

New American Commentary on 1 Timothy 6:5-10, 17-19

Gain, Wealth, Materialism, Generosity and Eternal Treasures

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The heretics viewed religion as a means of making a quick dollar. In character they were greedy and materialistic. Paul's strong words described false teachers who exploited the church for their own ends without caring about the havoc they created. Paul had no objection to giving money to a religious leader, but he was opposing the goal of materialism that was primary for the heretics. It is interesting to note how many of the qualifications for church leaders in 3:2–12 these false teachers lacked. Paul would now elaborate on the developing dangers of materialism.

(3) The Greed of the False Teachers (6:6–10)

⁶But godliness with contentment is great gain. ⁷For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. ⁸But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. ⁹People 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. ¹⁰For 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.

Paul expanded his brief reference to materialism among the false teachers (v. 5) into a pointed review of the dangers of greed. Addressing his words specifically to those who willed to become rich, he affirmed that godliness and not wealth brings great gain (v. 6). He explained two reasons for which contentment should be a companion of godliness (vv. 7–8). In vv. 9–10 he presented the desire for wealth as a trap that plunges the unwary into spiritual ruin.

6:6 Paul commended the benefits of godliness with contentment in v. 6 (see Ps 37:3–5). The word “contentment” (*autarkeia*) “was a great word in Stoicism, expressing the essence of the Stoic ideal, which was to be independent of external circumstances.”¹⁵³ Paul Christianized the term, using it to refer to an attitude of mind independent of externals and dependent only on God. He was not advocating godless self-sufficiency as a source of contentment. Paul believed that true sufficiency is Christ-sufficiency (Phil 4:13).¹⁵⁴

The word “but” (*de*) should be translated more with the intensive idea of *indeed*. Paul was affirming that those who felt that godliness leads to gain were indeed correct, for there is great profit (spiritual profit) in a brand of godliness that possesses a contentment in the realm of its material possessions. True godliness is a means of much gain, for it promises benefits for this life and the next (4:8). Adding contentment to this godliness would promote gratitude for God's gracious gifts in this life (see 1 Tim 4:4–5).

6:7–8 Why do godliness and contentment represent great gain? Paul's “for” clause introduced an eschatological reason for this contentment.¹⁵⁵ Since after a brief stay we shall depart this life as we came

¹⁵³ Hanson, *Pastoral Epistles*, 107. Dibelius and Conzelmann explain the Stoic understanding of “self-sufficiency” with a quotation from Stobaeus, “Self-sufficiency is nature's wealth,” and a statement from Epictetus, “The art of living well . . . is contingent upon self-control, self-sufficiency, orderliness, propriety, and thrift.” See Dibelius, Conzelmann, *Pastoral Epistles*, 84.

¹⁵⁴ The adjective “content” in Phil 4:11 comes from the same word family as “contentment” in 6:6.

¹⁵⁵ Ellis feels that the “for” (*γὰρ*) clause beginning in v. 7 may represent the “quotation of an ethical maxim” which represented Christian tradition accepted by Paul. The saying may plausibly represent a general conviction that early Christians held. See Ellis, “Traditions in the Pastoral Epistles,” 246.

in, it is sheer folly to concern ourselves with earthly matters. Material gain is irrelevant, and greed is irrational (see Job 1:21).¹⁵⁶

The second reason (v. 8) is that we must be content when we possess life's necessities. The use of the adversative "but" (*de*) suggests that Paul wanted to contrast the believer's attitude to that of the greedy heretics. The term "clothing" is general enough to include both clothing and shelter, but the immediate context favors limiting it to personal possessions such as dress. Paul's words reflect the teaching of Jesus (Matt 6:25–34; Luke 12:22–31). Paul referred to food and clothing as symbols of life's necessities. His expression is a figure of speech known as synecdoche in which a part ("food and clothing") refers to the whole. What is actually a necessity will vary somewhat in different societies. However, all of us face the temptation of greedily coveting more than we need. Paul's use of the future tense "we will be content" contains an imperative idea directing Christians to practice contentment once they have life's necessities.

It is interesting to observe that Paul made an allusion to an Old Testament text (v. 7) followed by a reference to Jesus' teaching (v. 8). Although his statements would resemble the teachings of the Stoics, he was clearly influenced more by the Old Testament and the teaching of Jesus than by Stoic philosophy.

