

1 Timothy 6:17 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. ¹⁸Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. ¹⁹In 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.

Dear Friends in Christ,

I. “The Wealthy” – Does This Apply to You?

Oh no! It looks like I picked the wrong Bible reading. Did you hear how the reading began? It said, “*Command those who are rich...*” I don’t think many, or maybe anyone, here this evening considers him or herself rich.

But wait. There is this opinion from one wealth advisor, “If you don’t have to work,” he said, “then you are rich.” Say, that sounds good! But a few of you who are retired might have a different opinion. The Social Security check may keep the furnace going and macaroni-and-cheese in the cupboard, but is that rich?

Then what does “rich” mean? Maybe “rich” means having more than others. In 2014 the median household income was about \$54,000. So if your house made \$55,000, you have more than at least half of Americans. Maybe that is rich. But most wouldn’t consider \$55,000 as *rich*.

Maybe “rich” means that you have the dubious honor of the highest tax bracket. For that you need an income of \$467,000 a year. Most of us would agree that that would be rich. But I don’t think many of us make that.

So, like I said, maybe this word of God just doesn’t apply to us. We may as well just close the Bible and go home, right? Well, God certainly had in mind some rich members in Pastor Timothy’s congregation. But I think that for our purposes, God’s word talks more about an attitude, or attitudes, about earthly belongings, rather than income level.

So, are you rich or poor? (*pause*) I’ll bet you are wrong.

There was a newlywed couple. They had a car. A decent car, got them where they were going, but an old car with a couple hundred thousand miles on it. Going down the interstate, it would get up to the speed limit, but could do no more. The problem was semi-trucks, because they would come up on semi’s that were going slower than the speed limit, and they would try to pass, but when they got to the shock wave of wind at the front of the semi, their poor little car just couldn’t make it. One time, on their tail was one of those big \$80,000 pick-ups all chromed up and following about 18 inches off their bumper and they couldn’t do anything. A little embarrassed, the young man got kind of resentful about that “rich guy” in the fancy truck behind him, all uppity and high and mighty. He felt like the rich world was looking down its nose at him, poor him.

A few days later—same couple, same old car—they are driving down the main street in a town, about like 31W here. In front of them is a car with the paint peeling, taking a right turn, the blinker just a bulb on a wire duct-taped to the side of the car. Well you know what that young man thought? “Get that bucket of rust off the road!”

Do you know what the word hypocrite means? So was that young man rich or poor? He was whatever he wanted to be. He could be rich if he wanted to look down at other people, and he could be

poor if he felt other people were acting all proud. And I would guess this is common to a good many people. “RicI can choose to think of myself as either rich or poor, whatever I want, to maintain my superiority. You see the problem is not about how much wealth I have, it is about me. It’s a sin problem.

II. Thanks because Wealth Is from God

As a sin problem, there is only one solution. It is the solution that all of the letters, the “Epistles”, of the New Testament give. These books of the Bible we call Epistles, books like Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, and also 1 Timothy, have a similar outline. They begin with what God has done for us, and finish with guidance—rules if you will—for our Christian lives. This is important!

1 Timothy follows the pattern. 1 Timothy opens “*Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus.*” (1:2). It is an assurance of God’s friendship with us. A few verses later in the book we read the familiar words, “*Here is a trustworthy saying... Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst*” (1:15). We also hear, “*God wants all men to be saved*” (2:4). First, God tells us about his love to us in Christ Jesus. Only *after* that, in the closing words of the letter, does he tell us what he wants us to do. First God tells us that we are his people, then he tells us to act like it. It is *not*, act good and then you will be God’s people. None of the Epistles are written that way.

Following this pattern makes Thanksgiving genuine. When we first realize that God has been generous to us in spiritual and earthly matters, then we can be thankful. But if we think that first we need to be nice people and then we become God’s people – well, that leads either to arrogance or worry, not thanksgiving.

Wealth does that. It makes us arrogant or worried. That is why our reading at the end of 1 Timothy said, “***Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth.***” We need to think about wealth differently from how the world does.

Jesus once told a parable about a rich man. The man looked at all his wealth, the great returns from his farming, the bigger and better grain bins bursting with wheat. He said to himself, “*You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.*’ But God said to him, ‘*You fool!*’” (Lk 12:19-20). The problem wasn’t the wealth, the problem was inside that man. The problem with the rich fool in Jesus’ parable wasn’t that he was rich. The problem was that he was a fool. If he had been poor, he would still have been a fool.

And so we need to remember from our reading, “***God richly provides us with everything.***” God’s undeserved favor is the source of every blessing we have: the necessities of food, house, the clothing you have on. He is the source of luxuries like central heating, a closet full of clothing, vehicles. He gives the things that make life enjoyable: family, friends, your favorite food. He gives gifts that last more than a lifetime: a Savior, faith, a church, Word and Sacrament. We thank God because it is *his* gracious giving.

And since it is his gracious giving, it leads us “***to do good works, to be rich in good deeds, to be generous and willing to share.***” Giving thanks to God leads us to do to others what God has done for us: to give. We seek to “***be generous and willing to share.***” And if you don’t have wealth to give, give something in even shorter supply in this world your time, your attention. “***Be rich in good deeds.***”

III. Enjoy the Wealth God Gives

But something happens at this point. We hear about our blessings and belongings and that we are supposed be generous and share, and a good many people start to feel guilty about what they have. There is one really special phrase in our reading that I want you to remember it this Thanksgiving. Over the centuries, many Christians have had a similar confusion about wealth.

Long ago, in the last days of the Roman Empire, there was a fad that some especially “godly” people would go live on top of a free-standing column, like what you see on the US Supreme Court building. They would stay on a platform on top of the column for years, sometimes decades. All the while they were staying away from all the things of this world. I don’t know that they were doing the right thing.

One person told me of growing up in the hills of Kentucky decades ago. There was one church that tried to stay away from the evils of this world. They would go around in ragged clothes with unkempt hair, and not very well washed either. I wonder what God thought about that!

There have been some churches that won’t let people play cards or games or even sing songs because they see fun things as sinful things.

I hear people, who know that we once lived in Africa, talk about guilt feelings about all the excess of America and how little those poor people over there had. And they go to feeling guilty about what they have. I think they have their heart in the right place.

And maybe you (and maybe not), but maybe you have a vague sense of guilt when you are having a good time – by that I don’t mean drunkenness or immorality – just enjoying yourself.

Well, all of us would do well to remember these few words of our reading, “***God richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.***”

God provides us what we have. So we want to be generous with what we have, and he wants us to share. But we must also remember that God gives us things because he is a father who loves to give good things to his children.

Now if you think people bring out the Christmas stuff too early, I am going to get your goat. Think of God as the Father of a house and he is handing out the Christmas presents to his large family. As we children open our presents, each one different, our eyes sparkle and our smiles grow wide. And we thank our Father for our presents. And we share our presents with our siblings, and our Father smiles. But one of the children is intent, not just on sharing, but on giving away all of her presents. She just wants to give them all away. Do you think Father is happy? You know, I really don’t know. I really don’t know. And I don’t know if my little illustration here is 100% accurate. But if you have shared with others, given generously of your time, your treasures and your talents, and you still feel guilty that you have more than other people, remember that at least part of why your heavenly Father so generously gives you gifts is right here at the end of verse 17: “***for our enjoyment.***” He is a gift giver who loves it when you love his gifts to you. Be thankful for God’s blessings, and enjoy them, not with pride or worry or guilt, but with thanksgiving! Amen.