

If you know what to hold on to and what to let go of you can spare yourself a lot of misery
In remarks to C.A. Dana, Abraham Lincoln said, *‘When you have got an elephant by the hind leg and he is trying to run away, it’s best to let him run.’* (1865)

Some people don’t learn what is worth holding on to and what to let go of until it’s too late. It begins to hurt them. Personal gadgets are handy. We depend on our smart phones. If we let them, Facebook, MySpace, Linked-In, and Twitter, will take charge of our lives. As of this July, Facebook had over 500 million active users.

Millions of people are wasting time in vacuous chatter with people they’ve never even met, instead of investing time with someone they know and are supposed to love.

One wife said to her twittering husband, *You would pay more attention to me if I were digital.* Most people under the age of thirty can’t imagine life without a little digital companion.

- But contentment will never be found in anything you can’t let go of or be without.

One of the big reasons why so many people are in constant crisis is because they can’t explain the difference between what could help them and what will hurt them; what’s worth their attention, and what’s best left alone.

That’s the gist of “The Serenity Prayer:”

‘God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.’ (Reinhold Niebuhr, 1934)

- With all the clear teaching in Scripture about what is worthwhile and what is worthless, you’d expect Christians today to be expert in sorting the worthwhile from the worthless.

God’s Word tells us that all who repent of sin and put their faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior have eternal life. This means the core values of the Christian faith are eternal and indestructible. If we live with such a conviction, then our values are in order.

It’s a sad irony that many Christians are not able to see beyond the things of this world. They have set their affections on material possessions.

They’ve lost perspective—if they ever had it.

- Jesus warned all his followers about the danger that lurks in possessions.

The Apostle Paul often addressed this dangerous threat in his letters.

George MacDonald wrote in one of his pastoral novels, *‘The first thing in regard to money is to prevent it from doing harm. Neither Christ nor His Apostles did anything by means of money; even he who would join them in their labors had to abandon his fortune.’* (*On Tangled Paths.*)

- In our study of Paul’s first letter to Pastor Timothy at Ephesus, we have now come to chapter 6 verse 6.

At the end of the previous section Paul warns about false teachers whom he calls, *‘men of a corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain.’* (6:5)

6:6. *But godliness with contentment is great gain.*

6:7. *For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.*

6:8. *But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.*

6:9. *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.*

6:10. *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.*

Money was their chief concern.

These are people who love things. They think that by being religious they can count on God blessing them with more possessions.

- From this point to the end of this letter to Timothy the Apostle Paul deals with possessions and money. He appeals to Christians to break the insatiable longing to get more and more of stuff that satisfies less and less.

In 1 Timothy 6:6-21 the Apostle Paul makes three crucial distinctions that can help you realize godly contentment in your life.

1. Distinction between Profit and Loss: what adds to your life, and what corrupts your life. 6:6-10

[NEXT WEEK:]

2. Distinction between Flight and Fight: know what to flee from; know what to fight for. 6:11-16, 20-21

3. Distinction between Here and Hereafter: know the inadequacy of what you possess; know the value of what you cannot keep. 6:17-20

Let's delve into the first distinction.

I. PROFIT AND LOSS. 1 Timothy 6:6-10

This is the difference between something that adds to your life and something that corrupts your life.

Just like everybody else, you're interested in anything that can make your life better.

Paul gives us the biblical prescription for making life better.

Paul tells us clearly, *'But godliness with contentment is great gain.'* (6:6)

In his letter to the Philippian Christians he wrote, *'... for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.'* (Philippians 4:11)

Real contentment does not depend on what you have, but it does depend on how you feel toward what you have.

You can be happy with little and you can be miserable with a lot.

- The false teachers Paul warns about in verse 5 were interested only in financial gain.

But if you are a sincere Christian, there is incomparably more to your life—you have great gain.

- This means, if you are godly, it is not your purpose in life to get rich. That's not what you live for.

Regrettably, some of the most popular television evangelists are horrible examples to us. They violate clear teachings in God's word, but thousands of Christians flock to conferences where they are featured speakers and practically idolize them. I just read about a popular evangelist who has a personal Gulfstream corporate jet worth \$10 million. She pays herself and her husband well in excess of a million dollars a year, and owns several homes in the millions of dollars. All of this is paid from donations to her ministry. This is precisely the kind of person Paul addresses in verse 5.

It's no wonder that so many people think Christianity is a sham.

The Bible us that these are the people who mislead immature, unsuspecting Christians.

The Bible warns, *Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.* (James 3:1)

- Does this mean you have to adopt the ascetic lifestyle of a monk to be contented? Not at all!

What it means is that you must learn the difference between gain and loss. It's all about your values.

- God designed human beings so that things cannot satisfy us.

If people get what they crave, they discover it's not enough. It doesn't satisfy, so they set their hearts on something more.

Christina Onassis was the daughter of billionaire Aristotle Onassis. She had four failed marriages; her mother committed suicide. Christina said *'Happiness does not depend on money. Our family is the best proof of that.'*

In the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes King Solomon tells how he learned by personal experience that nothing in this world can fill a person's life. He said, *He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity.* (Ecclesiastes 5:10)

- The Apostle Paul goes on:

6:7. *For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.*

Here's another insight from the Book of Ecclesiastes: *'As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand.'* (Ecclesiastes 5:15)

There is nothing you can get from this world that will add anything lasting to your life.

You come in with nothing, you go out with nothing. Earthly possessions have value only in this world.

As someone quipped, *Who has ever seen a hearse towing a U-Haul?*

We leave, stuff stays.

