

²² The blessing of the LORD brings wealth,
without painful toil for it.
²³ A fool finds pleasure in wicked schemes,
but a person of understanding delights in wisdom.

-- Proverbs 10:22-23

⁶ But godliness with contentment is great gain. ⁷ For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. ⁸ But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. ⁹ Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. 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.

¹¹ But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. ¹² 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.

-- 1 Timothy 6:6-12

²⁴ “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

²⁸ “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

-- Matthew 6:24-34

One year ago, the circumstances in which I found myself were very different than where I am now. I wouldn't say I was poor, but neither were my finances so secure that the thought of not having enough never crossed my mind. I never did enter pastoral ministry to get rich, but due to some family difficulties, the actual *reverse* of getting rich was happening—and quick. I don't feel free to tell you everything that went on as even I don't even really know what happened then, but suffice to say that the weeks and months of watching and waiting and praying were not happy times at all.

And it wasn't just the state of my bank account that had me tossing and turning—it was also the poverty that Mother Theresa herself called the “greatest poverty”, the poverty of loneliness. Whether you're a billionaire in a ten thousand square foot mansion or one of the poorest of the poor, loneliness affects us all. Yet being a pastor brings with it some rather unique pressures. Even if you have a strong eldership surrounding you, it's inevitable that a pastor feels alone as they are given the duty of caring for God's flock. This is because they carry the unique responsibility of not just caring for how people feel or the way their lives are going, but also where God seems to be intersecting in their lives. Pastors are shepherds, and on top of de-lousing the sheep and leading the flock to food and water, we're watchers who watch for signs of morning, of where the Kingdom of God is breaking through. By its very nature, pastoral ministry is lonely work—but when you add to this the reality that I was single, my loneliness was magnified.

It's remarkable how much can change in a year. My family's finances aren't completely secure, but I have learned to draw some boundaries—which may have been the lesson I needed to learn all along. And, as you may know, I improbably met a woman who one year from this past week will become my wife. (I should pause here to note that just because I am getting married doesn't mean I won't ever be lonely again. Only now, it's not quite so sharp.) One year later, it's as though every place where I felt desolation and the absence of God has been deliberately met by the Lord in a

systematic way. I wonder sometimes if God deliberately set up hard circumstances like bowling pins to prove that he can knock them down, but I don't think God's that manipulative. The best explanation is that the desolations I experienced were now knowing consolation and redemption because God is, after all has been said and done, *good*.

So why is it after being provided for in so many ways that I'm *still afraid*? There is no other explanation for my sudden wealth other than what our Proverbs text says: "*The blessing of the LORD brings wealth without painful toil for it*", so I know well that I don't deserve what I've received. At first, like a dog recovering from learned helplessness, I was only afraid that God would pull the rug out from under me in some capricious way meant to show me my dependence on him. Yet now, this fear is joined by another unwelcome cousin: what am I to do with all I've got? Now that I can call myself "undeservedly wealthy" in almost every way, the truth is that now instead of being afraid of never having it, I'm afraid of losing it altogether. In other words, the richer I am, the more fear I have to overcome.

This is counter to what most of us believe being wealthy will do. Though we may say with our mouths that "money can't buy happiness", we often intrinsically feel and behave as though it *will*. None among us are likely to say that an extra thousand dollars of spending money *wouldn't* help with an admittedly temporary euphoria over something new and pretty. But how much does we have to have before we stop relying on God's provision and see our blessings as a matter of *our* hard work and merit? How much do we need to accumulate before we do away with trusting God?

The answer is very little indeed. You can have pennies and pocket lint in your bank account and you can *still* forget that even though you have little, even this little bit is from God's own hand. The point is that when it comes to the spirituality of money, quantity is not the issue—our hearts and what we worry about *is*.

It's not wrong to plan for the future and save your money. That's not worry, that's wisdom, and Proverbs gives this kind of prudence a ringing endorsement. Sinful worry is when we devote an undue amount of concern and energy towards things we cannot control, things we simply have to leave in God's hands. This is something I personally struggle a great deal with. I'm a light sleeper to begin with, but when you add in chaotic forces of brokenness and the seeming randomness of rain falling on the righteous and the wicked, it's a wonder I get any rest at all. Yes, I do sin, but it's not necessarily as simple as saying all worrying is sin. Rather, my sin is born out of two other, deeper sins: Pride and distrust. Pride that by thinking about something I can figure out a way to avert disaster and distrust that God actually cares about me.

