

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The Pauline letters of First Timothy, Second Timothy, and Titus are known among biblical scholars as the “pastoral epistles.” In short, these letters are Paul’s “mentoring moments” to the newest planters of the gospel within the fledgling Christian community. 1 Timothy addresses one of Paul’s closest comrades as he is officially ordained into a life of service and mission to spread the news of Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, The Anointed One, and to help those who believe to live according to the life of Christ.

This week’s text comes from the end of Paul’s first letter to this most recently ordained and new pastoral head of Christian communities. Timothy is one of Paul’s most trusted companions. The epistle of First Timothy gives a kind of short form “pastoral outline” detailing “what it takes” to be a servant leader in a new Christian discipleship community. But as Paul reaches the end of this first letter, he becomes less specific about details and more about a larger focus and a life-altering attitude. Paul’s message is both inclusive of all who genuinely seek a Christ-life, and exclusive of the world that seeks to suck the life out of that conviction.

As this week’s text opens it seems to focus on the difference between “contentment” and “the love of money,” the eternal lure of worldly riches. There is no condemnation of wealth in and of itself here. Only the power of the love and lure of wealth is called on the carpet. Early Christian theologian St. John Chrysostom noted, “Riches are not forbidden, but the price of them is.” That

“price” is too high when it conflicts with the spreading the love mission and love message of Jesus, God’s gift to all creation.

How do we as twenty-first century Christians keep the faith with the first-century instructions Paul gave to Timothy? We are given a template in today’s text:

*I command you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and Christ Jesus, who made the good confession when testifying before Pontius Pilate. Obey this order without fault or failure until the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 6:13-14, Common English Bible)*

What was Christ’s “testimony before Pontius Pilate”? It was not a “testimony of words.” We have gospel renditions of what was the brief exchange between Pilate and Jesus. The “testimony” Jesus gave was the testimony of his presence, the testimony of his promise, the testimony of his silence, the testimony of his faith, and finally the testimony of his life and upcoming death on the cross—the ultimate saving moment for all of creation.

That message is the “testimony” that Paul calls Timothy, and all Christians, to repeat verbally and replant constantly in their own lives as true disciples of Jesus. It is only through a life continually focused on that “testimony” that, in Paul’s words, believers “may take hold of the life that really is life.”

In recent years we’ve heard a lot about the “1 percent.” These are the richest of the rich. The latest figures from the Brookings Institution tell us that the top 1 percent in the United States possess more wealth *than the entire middle class*. The 1 percent has recovered from the recession of the mid 2000’s while the middle class’s share of that wealth has steadily declines since the mid-90’s. Worldwide, the top 1 percent are expected to own more than half of

the world's total assets by 2022, if trends continue. This growing inequality of wealth is extremely troubling and threatens to cause global turmoil in the future.

So, in today's text, when Paul refers to "those who in the present age are rich," is he speaking about the 1 percent? Yes and no. The 1 percent would certainly be included in this statement. However, compared to conditions in the ancient world and compared to today's global financial landscape, any American in the middle class is clearly "rich." So when Paul talks about the rich, he's talking about most American clergy and most members of U.S. congregations. And Paul's words to us are very clear: God expects us to be generous with our financial assets.

Unfortunately, most American Christians are not particularly generous. A couple of years ago, I read a book titled *Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give Away More Money*. After extensive research conducted in the years prior to the 2008 recession on giving patterns, the authors come to the sad conclusion that most American Christians are "remarkably ungenerous." For example, 20 percent of persons who identify as Christians give absolutely nothing to charity. They spend every dime that they earn on themselves. Of the 80 percent who DO give to charity, most give very little, usually only 1 to 2 percent of their total income. In the author's opinion, the primary reason Christians give so little is because we live in a radically consumerist culture, one that is intentionally designed to create permanent discontentment so that we'll buy more and more stuff. In short, we spend so much money on ourselves that we have little left for God and for people in need.

In this kind of hyper consumerist context, the words of 1 Timothy are especially relevant. In the text, Paul says:

*Actually, godliness is a great source of profit when it is combined with being happy with what you already have. We didn't bring anything into the world and so we can't take anything out of it: we'll be happy with food and clothing. But people who are trying to get rich fall into temptation. They are trapped by many stupid and harmful passions that plunge people into ruin and destruction. The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some have wandered away from the faith and have impaled themselves with a lot of pain because they made money their goal. (1 Tim. 6:6-10)*

By resisting greed, living simply, and being content with the basics, Christian disciples can afford to be generous. You see, our hope does *not* lie in our possessions or our prestige, or even in the accolades that we can receive if we are wealthy. Our hope lies in Christ. Paul reminds Timothy, "Tell people who are rich at this time not to become egotistical and not to place their hope on their finances, which are uncertain. Instead, they need to hope in God, who richly provides everything for our enjoyment. Tell them to do good, to be rich in the good things they do, to be generous, and to share with others. When they do these things, they will save a treasure for themselves that is a good foundation for the future. That way they can take hold of what is truly life" (1 Tim. 6:17-19).

So, in the end, generosity is not a burden but a blessing. Generosity is a life-giving practice. The prophet Micah reminds us that God himself has told us what is good and what the Lord requires from us: "to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with (our) God" (Micah 6:8).

Or, as Dolly Levi shares with the audience in the musical, *Hello Dolly*, “Money, pardon the expression, is like manure. It’s not worth a thing unless it’s spread around, encouraging young things to grow.”

Be generous with what you have been given. The rewards will outweigh the sacrifice.

There is an ancient hymn that I want to quote as I close. The third verse of the hymn, *Be Thou My Vision*, says:

*Riches I heed not, nor man’s empty praise  
Thou mine Inheritance, now and always  
Thou and Thou only, first in my heart  
High King of Heaven, my Treasure Thou art.*

When Christ is first in our heart, when Jesus is the source of our vision, we don’t need the world’s riches to satisfy our needs. Those needs will be satisfied by God. When we trust that our needs can be satisfied by God, then we can be generous with what we have... no matter how little that may be.

Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.