live two parallel lives: our real lives, and the hypothetical (happier) lives we would be living if we would have done things differently.

What if I had taken that job? What if I had moved to that city or stayed in that city?
What if I had pursued that relationship?

What if I had put my kids in that school? What if I had encouraged that friendship,
chosen that church, made that crucial decision at that crucial moment?

How would my life have been different? What painful pitfalls might have I avoided?
What pleasures and surprises might I have missed out on? What doors may have closed
never to open again?

**What have I missed out on by virtue of choosing what I have chosen when I have
chosen it?**

We tend to assume, says Phillips, that if we had made different choices—a different
spouse, a different career, a different city to live in, a different church—that we would
be happier, healthier, and more fulfilled than we are in our real lives.

Our hypothetical lives thus serve as both a reproach and an escape. They are a
judgment on the decisions we have made and a means of escaping the life we in fact are
living.

We can always take refuge in what we might have been.

Why do we do this?

While I think these are basic human problems that have been around since the dawn of
time, I think our cultural context fuels our discontent in a number of ways.

From our earliest years, we marinate in the myth of limitless possibilities. Anything is
possible, we are told. Anyone can be a president, a pop star, an athlete, a millionaire, a
princess, an action hero who saves the day...

Everyone can change the world... The sky is the limit! For everyone.

See any kids movie made in the last twenty years.

Of course, this is not true. Some things really aren't possible for everyone. Not everyone can be a superstar or a millionaire, no matter what those in positions of influence and power, those who have a vested interest in keeping us restless and consuming, might wish for us to believe.

Some of us will simply lead relatively ordinary, simple lives of modest influence and limited "success." Which is ok!

But this is not what we are told. We are presented instead with an illusion of perpetual bliss and fulfillment and then we are crushed when we realize that the world isn't like that.

This is, of course, exacerbated by our online culture. A quick tour through the world of social media will quite quickly yield the conclusion that everyone out there is smarter, prettier, happier, more competent and creative, and generally having quite a bit better time in life than we are!

Most of us can only handle so much of hearing how awesome everybody else's life is—oh look, so and so published a book! Or went to Hawaii... again! Or bought a new house, car, _____! Or got the job I always! Or has never faced the health challenges that I do!—without starting to wonder... What if I had... ?

So, on the one hand the enemy of contentment is the proverbial "other side of the fence" where the grass is always greener, where someone else always *has* more, *does* more, *is* more than we are, and where we constantly wonder, "what if?"

It's just that in world of instant digital communication, there are a lot more fences to look over, and a lot more creative ways to make the grass seem greener than it really is for those who are looking!

But contentment is not just about what we *have* (or don't have).

I think we also have a hard time being content in our own skin.

Virtually all spiritual wisdom down through the ages says something to the effect that a key to finding any kind of viable and lasting contentment in the world requires coming to peace with who you are.

Not some future self that you wish you could be, not the person that you imagine yourself to be in your best moments, not the person that you might have been if you had chosen differently...

No, the person staring back at you in the mirror.

Unless we can believe that we are enough as we are—that we matter and have value even prior to all of the well-intentioned character modifications that inevitably loom over the next ridge of our lives—we will never be at peace.

Our striving for improvement will always be borne out of restlessness and dissatisfaction, rather than a desire for goodness.

And yet. So many of us live lives where from the moment we wake up until our heads hit the pillow at night, we are mocked and goaded by what philosopher Matthew Crawford calls the “more skilled future self” that we have yet to become.

You know this self, right?

The self that has shed all of its toxic habits and unhealthy behaviours.

The self that gets up and goes for a run instead of tramping bleary-eyed to the computer first thing in the morning.

The self that eats (and inexplicably takes pleasure in) virtuous green stuff and passes on potato chips.

The self that exhibits inexhaustible patience with their children, rather than snapping at the slightest provocation and marching around in a cloud of righteous indignation.

The self that forgives easily and often.

The self that accepts hardship with grace and determination rather than sorrow and resentment.

The self that prays instead of worrying

The self that acts purposively rather than constantly reacting to the demands (real or imagined) of others.

The self that makes wiser consumer choices and embraces simpler things.

The self that is generous rather than stingy.

The self that sees life not as a game to win by accumulating as much as we can, but a gift to be shared.

The self that moves through their days guided by love and not fear.

Our “more skilled future selves” call out to us in countless ways, and how we chase after them. Sometimes we do this for long, fruitless decades.

And all the while we miss the most basic and liberating of truths. We are loved by God as we are. We have value, even as—precisely as, in fact!—our “unskilled” or “less skilled” present selves.

