

Evil Love Affair • 1 Timothy 6:10

Life without money is impossible for all but the very few. The President of the United States and the Queen of England don't carry cash. Comatose patients in long-term nursing facilities don't deal with money. But the rest of us can't live without it. First graders need cash for field trips to the zoo or for milk at lunchtime. CEOs of Fortune 500 companies must write checks to the IRS just like the rest of us.

There is simply no escaping money. It is an essential part of life. Good or bad, rich or poor, Christian or not, we all deal with money. The question is: "What kind of a relationship to money do we have?" Do we love it or hate it? Does it control us or do we control it?

In I Timothy 6 we find four possible relationships to money. The first is contentment. I Timothy 6:6-8 establishes the baseline for a relationship to money.

The apostle Paul writes, "But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that."

Contentment is acceptance of a situation with peace and without regret. In other words, we adjust what we want to fit what we have instead of trying to adjust what we have to fit what we want.

Contentment does not come naturally. It is a discipline that must be learned. That's why the apostle Paul told the Philippians, "I have learned to be content." The clear implication is that there was an earlier time in his life when he was not content.

Paul's theology of money, which he is here sharing with Timothy and with us, establishes a minimum baseline for contentment. He explains that we were born with nothing and we will die with nothing. All we have in between is more than we started with or will end with.

More practically, he specifies that "if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that." Assuming that clothing may include shelter, he is saying that all we really need is a place to live,

food to eat and clothes to wear. Anything beyond that is extra.

Many have experienced a back-to-basics life. Henry David Thoreau moved into a shack by Walden Pond and enjoyed the contentment of living with little. The Great Depression in the 1930s forced millions of Americans back to basics whether they liked it or not.

What does this mean for us? We may or may not have to live on a baseline minimum. But whether we do or not, we can resolve to seek contentment in our theology of money. To be content is to accept what we already have as adequate to meet our material needs and live at peace. Such contentment promises great joy, less anxiety and enormous economic freedom.

But, such contentment is hard to come by in our culture. We face enormous pressures to be discontent

and to continually acquire more and more.

Since contentment is learned, those who want it must try it and practice it. For example, drive your present car another year rather than buy a new one; wear that coat one more winter; if the television quits, be content to get by for at least some period of time without replacing it. Be at peace with that which is basically and minimally adequate.

The second possible relationship in Paul's theology of money is found in verses 9-10, and it is an awful tragedy by comparison. He writes:

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. 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.

Look at the words Paul uses to describe this second relationship. In verse 9 it's "want to get rich." In verse 10 it's "the love of money." And, again, in verse 10 it's "eager for money."

Here is a person whose life is so focused on money that money has become a driving desire,

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a deep passion and a primary motivation in life. This person works mostly for the money. Everything has a price, including friendships. If it came right down to a choice between money and friends, money would be chosen because you can get other friends. This person is always looking for ways to get more money. He or she defines success and worth in terms of money. This person feels good when money is gained and feels bad when money is gone.

The Bible says that this love of money stands at the root of many of life's evils. Crime, divorce, depression, sickness and all kinds of sins have at their root the love of money. This is serious stuff! The desire to be rich, the craving for cash, the love of money is a major generator of all the sins in our lives and in our world!

Let's be honest. Many of us love money. Of all the relationships to money listed in I Timothy 6, love has been our most frequent relationship. And it doesn't take much money to love it. In fact, it doesn't take any!

The wisest and best approach to an evil love affair with money is the same as a sexual extramarital love affair. Admit it. Break it off. Build barriers against ever doing it again.

The third relationship in Paul's theology of money is in I Timothy 6:11-16 and is seemingly unrelated. In fact, some Bible scholars label most of the paragraphs of I Timothy 6 as "miscellaneous concluding admonitions". The contention is that they really are not related to one another. I disagree. The paragraphs before and after are about money, so I assume that the paragraph in between is about money, as well. See what it says:

But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight 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. In 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 to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which God will bring about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immor-

tal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen.