Louis B Mayer (1885-1957) was the film producer who with Samuel Goldwyn founded MGM Co. in 1924. He was a cheapskate. Some colleagues were trying to persuade Louis to give money to charity: *'You can't take it with you when you go.'* Mayer countered, *'If I can't take it with me, I won't go.'* He went without it in 1957.

Christians are people who have eternal life. They know this world is a brief journey that will soon end for each of us, and then we go into eternity. They have eternal life.

Doris Mortman said, *'Until you make peace with who you are (godliness, piety), you'll never be content with what you have.'*

If you are a genuine Christian, then you should find contentment here, because you know your inheritance is not here. It is with Christ in heaven.

This doesn't mean Christians are immune to the allurements of earthly goodies. That's the source of some of our most dangerous temptations.

- Some Christians possess a lot of this world's goods, but the more mature they are in the faith, the less they cling to it. They hold it loosely.

Augustine said, *"Thou has made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee."*

God made people in his image and for a relationship with him. We find true contentment only in relating to God through faith in Christ.

Money has nothing at all to do with this.

Henry David Thoreau wrote: *'Money is not required to buy one necessity of the soul.'*

Our only enduring contentment is in a relationship with God; otherwise we suffer relentless restlessness.

6:8. *But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.*

Let's be honest about this; wouldn't most of us have to confess that's not where we are?

Most of us have never been in that situation where all we had was the basics. We are privileged.

- Let me warn you, I'm getting to meddling now.

Christians have walk-in closets full of fine clothing. And these we consider necessities, not luxuries.

I've known some Christians who have the equivalent of a *black belt in shopping.*

Let me ask an uncomfortable question, because it's what the Bible presses us to deal with: Is it right to spend hundreds and thousands of dollars on clothes, some that you may wear only once? Then you have nothing left to give to help someone in need.

Folks, that's the economics of the kingdom of God.

Being a follower of Jesus Christ is not a convenience. It's a matter of life and death for the world.

And what you do with the resources God has entrusted to you is at the heart of practical Christianity.

The Apostle Paul wrote, *'If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.'* (Colossians 3:1)

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth (3:2).'

On many occasions over the years I have visited Christians in Asia and Central Europe. They have so little, and their Christian faith is so robust. They are more contented with little than we are with much. Their spiritual lives are in balance.

I feel like a pygmy in the presence of spiritual giants. I have to examine my values frequently.

- According to God, a life that revolves around acquiring earthly possessions is incompatible with life in Christ.

6:9. *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.*

The word Paul uses means these people are determined to be rich. They won't settle for getting by with the necessities.

That's a dangerous determination. It will enslave you.

I came across a few lines of doggerel in this regard:

The years have passed, scant time is left;

His clothes are rags, his looks bereft;

His hair is white; his legs are tottery

But still he hopes to win the lottery. (Anon.)

- We must make sure we understand what Paul says in verse 9. God doesn't condemn the possession of money or things. He provides them.

What God condemns is the yearning for things—as if they could satisfy our souls.

It's a fact that people who want to get rich are much more materialistic than those who are rich.

George MacDonald wrote, *'The worship of Mammon/money is by no means a vulgarity confined to the rich. Many of these same people, having next to nothing themselves, still thought of money, houses, and lands as the only inheritance worth having. They were living examples that Mammon can be worshiped equally by those who do not have it as by those who do.'* (*The Laird's Inheritance*)

- This is important: In verse 9 Paul does not say, *Those who want to get rich may fall into a trap, or are in danger of falling into a trap.*

If you want to get rich *you will fall* into a trap. That's a fact. You will certainly be caught in a trap.

John Steinbeck wrote, *'Man is the only kind of varmint that sets his own trap, baits it, then steps in it.'*

- Verse 9 describes a downward spiral to destruction.

It begins with a choice—the determination to be rich. This causes the person to fall into temptation, which becomes a trap. In this trap many foolish and harmful desires take over. These plunge the person into ruin and destruction.

- When you make getting rich your goal in life, you enter a realm of temptation where you are in great peril.

6:10. *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.*

This proverb is often misquoted as *'Money is the root of all evil.'*

It's the *love* of money that is the root from which evil grows as the fruit.

Love of money seems to cost some people just about everything they have.

If you love money, evil is going to grow in your life.

This love of money is so strong that it draws Christians away from the faith, and life becomes miserable—they are pierced with many pangs.

- We have to be realistic. The need to make money is a fact of life. That's how we provide what our families need to live.

Making money is necessary and good. Loving money is not good.

- Many of our Christian brothers and sisters today are struggling because their means of making money to buy what they need has been taken away or is being threatened.

If economic conditions deteriorate, Christians who have may need to share with those in their church family who don't have.

That's what they did in the early church in Jerusalem so that there was not a needy person among them (Acts 4:32-37).

Only Christ's followers who have learned to be content and are not trapped by love for money are eager to give to those with serious need.

Many years ago in Siam (Thailand), when a king wanted to bring someone down in his kingdom, he would give him a gift of a white elephant. Since a white elephant was considered sacred, it required the best of care. That was very costly. It could not be given away or sold since it was a gift from the king. The care of the animal eventually impoverished the king's enemy.

So it is with craving to acquire wealth. Things seem very precious to us, but once we have them, they control us and may eventually bring us to spiritual ruin.

That's the danger in wanting to get rich.

• Do you have contentment? Are you restless? Nothing seems to satisfy you. You've heard God's truth today. God designed you to be fulfilled, to be truly contented, only with him.

• My Christian brother/sister, have you fallen into a trap?

Is there something you should eradicate from your life?