

Bible Studies for Life Series for October 15: Take hold of contentment

October 4, 2006

Posted: 10/15/06

Bible Studies for Life Series for October 15

Take hold of contentment

- 1 Timothy 6:3-12,17-19

By Kenneth Lyle

Logsdon School of Theology, Abilene

One of the great paradoxes of living comes in the balance between our desire to improve and our need to be content. We want to mature and grow as individuals. We educate ourselves in order to be more productive in the workplace. We exercise in order to improve our health and our quality of life. We admonish children to “grow up.” We admire those individuals who “pull themselves up by their own bootstraps” and become successful businesspeople.

In twenty-first century America, achievement is a virtue. Yet this drive to achieve and improve often comes at the expense of contentment. One could argue the lack of contentment in our lives drives us to do better—to improve.



[For a printer-friendly version, click on the printer icon at bottom of page.](#)

This paradox finds its way into our Christian commitment. What drives us to become better disciples of Christ if not a lack of contentment with our current walk? We are encouraged—quite correctly—to grow as Christians, to mature in Christ, to exercise spiritual disciplines. Yet we are to do all of this while we remain content—a paradox indeed.

Paul’s admonition to Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:3-19 offers some help in resolving this tension between our desire to improve and our need to be content. Here, Paul describes contentment as a quality of godliness. Paul connects contentment to godliness, and contrasts the love of money with the pursuit of righteousness.

Just a few weeks ago, a national news magazine ran a cover story with the title, “Does God want you to be rich?” The article chronicles the ongoing debate over the so-called “gospel of wealth.” On one side of the debate, there are those who argue that God wants his followers to achieve success in all things financial. Others suggest that the so-called health-and- wealth gospel flies in the face of Scripture.

Those who hold the second view may find support in Paul’s words to Timothy, “for the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Timothy 6:10). Those who believe God wants them to be rich might counter that in other contexts Paul argues wrong motives and misplaced emphasis on human effort to achieve sinless perfection reveals the evil “... right here with me” (Romans 7:21). Is money or motive the real problem?

In 1 Timothy 6, Paul draws a sharp contrast between two kinds of people—the teacher of false doctrine (vv. 3-10) and the “person of God” (vv. 11-19).

He begins the discussion with a description of “false teachers” who manifest selfishness as a lifestyle. Paul employs a litany of warning signs that help Timothy identify false teachers: conceited, lacking understanding, “he has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions” (6:4-5). The culmination of Paul’s description identifies the false teachers as those “who think that godliness is a means to financial gain” (6:5).

Here understand “godliness” as “religion” with the idea that these people believe religion provides an opportunity to make a profit. Paul is not talking about legitimate vocational ministers, and in fact, he has already announced to Timothy that those who preach and teach should be compensated appropriately (1 Timothy 5:17-18).

Paul warns of the persistent human tendency to use religion as a means to an end. Paul here speaks specifically of those religious charlatans of every era who preach the gospel in order to fleece the faithful. However, the use of religion for profit creeps into other aspects of our life, and we need to be on guard against pundits, politicians, and, yes, preachers who peddle religion as a means to an end. Moreover, we need to guard against that tendency in our own lives.

Money itself is not evil, and money employed properly as a tool can help us to do great good. Here, however, greed and temptation replace hard work, faith and benevolence. In contrast to those who use religion for profit, Paul sees profit in contentment (v. 6).

Paul employs the language of the ledger to describe our state. We come into the world with a zero balance, and we leave the same way (v. 7). For

Paul, the only gain comes from godliness with contentment.

Some scholars point to the similarity of Paul's words here with the ideological stance of Stoic philosophers. To be sure, there are some conceptual similarities—contentment with your current state and avoiding the trap of temptation. However, Paul is no Stoic, and he does not envision a static existence for the Christian. Rather, he points Timothy towards a life characterized by pursuit.

In 6:11-19, Paul describes Timothy as a person of God and encourages him to “flee from all this and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith” (vv. 11-12). In contrast to those “false teachers” who pursue wealth, Paul emphatically states the real people of God will “put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (v. 17).

Paul reminds Timothy that Christians need “to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share” laying “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” (vv. 18-19).

Often, churches hear this passage of Scripture during the ordination of a young minister. In fact, scholars suggest this part of 1 Timothy reflects an early ordination or baptismal formula. The admonition to “pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness” comes in the context of a life commitment.

Paul encourages Timothy to “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 ... and of Christ Jesus” (vv. 12-13). When we enter into the Christian walk, we enter into a life of pursuit. Take hold of contentment—the very idea is a paradox. If we were content, we would take hold of nothing. As Christians, we find contentment as we pursue the

things of God.

Discussion questions

- How do we resolve the tension between our desire to improve and our need to be content? How do we pursue contentment?
- Do we ever use religion as a means to an end?
- In what ways does money help and harm the work of the church?



News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.