

“Be Generous and Ready to Share”

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Most people want to live comfortably. But how much is enough?

Nasreddin Hodja was born in what is now Turkey in the early 13th century and quickly developed a strong reputation as a quick wit and a man not to be fooled with. He was loved by the common people for putting rich people in their place, his humor and trickery, but mostly for poking holes in pompous windbags. (The word “hodja” is an honorific title meaning scholar or teacher.)

One of the stories told about Hodja concerns a beggar. The itinerant was given a piece of bread, but no butter, jam or sauce to put on it. Hoping to get something to go with his bread, he went to a nearby inn and asked for a handout.

The innkeeper turned him away with nothing, but the beggar sneaked into the kitchen where he saw a large pot of soup cooking over the fire. He held his piece of bread over the steaming pot, hoping to thus capture a bit of flavor from the good-smelling vapor.

Suddenly the innkeeper seized him by the arm and accused him of stealing soup.

“I took no soup,” said the beggar. “I was only smelling the vapor.”

“Then you must pay for the smell,” answered the innkeeper.

The poor beggar had no money, so the angry innkeeper dragged him before the qadi. (Who we would call the “judge”).

Now Nasreddin Hodja was at that time serving as qadi, and he heard the innkeeper’s complaint and the beggar’s explanation.

“So, you demand payment for the smell of your soup?” summarized the Hodja after the hearing.

“Yes!” insisted the innkeeper.

“Then I myself will pay you,” said the Hodja, “and I will pay for the smell of your soup with the sound of money.”

The Hodja drew two coins from his pocket, rang them together loudly, put them back into his pocket, and sent the beggar and the innkeeper each on his own way.

“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil,” writes the apostle. What else but the love of money can explain why the greedy shopkeeper would want to charge a poor beggar for the smell of his broth!

In verse 7 of the text, the apostle recalls the words of Job, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21). Paul writes, “We brought nothing into the world, so that* we can take nothing out of it.” Put another way: *There’s no trailer hitch on a hearse.*

All this is true. But we can’t live without money, can we? After all, we need a paycheck. We need to put food on our TV trays. No argument. We came into the world empty-handed, and we shall leave life empty-handed, but we can’t survive empty-handed in the interim. We need to cultivate the skills necessary to survive.

Men in agrarian societies were taught at a young age to hunt, use an axe, fish, farm or yoke a pair of oxen. Women learned to skin the hides, erect shelters, cook the food, gather herbs, bring in a harvest and bear another generation of workers.

As urban life emerged, shopkeepers, cobblers, tinsmiths, artisans, bookkeepers, autocrats, politicians, writers, philosophers and others plied their trades. Clearly, some professions were more lucrative than others.

As this was happening, spiritual leaders, including the apostle Paul, realized that the need to earn a living was fraught with potential problems:

- If one was too wealthy, others might covet your possessions and even steal what they could.
- Envy might cause some souls to work harder than necessary.
- Those who were employers might prefer to see their employees starve rather than give them a decent wage.
- Careers are sometimes judged based on the *earnings* they provide, when they ought to be evaluated in terms of the *service* they offer. A teacher, one could argue, has more value to society than a football player.
- Most would agree that some professions are simply wrong: Prostitutes, drug pushers, jewel thieves, crooks, Steeler fans, etc. No reasonable person would consider these activities as bona fide “professions.”

Today’s text narrows the discussion to money, specifically the *acquisition* of money, the *benefits* of money and the *dangers of avarice*. Paul reminds us that Christians are not just a peculiar cohort of citizens who value spirituality, worship and Judeo-Christian ethics; they also need to earn a paycheck. Spirituality is other-worldly.

Earning a living is very worldly, and to do it successfully, one must be ambitious, work hard, train and develop one's skills — but do it without sacrificing moral and ethical values.

Not everyone can do this. Why? The love of money gets in the way.

People like this cannot be content with “food and clothing” (v. 8), but rather are vulnerable to the temptation to acquire more than they need, thus our fellowship hall and hallway are piled high for every Rummage Sale to benefit our youth.

The Bible says that “there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment” (v. 6). So, the questions are: “What are the bare essentials? With how little can we be content?”

Money talks. True. And it usually says, “Goodbye.”

In his book, *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized*, writer, preacher, novelist and public theologian Frederick Buechner noted, “The more you think about [money], the less you understand it. The paper it's printed on isn't worth a red cent. There was a time you could take it to the bank and get gold or silver for it, but all you'd get now is a blank stare. ... Money has worth only if there is not enough for everybody. It has worth only because the government declares it has worth and because people trust the government in that one particular, although in every other particular we tend not to trust it. ... Great fortunes can be made and lost completely on paper. ... There are people who use up their entire lives making money so they can enjoy the lives they have entirely used up.”