In these verses Paul warned that godliness is not a trait from which to make material profit (v. 5). True godliness has contentment for its companion (v. 6). Since we cannot take life's luxuries into God's presence, we should be content with life's necessities (vv. 7–8). Greed can find no place in an attitude like this.

6:9–10 Paul spoke the words of vv. 9–10 to those who "want to get rich" ("men who keep planning to get rich," Williams). There is no condemnation of wealth as such, and the words do not apply to someone who wistfully longs, "It would be nice to have more money."

In v. 9 Paul painted three progressive pitfalls in which the willful wealth-seeker becomes entangled. First, wealth tempts like a lure and causes people to covet the wrong objects. Second, individuals become entangled like animals dangling in a trap. The "desires" that trap them are probably more materialistic than sexual or personally grandiose. Third, the trapped ones drown in an almost personified wealth that becomes "a personal monster, which plunges its victim into an ocean of complete destruction."¹⁵⁷ The "desires" are "foolish" because instead of bringing gain, they only produce harm. Kelly suggests that "ruin" and "destruction" may signify material and spiritual disaster, respectively,¹⁵⁸ but it is probably best not to distinguish between the types of disasters these words suggest.

Paul supported this warning about wealth with a contemporary proverb the wayward Ephesian elders validated by their behavior.¹⁵⁹ We can make three comments about the proverb. First, it does not condemn money but the love of money. Second, it does not state that all evil comes from the love of money, but such misplaced love can cause a great variety of ("all kinds of") evil. It is incorrect to say

¹⁵⁶ A variety of textual readings exists for the "and" in v. 7 (ὅτι—normally translated "because" or "that"), including support for such translations as "and" (καὶ), "but," "it is clear that" (ὁφείλον ὅτι) and "it is true that" (ἀληθὲς ὅτι). Most commentators agree that the Greek ὅτι is the likely reading but differ on the meaning of the term. Lenski (*St. Paul's Epistles*, 705–6) says that the ὅτι clause explains why we did not bring anything into the world. Lenski's observation is certainly true, but it is unnecessarily trite. Bernard suggests that the ὅτι is to be taken as a resumptive idea, "a somewhat irregular construction, but not impossible." He prefers the translation, "*We brought nothing into the world; I say, that neither can we carry anything out*" (*Pastoral Epistles*, 95). The best view is to follow BAGD, who understand ὅτι as introducing a result clause with the meaning *so that*.

¹⁵⁷ Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles*, 113. For a more literal use of the verb, note the translation "sink" in Luke 5:7.

¹⁵⁸ Kelly, *Pastoral Epistles*, 137.

¹⁵⁹ A proverb similar to this is well attested in ancient writings. For the proverb see *T. Judah*, 19.

that the love of money causes all sins. Ambition and sexual lust are also fertile breeding grounds of sin. Third, the wandering elders from Ephesus who had sold out to greed were living proof of this maxim. The concern about materialism Paul had expressed in v. 5 had become a reality in the false teachers. Judas and Ananias and Sapphira were New Testament figures who “drowned” because of this inordinate love.

There is a link between the “faith” of the gospel and the blessedness God promises to his people (6:10b; Ps 1). The denial of one negates the other. Some translations (e.g., “spiked themselves on many thorny griefs,” NEB) capture the intensely painful idea behind the word “pierced.” Kelly notes that the entire metaphor describes the “thorns of remorse and disillusionment that now lacerate them.”¹⁶⁰ With these graphic words Paul concluded his description of the heretics, their false teaching, and their false practice. He now turned his attention to specific words of guidance for his beloved Timothy.

Summary. Paul focused on three important issues in these verses. He called for service among Christian slaves. He warned all his readers against a love for controversy and the all-consuming aims of materialism as seen in the Ephesian heretics.

It is human nature to return cruelty with more cruelty or a mean-spirited petulance. The Christian slaves to whom Paul wrote were not exempt from this temptation. It was needful to warn them, as it is to warn us, that unkindness or injustice by an owner, employer, or enemy does not excuse our reciprocating with the same trait. We are to honor God’s name by responding respectfully even to those who berate us.

Conceit leads to a love for controversy. Those who think well of their opinions like to argue them with others. Where a spirit of controversy seizes a family, office, or institution, all sense of community and unity disappears. When we learn of the unhealthy results of indulging a spirit of controversy, we should want to avoid the experience.