The kind of worry I carry leads me dangerously close to a love of money, the kind that is the root of all kinds of evil. It's not as though I lose sleep over how to cheat people of their hard-earned cash and so get into the "wicked schemes" that Proverbs talks about. But when I brood over the things I cannot control and think of ways to insulate the people I love (including myself) away from harm, I reject the wisdom of the Kingdom of God which says "*trust in the LORD, and don't lean on your own understanding.*"¹

The sin I'm less familiar with these days after long periods of trial is the one at the opposite end of the spectrum—that of assuming that everything will go exactly the way I want because God would never let harm come to me. Though the Bible does bear witness to God's gracious provision of life and strength in the midst of trial, we're never told that life in Christ will be blessedly free of difficulty or strife. In fact, we're told that the pursuit of living truthfully and passionately will only get us into more trouble—yet that throughout all our turmoil, we shall *not* be alone.

¹ Proverbs 3:5

However, there is a temptation to believe that because we follow the living God that all our financial burdens will cease. As you may know, there is a strain of teaching primarily found in the North American Church called “prosperity theology”. Simply stated, this teaching proposes that since God loves us, he also wishes our material prosperity. What prevents us from accessing financial security is our unbelief and unwillingness to “claim” the wealth God has stored up for us. Prosperity theologians often will then follow such teaching with steps on how to access God’s material blessing, one of which is “giving”—usually to that teacher’s ministry.

I’d like to emphatically state that this church and its teachers aren’t in support of prosperity theology. We consider it a very poor reading of the Bible in addition to being harmful to a great many people because it makes God into some sort of cosmic sugar daddy/genie and not our Lord and King. It is against this kind of theology that Paul himself writes in 1 Timothy that many have “*For the love of money...have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.*”² Though we often read Paul’s injunction against “love of money” by itself, it’s important to realize that the context of his teaching is actually against the idea that godliness is somehow a means to financial gain.³

What’s of interest to us here is that the word Paul uses to describe “love of money” is a single word in Greek, “philarguria.” It’s only used once in the entire New Testament as if to denote a very specific meaning. In this case, the love of money is more than just liking shiny things. It’s avarice, greed, an unquenchable lust for more that Paul is saying has led to the downfall of many because they believe following God will grant them some worldly advantage. The love of money twists our understanding of God’s true character and deceives us into thinking that following Jesus will keep our bank accounts and bellies fat. Wandering from the faith, then, is not just leaving the Christian faith entirely as we might read it, but having such a distorted view of God that we no longer have any idea

² 1 Tim 6:10

³ v.5

of who we're worshipping. When we think that following God is a ticket to financial stability, we end up living a lie.

So where are we to place ourselves then? To what extent can we expect that God will actually provide for our every need?

Jesus seems to make some reassuring noises when he busts out this famous passage from his Sermon on the Mount. He says not to worry or chase after the necessities of life because God cares more about humans than he does about grass. Sounds good, doesn't it? Yet all of this provision comes down to the crux of Jesus' teaching about provision in verse 33: "*seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*"

I find this very easy to believe in North America and especially in the circles I run in. Most people I know in our sort-of socialist welfare state are healthy and industrious, so even if you chose to permanently camp out in your parents' basement suite with an Xbox and a vast supply of Doritos, chances are you're not going to go hungry or naked. Yet I struggle to believe pursuing the Kingdom leads to provision when I think about places where Christians starve to death because of the sinful systems they live in. In other words, I can believe that God will provide for *me* as I pursue his Kingdom and his righteousness, but what of those whom he loves that don't live in such easy circumstances? A question that has pursued me for many years goes along the lines of how is God's provision meeting the Christian in Angola or Somalia? How is this promise of Jesus meeting the faithful living off of mountainous garbage dumps in Manila and Mexico City?