Money is not mentioned at all. But the third relationship to money is powerfully addressed. It is the relationship of godliness. Godliness focuses on righteousness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness in verse 11. In verse 12, godliness focuses on faithfully fighting for Jesus Christ and upholding a Christian witness. In verse 14, godliness is living a life that is unstained and free of reproach. And in verse 16, godliness is honoring the Lord. And yet there is no mention of money, although money precedes it and money follows it.

The "theology of money thesis" of this paragraph is simple: godly Christians don't focus on money . . . instead they focus on righteousness, faith, love, endurance, witness, testimony and honoring the Lord Jesus Christ. Money is not a consideration. It is important only in terms of living for Jesus Christ.

What does that mean practically? When money is gained—through an inheritance or an investment or a bonus or the sale of something or a paycheck—the issue for the godly Christian is how to please God in that gain. And, when money is lost—through theft, unemployment, a loss in investments or perhaps through some great calamity—the godly Christian focuses on how to honor God in the loss. In either case, God is always central and money isn't.

In I Timothy 6:17-19 the apostle proposes a fourth possible relationship to money: riches. Here he speaks specifically to those who already have riches and not to those who are seeking riches. Here is what he says:

Command 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. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In 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's instructions on how to relate to money are several. Number One: "don't be haughty."

Don't become proud, pompous and arrogant. Don't think that you are better or more important than anyone else simply because of how rich you are. This is stated because it can be a major pitfall of the rich. Don't think you are exempt or different. Don't be haughty.

Second, don't set hope on uncertain riches. Another likely possibility is to find security in money. Don't do that! Set your security in the Lord who gives us everything to enjoy.

A third instruction is to do good.

Assume that your purpose in life is to do good to others, especially through liberally and generously giving from you riches.

The pastor of a well-to-do church in Beverly Hills, California, once told me that from his years of observation, the more money most people have the less they give until they eventually have so much that they give nothing!

Paul's theology of money neither commends nor condemns riches, as long as those riches are not loved and as long as they are rightly related to.

So, we have four different possible relationships to money: contentment, love of money, godliness and riches. But there are actually seven different combinations that one might come up with in terms of those four relationships. For example, it is possible to have contentment and be at peace with just the bare necessities of life, to genuinely not love money, to perhaps be broke and not have any riches, but also be godly.

A second possible combination is to really love money. However, if you really love money, it is very difficult to be content, so that's excluded. And, if one really is in love with money then godliness is also very difficult, if not possible. Actually, it is possible to love money and not have any, but still have our lives totally built around the love of money.

A third possible combination is to have riches and not love them yet still not be godly. It's possible to have riches and not be content. Riches merely stand alone.

Combination number four is to have godliness and contentment. As Paul explains, this is a

wonderful combination. This person is focused on the Lord, is honoring him and is content to live at the economic baseline of food and clothing, and may, in fact, have no riches at all. If a person is godly and content there is no place for the love of money in that person's life.

There is a fifth possibility and that is to have godliness and contentment and riches. Of course, that would exclude the love of money because if you have godliness and contentment with your riches, you surely could not love money. That could not be the primary focus of life.

A sixth possibility is to love money and be rich. In our society, that is the quest of life: to really love it and to have it. That, of course, excludes both contentment and godliness.

Or, it's possible to have a seventh combination, and that is to have contentment and riches. There are many people who think that's the best way to do it. Don't be in love with money, but care about God. So, have money and be at peace with the money you have.

Which of these seven combinations would you like to describe you? Some will surely say, "I choose Number Five. I'd like to be godly, content and rich!" That's okay if you are already rich. But if you not already rich and you choose Number Five then you are really in love with money and have actually selected Number Two. You love riches, and that excludes both contentment and godliness. That is the greatest loss of all.

The best choice is to focus on godliness, choose contentment and accept riches if and when they come as a powerful but dangerous tool to be used for the glory of God.

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