

Message: Rely on God**Do we have any hunters here today?**

The reason I ask is because of the image that comes to mind when we read vv9-10 of our Scripture passage for today, 1 Timothy 6:6-12. The NRSV translates the verses this way, “*But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains” (my emphasis).*

These verses bring to mind the image of a pit hunters used to dig to trap animals. First, they’d dig a deep hole in the middle of a path. Then they’d cut tree branches, sharpen one end and bury them in the bottom of the pit, with the points facing up. Next, they’d cover the pit with small branches and leaves, concealing it. Finally, they’d go out, beat on drums and chase animals down the path, waiting for them to fall into the hole, impaling themselves on the stakes. It’s a gruesome, cruel image. They’ve also been used as “man pits” during past wars.

Why would Paul use such graphic language when giving advice to Timothy, the young pastor? The answer seems simple: he’s showing the contrast between what we’ll find when we pursue worldly wealth and gain, and what we’ll have if we pursue God in all situations and circumstances. That’s the easy answer. But it’s an answer that’s difficult to live, particularly for those of us in the West, immersed in American culture. We need to drill down on what lies behind the passage to get a better understanding of Paul’s advice.

Let’s start with a question: what does it mean to be content?

According to Google, if we’re content, we’re in a state of peaceful happiness. Synonyms include satisfied, pleased, gratified, fulfilled, cheerful or glad. On the face of it, being content is the equivalent to being “blissed out.” I don’t know about you, but I don’t know too many people who are satisfied with their life, day in and day out. That’s true in Corona, across our country and around the world. A few facts tell a lot and help us find perspective.

According to the United Nations, approximately 2.8 billion people (half of the world’s population) live on less than \$2 USD per day. 1 billion people, about 20% of the world’s population, lives on less than \$1 USD per day. Nearly 1 billion people are illiterate and 1 billion people don’t have access to safe water. 98% of those on the margins live in developing nations. An additional note: women make up a little over half of the world’s population, yet they account for more than 60% of the world’s hungry.¹ During 2011, more than 3 million children died due to under-nutrition and the diseases related to poverty.² I doubt very many of those who are living in such conditions are content.

Those are horrifying numbers. They’re so large we can’t really comprehend them very well. We want to help, but the barriers are high. First, we aren’t sure what we can do as individuals or even as a group. Second, we don’t have any idea how to provide assistance or even what assistance is needed. Third, we don’t know how to help others develop sustainable lives. Finally, if we’re honest, most of us are more worried about our own needs and those of our family and friends.

Maybe we should look closer to home. According to the U.S. Census in 2015, 43 million people in America (13.5%) live below the poverty line. The income threshold for being counted as living in poverty was \$11,490 last year for a single person and \$24,046 for a family of four. Poverty hits single mothers particularly hard. 42.6% of all families in poverty were headed by single women. 24% of black Americans lived below the poverty level last year (10 million), with 42.5% of single black women in poverty. The Hispanic poverty rate was 21.4% (12.1 million). For children under 18, 19.7% live in poverty (14.5 million), while 12.4% of people (24.4 million) aged 18-64 and 8.8% of people (4.2 million) aged 65 and older lived in poverty. There are more women now living in poverty than men.³

Still not close enough? According to the U.S. Census’ 2015 population estimate, of the 164, 226 people living in Corona, 11.3% live in poverty

¹ www.un.org/en/globalissues/briefingpapers/food/vitalstats.shtml

² www.bbc.com/news/magazine-22935692

³ www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/16/poverty-household-income_n_5828974.html

and 16.3% are without health insurance. The male median income is \$40,009/year while the female median income is \$25,349/year.⁴

If you're a student or graduate and you're between 20-24 years old, 71% of your classmates got jobs in 2015. 75% of the males got jobs, while 68% of the females did. If you don't have a high school diploma, the numbers are worse, 60% of males got a job in 2015, compared to only 42% of females.⁵ Unemployment rates for Hispanics were almost the same as for Caucasians, while Blacks were 65% more likely to be unemployed.⁶ Sadly, “a black college student has the same chance of getting a job as a white high school dropout”!⁷

Are you feeling content or discontent? We all struggle to juggle busy lives with demands on our time, particularly if care giving is part of the mix. Some of us care for children or grandchildren, while others care for aging parents. Some care for both. Add illness, disease or injury and our peaceful state is usually long gone.

What are we to do? First of all, we learn the Bible is relevant. The apostle Paul gave us a glimpse of his life in 2 Corinthians 11:24-28, *“Five times I have received ... the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers... bandits ... my own people ... Gentiles ... in the city... in the wilderness ... at sea ...from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.”*

Sounds like Paul would be distressed and unhappy, right? Wrong! In Philippians 4:11-12, Paul writes this, *“Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.”*

⁴ <http://www.census.gov/>

⁵ <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=561>

⁶ <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/youth.nr0.htm>

⁷ <https://thinkprogress.org/a-black-college-student-has-the-same-chances-of-getting-a-job-as-a-white-high-school-dropout-b7639607fdf1#.rdt6fszf5>

What’s the secret? What did Paul learn that gave him contentment no matter whether he was hungry or full, with all his needs met or doing without a meal, a bed or clothing? Let’s look back at 1 Timothy 6:6. Reading from The Message, “*A devout life does bring wealth, but it’s the rich simplicity of being yourself before God.*” Paul learned that he could be himself - warts, complaints and all, before God with full confidence and assurance that it wouldn’t shake his relationship. Jesus changed Paul’s life and gave him a reason and the passion to get up each day. In return, Paul trusted and obeyed God, holding nothing back.