Though there is no definite answer that will satisfy any of us, I've come to three places to settle for now. The first is that many times, the good news of Jesus Christ *does* tend to have a documented "social lift" for the working poor. Sociologists note that new believers tend to stop drinking and gambling so much and start valuing things such as education, family, and honest work—all of which

results in progressively higher socioeconomic status. That is, it certainly seems as though that when people enter the Kingdom of God and take his demands of loving him and loving our neighbour seriously, a certain level of societal prosperity seems to follow. Love is actually *good* for business because it's an umbrella under which trust and integrity also meet.

Second, the clear commandment of God is that we who have more are to help provide for those who don't— with particular concern for those who follow Jesus with us.⁴ And this provision doesn't just start and stop with a monthly cheque to World Vision. A lot of people are trapped in oppressive systems that rob them of stability and security needed to live quiet, industrious lives. Part of living justly means not only throwing money at a problem, but to advocate for change in governments and cultures so that *everyone*—no matter their race, creed, or religion—may live in peace. You and I have power that not many others have: a voice and a life and freedom to use them. For the love of God and for our neighbours, we need to steward these gifts well by seeking the well-being of others.

Third, and the place I have come to most in recent days is that even when we are not given material provision, we can expect strength and endurance to live fully with God. I believe that even though Christians suffer as much as non-believers, every single one of us can live with hope because we know that no suffering is too great and that no death is ever permanent. Even more, I believe we are given our clearest sense of Christ's nearness to us when we suffer and that we are at times given an extraordinary capacity to live out our troubles. The stories of saints bear witness to this very fact, and, I think, so would you: God feels nearest when we are in pain. It is with a sense of wonder that I recall how clear-headed and decisive I felt during my family's financial troubles despite my own history of emotional instability. And, it was only when I had settled on singleness and made peace

⁴ Gal 6:10

with my life that I was suddenly given a relationship I long desired. This isn't to say that the key to getting these things is to pursue them from out of the corner of your eye, but that contentment and developing a theology of "enough" is what opens the door to pursuing God and his Kingdom first. When we identify ourselves first as blessed and beloved *as we are* instead of constantly longing for the things we do not yet have, we learn Kingdom contentment. The richest people are not the ones with the nicest houses nor the fanciest cars nor even the most friends—the richest people are those who are content with what they have.

We can't escape "love of money" by trying harder, though disciplined living is never a bad idea. In order to wean ourselves off of *philarguria*, we need to first hear God's proclamation of mother-love for us and our inclusion as sons and daughters. It's only when we realize that our identities are transformed from being self-sustaining strangers into the beloved children of God that we are able to let go of the things we think we need. We can be contented with what we have because we know *who we are* and that nothing, not even death, will separate us from the love of God.⁵

There's a scene from *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* that I find helpful. In the movie, we find out that Indiana's real name is Henry, named after his father—who only calls him "junior" because Indiana was what they named the family dog. Now our hero Indy has spent his entire life in his father's shadow, and never being called by his name of choice has for him meant in part that he never would be his own man. He would never be "himself". He would always just be "junior"—unknown and unseen.

Yet at the end of the movie, as Indiana Jones dangles from a cliff ledge while reaching for the Holy Grail, the treasure that father and son have both sought, Indiana's dad says something significant.

⁵ Rom 8:37-39

With his fingers just glancing the edge of the cup that carried the blood of Christ, Indiana says
“*I can almost reach it.*”

“*Junior,*” says his dad. “*Let it go! I can’t hold on.*”

“*I can almost reach it, dad.*”

Then, a brilliant line. A look of understanding crosses Professor Henry Jones Sr.’s face and he says one word. “*Indiana.*” Indiana Jones looks up at his dad, and the old man says it again.

“*Indiana, let it go.*”

Indy *does* let it go. It’s only as he realizes that his father sees him for who he is that he’s able to stop pursuing what he thinks will save and distinguish him. He doesn’t need the Holy Grail. He doesn’t need its prestige or power. He needed to know all along that he was *seen* and moreover, that he was loved and cared for.

If we hope to live in contentment, this is also what we need to hear most clearly. In order to leave the love of money behind, we need to have it replaced with another love. One that moth or rust can’t touch. One that never fades. One that is stronger than death. And one that never ends.

- 1.) How does being God’s beloved mitigate our fear?
- 2.) How can we help each other live contentedly in our different circumstances?