This is not to say that we are not called to pursue better selves. I am convinced that the ability to imagine and pursue better versions of ourselves is a uniquely, gloriously human trait, and that God has made it to be so.

But it seems to me that unless we can accept that our present selves are deeply loved and cherished by God, the future selves that we are always stretching toward will remain a torment rather than an invitation and an embrace.

GODLINESS

So, instead of chasing after wealth and material possessions and defining ourselves by what we possess, instead of measuring ourselves against the impossible standards of others or the version of ourselves that we think we should be, we are to give ourselves to “godliness.”

The Greek word here is *eusebeia*. If I were to sum up what this word means, I would simply say, “life lived as God intended human lives to be lived.”

Look at the words that Paul tells Timothy to pursue as the antidote to all of our restless striving.

Righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.

“Don’t be arrogant,” he says. And it is so tempting for those who are wealthy to be arrogant. Wealth is how we keep score, right? Wealth is how we know who is winning in the game of life!

Perhaps in the world, but not in the church.

Paul tells Timothy to “Command those who are rich in this present world to **do good**, to be **rich in good deeds**, and to be **generous** and **willing to share**.”

And, in case we’re tempted to not pay attention to Paul’s words here because he is, after all, talking about “rich people,” I think it’s pretty safe to assume that he is speaking to all of us in the Western world.

If you make \$25 000 a year, you are in the top 4% of the global population when it comes to wealth, according to one calculation I came across this week! So, we might not always *feel* rich, but in global terms, we are.

So these words are for us.

And I know that all of this can seem like little more than a bunch of good advice, one more item on a moral checklist that we are daily failing to live up to. *Be more content because God says you should be content! Be generous! Share! Do good! Roll up your sleeves and do it!*

But look at what Paul says next:

They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, **thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.**

Practicing contentment turns out to be not a “grit-your-teeth-and-do-it-because-God-says-so kind of thing—not just an arbitrary commandment that we’re supposed to do because Jesus-y people aren’t supposed to be obsessed with stuff.

It’s not something we do to try to convince ourselves that we’re “better off” (however we define that) than we really are. It’s not a way of avoiding reality.

It’s not even something that we do now to get a reward later, although there is a bit of that. There’s no doubt that those who have little in this life and practice contentment nonetheless do rightly look forward to a future of plenty as their reward.

Rather, it is the means by which we take hold of the life that *really is life*.

It is the way by which we train ourselves to become citizens of the kingdom of God. It is how we become *now* what we believe we were made to be and *will* one day be.

N.T. Wright puts it like this:

It’s all too easy for us to read verses like 11 (“justice, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness) and 14 (“undefiled and blameless”) and to think, “Yes, well he’s telling me I must learn to behave better.” That’s true, of course, but **the point of it all is that these are the ways you must get in shape both to be ready for the King when he appears and to enlist in his service in the present time.**¹

It is a form of practicing for heaven, in a sense, because we are becoming the sorts of people—“rich in good works,” generous, ready to share—who will be at home in the future that God is preparing and which God has promised.

And, I think we could say that the opposite is also true. Living lives of discontent—lives that are anxious and frantic and stingy and restless, lives that refuse to be grateful for what they *have* been given—represents a failure to take hold of the life that really is life.

I think that this is part of what Paul means when he says, “fight the good fight of faith.”

¹ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Pastoral Letters, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 75.

We are not just clinging to a set of beliefs until the end of our days and waiting for the prize. We are fighting to *become* what we were created by God to be, what Jesus Christ has set us free to become in emulation of our Teacher and King.

In becoming people characterized by “godliness,” we gradually shed our attachments to money, to stuff, to the opinions of others, to comparisons with those who we think are doing better, even to our own self-reproaches, and we become people of contentment.

We become people who are defined by **gratitude** for what God has given in the past, **contentment** for what we have and who we are in the present, and full of **trust** for a future that we do not have to earn or accomplish on our own, but which is being prepared for us in advance by the One who knows us best and who loves us at each stage of our becoming.

In verse 7 of our text this morning, Paul famously says, “For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.” Paul is speaking about material possessions and our unhealthy attachment to them, and he is obviously right.

But there is a sense in which, while we don’t bring anything into the world, we *can* take something out of it.

The people we have become follow us into the next life.

The fight that we have fought bears fruit in eternity, in continuity with who we have been on our earthly pilgrimage.

We can take with us selves that have been trained to be at home with God rather than with the smaller gods that tempted us along the way.

We can take with us selves characterized by a determined and settled contentment that God can be trusted with our past, present, and future.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.