The reality is that there is always going to be someone wealthier than you, and there are countless millions who are poorer than you.

Do we need a \$450 million yacht like Jeff Bezos? No, but we might not be able to live without spending \$60,000 on a pick-up truck!

Do we need a pick-up? Maybe we do. It's all relative. If you make \$14,500, are you poor? Not if you live in India, for example, where the per capita income is just north of \$2,000. But in the United States, if you're making \$14,500 per year, you are living in abject poverty.

According to the "Remember the Poor" website,

- If you made \$1,500 last year, you're in the top 20 percent of the world's income earners.
- If you have sufficient food, decent clothes, live in a house or apartment, and have a reasonably reliable means of transportation, you are among the top 15 percent of the world's wealthy.
- Have \$61,000 in assets? You're among the richest 10 percent of the adults in the world.
- If you have any money saved, a hobby that requires some equipment or supplies, a variety of clothes in your closet, two cars (in any condition), and live in your own home, you are in the top 5 percent of the world's wealthy.
- If you have more than \$500,000 in assets, you're part of the richest 1 percent of the world. I wonder how many of us are part of the richest 1 percent of the world, We might be surprised

Does this help you to be content with what you have? Perhaps. Unfortunately, we live in a culture of outrage and discontent. It's very difficult to be truly at peace with ourselves and content with what we have. Sometimes, it's hard to feel blessed.

Jesus had what social theologians call a "preferential option for the poor." Maybe it's because he himself was poor. He didn't own a house. He had no stocks listed on the Jerusalem Stock Exchange. He didn't even have transportation.

He did have a trade, but when the disciples knew him, he wasn't gainfully employed. Jesus, truth be told, wasn't the sort of fellow we'd hang out with today. Sort of unsavory ... shiftless.

Jesus had a soft spot for the poor, showing love and compassion toward those on the bottom rungs of society, including the sick, outcast, and those whom others considered sinners.

Is Jesus asking us to live as he did? No. And neither is the apostle, Paul.

The biblical consensus concerning personal wealth is that we should decide what we need, be content with that, and give away the rest.

This provides a clue as to how we should come to terms with the tension that exists between the need to survive (for which a paycheck is necessary) and the thirst (lust) to acquire more than we need.

Jesus and the apostle Paul — argue that our actions must be guided by compassion.

Consider the following if you are well-off in today's market and economy:

- **Be humble:** You had luck, privilege, advantages, options and opportunities that millions in the world can only dream of — even if you worked your tail off to get to where you are. Humility goes a long way. The Bible says, “As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty” (v. 17).
- **Be realistic:** There are no guarantees. The market may crash tomorrow. Who could have predicted the coronavirus, or the war in Ukraine, and measured their economic impact? If you practiced a policy of contentment, you were in a better position to weather this storm and any that may come in the future.

- **Be generous:** We live in a sharing economy. Be a part of it. In two weeks, we begin our annual fall stewardship emphasis, “My Faith Goal”. Our faith and generosity are closely connected. Divinity joins forces with local charities like LMM, Redeemer Crisis Center, the Hope Center for Refugees and Immigrants, and more. Be creative in the methods by which you can generously distribute your assets among those who need a helping hand.
- **Be faithful:** Watch for any signs that you are starting to love money. This is the root of everything that can go wrong in your life (v. 10). Instead of lusting after riches, grow your thirst for righteousness: “Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness” (v. 11).

In his seminal work, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity*, Professor Ron Sider confronts us with an inconvenient truth: “God’s Word teaches a very hard, disturbing truth. Those who neglect the poor and the oppressed are really not God’s people at all — no matter how frequently they practice their religious rituals nor how orthodox are their creeds and confessions.”

Okay, then. This sums it up. We are motivated to serve at the Redeemer Crisis Center, to sponsor refugees, to support Lutheran World Hunger and Disaster Relief, to help struggling families across the street at Parma Park, to feed families through our Divinity Pantry, to provide Stephen Ministers for the widow and widower, to learn good health practices from our Parish Nurses, to serve Lutheran Metropolitan Ministries and the Lakeside Homeless Shelter, to work through GCC to get more people to vote, and to be content with what we have so we can respond to the needs of others. May the peace of God . . . #715 – Christ, Be Our Light