

Do not focus on goods, but be good and do good

1 Timothy 6:6-19

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Scientific research has shown that money does not make us happy. A scientific article I read yesterday begins with this sentence: “The relationship between money and happiness is surprisingly weak.”

The article does conclude that not the ownership of money is what makes people happy, but how they spend their money. “If money does not make you happy, then you probably are not spending it right”, is the title of the article you can also find on the Internet.

I was thinking about this theme of money and happiness because we have read a lot about money this morning in the first letter of St Paul to Timothy.

Now this is the last weekend that we focus somewhat extra on the mission of the church in this world – and we cannot avoid talking about the need to be generous.

The heart of God is generous; it burns with a deep love for humankind. We belong to him, and we desire to reflect his character by being blessing for all people. That is our mission as a church and as Christians individually. To speak of Jesus Christ, to love people, to care for them.

1 Goods: Love of money is root of all kinds of evils

We are not perfect yet; yes, we are saints because of the work of Christ for us, but at the same time, we are on a pilgrim’s road. We have much to learn.

Paul wrote his letter to church leader Timothy in Ephesus because of some major problems Timothy was facing in his church, and one of the problems there was that some did not focus much on serving God, but more on earning money, more and more.

They must have had the unscientific idea that money can make us happy. Well, that seems not altogether a matter of the ancient church only, is it?

Paul speaks to Timothy of people who desire to be rich, who love money, who crave for money. People who focus only on accumulating goods, instead of accumulating goodness.

I guess we all have those moments where our money and related issues preoccupy our mind. Will we not lose our job soon? Is the value of our house doing okay? If only we could buy a car. So often my own mind is preoccupy

with such mundane matters. Will we have money to send our kids to university in a few years time. How can we live comfortably when we are old?

And all this is not wrong. We have to be wise and organize our life well.

Our societies do depend for work and profit on people who have a good mind for business, who take wise financial decisions, who want to accumulate profit for their companies. Without those entrepreneurs our societies would be impoverished.

God had created in us an appetite for developing our life, for developing this world, and this does not happen without a healthy dose of ambition.

But how healthy are those captains of industry nowadays; I often wonder whether they do not suffer from a mental disease. What psychological problems are they suppressing? What makes someone work 80 or more hours per week, for accumulating ever more wealth that you can never spend in your lifetime?

Why do we need more things; is shopping a way of getting rid of pains and frustrations? To a certain extent, it seems to help for a while. Some good advice from the scientific article I read:

If you spend money, send it on experiences, not on things. Experiences increase our happiness more than increasing things in our home.

Don’t buy on credit, but pay first and consume later, is a sure way to be happier. Postponed pleasure of ownership give us the free joy of anticipation. It also gives us the time to avoid impulse buying that often works out badly and makes us feel unhappy.

This sounds like my grandmother’s wisdom – and scientifically proven.

Anyway, I am not here to tell you how to do your shopping. Back to the apostle Paul.

He does not tell Timothy that working hard for money, or having a business, or spending money, is a bad thing. But he does warn us against the desire, the craving, the love of money. The intention is important. Why work so hard. Why focus on more and more money?

The saddest thing is that career-wise, most people work hardest to move up the ladder of success and salary, when they have young children at home, in kindergarten, in primary

school, in secondary school.... And then suddenly the kids are gone and we wake up... if only we had had more time with them...

Never have I heard old people say: I wish I had worked harder when I was younger. What is much more common is, I wished I had spent more time with my family. With my friends.

What is our priority in life? St Paul describes the love for money as a temptation that plunges people in ruin and destruction and as the root of all sorts of evils. And some, in the church in Ephesus, have 'wandered away from the faith' because of this lack of good Christian prioritizing.

2 Being good: Godliness with contentment is the lifestyle of a Christian

Godliness should be our aim – living as God wants us to live. Loving people as God loves people. That is a million times more important than having again another 1000 dollars in your bank account or buying yet another pair of shoes.

It seems that Paul is not just advising Timothy about how to deal with some people in his church who were craving for money and goods, but that Timothy himself needed some more wisdom in this respect as well. Church leaders must be extra careful that the desire for money – and the status that wealth gives - does not rule over them.

We know of too many church leaders all over the world who have used their position, their fame, their networks, to enrich themselves. Especially those who say they speak on behalf of God must be extremely careful to be an example of godliness instead of greed.