Paul continues in v7, “*Since we entered the world penniless and will leave it penniless, if we have bread on the table and shoes on our feet, that’s enough. But if it’s only money [we’re] after, [we’ll] self-destruct in no time. Lust for money brings trouble and nothing but trouble. Going down that path, some lose their footing in the faith completely and live to regret it bitterly ever after. But you, [child] of God: Run for your life from all this.*”

Winston Churchill said, “We make a living from what we get. We make a life from what we give.” Today’s version of Churchill’s saying might go this way, “We make a living from what we take. We make a life from what we give.” The more we take from others, the more likely we’re to find ourselves impaled on the stakes at the bottom of the pit. We’re pierced by consequences of our own making. The irony is that we think we’re seeking wealth so we can be happy. We know the expression, “you can’t buy happiness,” but we like to hedge our bets ... in hope that it might, after all.

I hear some of you thinking, “the pursuit of happiness is a basic human right. It is, but when we pursue wealth with an ‘end justifies the means’ view, then it becomes a basic human wrong. And yet, every TV program, advertisement, many movies and most political platforms are designed to make us say, ‘If I only had just a little bit more money, then I’d be content.’ Nelson Rockefeller, one of the richest men in the world in his day, summed it up nicely. When asked by a reporter how much money he needed to live on comfortably, Rockefeller replied,

‘A little more than I get.’ Most of us, from the very rich to the very poor would be tempted to say ‘Amen’ to that.”⁸

What are some things we can do to live a contented life?

Here’s a few suggestions⁹:

- ***Learn to give thanks in all situations*** (Ephesians 5:18-20)
Being thankful is a characteristic of a Spirit-filled believer.
- ***Rest knowing God will care for us*** (1 Peter 4:12-13)
When we trust God, we know there’s a plan for each one of us, individually and as a community of faith. That helps us when we receive trials because we know God sees the end result.
- ***Learn to be satisfied with little*** (v6)
When we desire what others have, that leads us to become discontent, particularly if we’re willing to do anything to fulfill those desires. If we learn to be satisfied with what we have, our spirits are freed from the burden of that pursuit and are free to pursue other, healthier objectives. This is a gain.
- ***Learn to live above our circumstances*** (2 Corinthians 12:9-10)
Paul boasted in his weaknesses, needs, persecution and distress when it was for Jesus’ sake because Paul knew that when he was vulnerable and not up to the task, he would have to rely on Christ who is strong and ready to help.
- ***Rely on God’s power and provision*** (Ephesians 3:16)
Jesus promised he would never leave us or abandon us. We can rely on Christ’s promise. Jesus sends us his own strength and carries us in our time of need until we have come through our situation and have what we need.
- ***Focus on the care and well-being of others*** (Philippians 2:3-4)
Paul reminds us to carry each others’ burdens and to have others’ interests in our heart. When we focus on others, our problems take a back seat. Things that bothered us seem to take on a different meaning, often less important, when we are loving others first.

⁸ N.T. Wright, *Paul: The Pastoral Letters*, Westminster, 2004, p.70

⁹ <http://www.gty.org/resources/questions/OA149/what-is-the-secret-to-contentment> (modified)

A life lived in pursuit of wealth rather than pursuing a relationship with God won't end in contentment. Only God can, and will, sustain and guide us through the highs and lows of life. We have to have a relationship with God (that's the “godliness” part), to give us a firm foundation and a basis for following a different path than what the world would have us take. The path of a self-centered person will end in discontent. But the person who lives for the interest and benefit of others, following Jesus, will find blessing upon blessing in their life (2 Corinthians 9:6).

As followers of Christ, this is an important lesson. It's not just about changing our behavior. It's about preparing and equipping us to go into the world as God's agents for change. That way, when we're at home, school, work or out in the community, we're prepared and ready to share the reason for our hope and contentment with others who are stressed out and discontent. That's what Paul meant when he wrote, *“Pursue a righteous life - a life of wonder, faith, love, steadiness and courtesy. Run hard and fast in the faith. Seize the eternal life, the life you were called to....”* That's what it means to make a life. We gain from what we give and we can't out-give God.

I don't know about you, but that's a secret worth sharing and a life worth living! To God be the glory, Amen.

Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16 (NRSV)

You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust.”

For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence;

he will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

You will not fear the terror of the night,
or the arrow that flies by day,
or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
or the destruction that wastes at noonday.

Those who love me, I will deliver;

I will protect those who know my name.

When they call to me, I will answer them;

I will be with them in trouble,

I will rescue them and honor them.

With long life I will satisfy them,

and show them my salvation.

1 Timothy 6:6-12 (NRSV)

Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.