Materialism is a desire to possess things instead of a love for the God who made those things. Paul showed that materialism is foolish because it fails to make preparation for eternity and leads to great sorrow in this life. Paul’s posting of such warning signs should cause believers to steer clear of the sickness of materialism, but many drive straight through the warning signs to ruin and grief.

10. Instructions to Timothy and the Wealthy (6:11–21)

Paul had earlier referred to the false teachers in 1:3–7; 1:18–20; and 4:1–5. He normally linked indictments of the teachers with a personal admonition to Timothy (1:3; 1:18–19; 4:6–16). The admonitions frequently included an appeal to an earlier point in Timothy’s spiritual life (1:18; 4:14). After warning the false teachers in 6:3–10 against word battles and godless greed, Paul added another persuasive reminder to Timothy (6:11–16). He followed this reminder with a warning to the wealthy, this time to those who already had wealth (6:17–19). In a concluding word to Timothy, Paul directed him to guard the gospel and avoid foolish discussions about silly speculations (6:20–21).

(1) A Program for Godliness (6:11–16)

¹¹But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. ¹³In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you ¹⁴to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵which God will bring about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, ¹⁶who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen.

Commentary on above text not included in this handout. RA

¹⁶⁰ Kelly, *Pastoral Epistles*, 138.

(2) A Promise for the Prosperous (6:17–19)

¹⁷Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. ¹⁹In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

Paul turned from a series of admonitions to Timothy to give advice to those already rich. The preceding words on wealth in vv. 6–10 were spoken to those who aspired to wealth. As a final thought Paul spoke a word to those who already had it. The constructive advice here balances the more extreme prohibitions of the earlier passage. He did not condemn wealth, but he showed the added temptations the wealthy face. He was vitally concerned that Christians have the right attitude toward their wealth and make the proper use of it (cf. Luke 12:13–21; Ps 52:7).

6:17 Paul’s beginning reference to the “present world” suggests that the wealthy can have their wealth only in this age. It is good for this present world, but it does not convert automatically into blessedness in the world beyond.

In this verse Paul contrasted right and wrong responses to the pos-session of wealth. A wrong response involves an arrogant attitude (“haughty,” Williams) and the making of wealth as the “hope” of one’s life. As a deterrent to trusting in riches, Paul mentioned the transitory, uncertain nature of wealth. The word “uncertain” contains a reminder that it is by no means clear that riches will continue with the one who has them. The right response is to hope in a God who lavishes on his people all their needs. The statement implies that God does not give wealth to promote pride but that we might use and enjoy it in his will (cf. Jas 2:5; 4:13–14; 5:2–3).

Paul’s sound advice walks the straight line between a world-denying asceticism and a self-centered indulgence. The advice promotes gratitude toward God for the benefits he bestows. We can express Paul’s theology of wealth with the words: “God supplies everything, his purpose is beneficent, and it entails obligation.”¹⁷²

6:18 Paul mentioned four ways to use wealth wisely. “To do good” involves using wealth in a positive way instead of letting it feed a life of personal luxury. “To be rich in good deeds” pointed the wealthy in the direction in which they were to be truly rich, in the doing of good deeds. These two verbs probably include more than benevolence. The need for benevolence is emphasized in the next pair of terms. “To be generous” demands a liberal sharing of wealth with others. One who is “willing to share” shows that the generous act of giving is to spring from internal generosity. Paul was suggesting that genuine wealth is found in what we give, not what we have.

6:19 Paul outlined the outcome of such generosity by stressing two truths. First, he stressed that giving generously to the needy stores for the giver a future treasure. The phrase “for themselves” emphasizes that generous givers may imagine that they are helping others, but they also are storing up significant personal benefits. Paul was not advocating that the giver could earn salvation or favors from God. Good works are solid evidence of salvation and assure us that we have eternal life. Paul may have based these thoughts on such words as contained in Matt 6:19–21. The godless, on the other hand, lay up treasures for themselves of a different kind (Jas. 5:1–5).

Second, Paul stressed that generous actions allow the giver to lay hold of eternal life in the here and now. Paul had urged Timothy to lay hold of this in v. 12. Here Paul expressed that taking hold of eternal life is a goal of the unselfish giving he had commanded. Christians who enter the life of love by unselfish behavior will enter gloriously into God’s presence in the life to come.

¹⁷² Ward, *1 & 2 Timothy & Titus*, 122.