There is something deeply worrying about pastors who become wealthy in the process of pastoring their sheep. What impression do they give to their church and to the world about having the right priorities? In our world where everything seems to be valued in monetary terms, we need more leaders who show that they do not care about money.

By the way, the opposite problem of under-paid pastors also creates problems. If people do not get enough in the bank account each month, their mind may just as well be focused on money all the time. Poverty is not better than wealth – both poverty and wealth can drive people to focus too much on money.

Paul tells Timothy:

But you belong to God. So you should stay away from all those things. Always try to do what is right, to be devoted to God, and to have faith, love, patience, and gentleness. We have to fight

to keep our faith. Try as hard as you can to win that fight. Take hold of eternal life. It is the life you were chosen to have when you confessed your faith in Jesus.

May our minds be pre-occupied with God, with faith and love and patience and kindness. May the mission God gave to his people be what drives us in life.

There is great gain in godliness. True gain cannot be expressed in dollars or euros. True gain is in living for our Lord. Paul actually says: 'There is great gain in godliness with contentment.' It is that lack of contentment we so often suffer from.

It seems we are not satisfied to have a roof over our head, the clothes we wear and the food we eat. It is not enough to have friends and family and a Lord to serve.

But mind you, we entered naked into this world, and naked we will leave it again. Empty-handed we came, empty-handed we will leave.

The banks, pension-funds, insurance companies, they think of a new scheme each year to convince us that if we do not have more, if we do not create more wealth, we may run into problems in the future.

They know that most people are not content with what they have today, so it is very easy for their salespeople to convince us, that we really need to work harder and give our money to them.

We work for being okay later and for this we suffer today, under the heavy arm of the god called Mammon. But we forget to work for the ultimate 'later', for eternity. We cannot take our money or house, our shoes, our car or our pension fund into heaven, but godliness is a value that last forever.

3 Doing good: the rich must be rich in good works

I think most of us can consider ourselves rich as compared to most others in this world; and Paul tells this to the rich:

Tell those who are rich not to be proud and not to trust in their money, which will soon be gone, but their pride and trust should be in the living God who always richly gives us all we need for our enjoyment.

Again, it is clear, Paul does not teach that having money is wrong – he says that we should not trust in it. We must trust in God, who always gives us all we need for our enjoyment.

Better enjoy what we have now – be content with it – as it will be gone soon. When we go

into our coffin, we take nothing with us. Better to enjoy what we have, with contentment, today, than to gather more and more and in the end, we leave this world naked.

God is not interested in what you leave behind in your bank account. He is not interested in how many pairs of shoes you have. He is not interested in my post-stamp collection. He does not really care much about your house.

God provides us with everything to enjoy. God is the giver, so our focus must be on him, not on stuff. And he gives it to enjoy. And then, Paul qualifies how we are to enjoy what we own.

He said that the rich must be rich in good works. Do not focus on your goods, but on being good and on doing good with what you possess.

Here St Paul is in full accord with the scientific article I read; the finding of a group of researchers was that spending money on others makes us happier than spending money on ourselves. A quote:

Given how deeply and profoundly social we are, it isn't any wonder that the quality of our social relationships is a strong determinant of our happiness. Because of this almost anything we do to improve our connections with others tends to improve our happiness as well and that includes spending money.

Giving is in accordance with our nature. We need each other, and helping each other makes us happier people. Our nature is created by God, whose character is to always give more; and it also the mission of the Church.

Whether we are poor or rich, God's character is our norm. He is generous for us, he is

generous for all, so with whatever we possess, we are generous to all. And giving to others makes us more happy in the process.

"Do good, be rich in good works, be generous and ready to share."

This is the mission of the church; this is our personal mission. Use whatever we have for the benefit of Gods kingdom. If we invest in other people, in the work of God, in the work of Gods mission, we store up spiritual treasure that we do take with us into eternity – and it gives us joy today.

Money in the bank will not benefit much; money used for others, for charity, for mission, this does benefit us with happiness, today and eternally – it is an investment in our heavenly bank account.

Conclusion

What are our priorities in life? Show me your agenda, show me your bank account, and your priorities become clear. Well, do not show me. But have a good look yourself. This reality check may be quite shocking actually.

We have an amazing mission in this world – the mission to reflect the goodness and generosity of God, the God who always gives and helps and blesses. How do we use our means to be a blessing for this world?

How do we reflect the character of God? By being his hands and feet in this world. We do not strive for maximizing the goods we own, but we want to be good, and we want to do good with all we have. And all things we do for our Lord and for others give us joy today and they last into eternity.