

THE LIFE THAT REALLY IS LIFE

1 Timothy 5:1 – 6:21

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What Needs Saying

“Life Changing Lessons.” That’s our current theme as we make our way through Titus, and 1 and 2 Timothy – often referred to as “the Pastorals.” Today I plan to talk about one life-changing lesson that’s urged in 1 Timothy 5 and 6 – namely, *contentment*. But first, there are some things that just need to be said.

If you’ve been in church at all over the last month or so, you’ll be aware that, when it comes to questions of identity and justice, the Pastorals represent some of the toughest texts in the Bible. In these books, homosexuality and murder are considered parallel “vices” (1 Tim. 1:9-10). Women are told to keep their mouths shut in church, and get to the salvific work of having babies (1 Timothy 2:11-15). In chapters 5 and 6 specifically, young widows are banned from a form of celibate, public, conversational spirituality that many of them had chosen; instead they’re to be quiet, get remarried, and keep the home fires burning (1 Tim 5:3-15).¹ Here too, slaves are told that the ethos of equality that’s built into the Body of Christ does *not* carry over into the household, so they’re to submit to their masters (1 Tim. 6:1-2).

One of the most important (maybe life-changing) lessons I ever learned was that the earthly instruments God uses to bring wisdom, revelation, and even salvation into my life are beautifully complicated and consternating. For example, I had a professor in seminary whose teaching was deeply inspired. From her I learned that the best way to talk about God is in terms of infinite knowing and being-known. Suddenly I was freed from the notion of God as a massive, exacting, white king in the sky. Yet, even as this professor taught about the holy power of relationality, she herself remained locked up in her office most of the time. In fact, she was known around campus as an elitist recluse who prioritized scholarship above people. God taught me and changed me both as I gratefully received, *and* as I critically challenged, all this professor had to offer.

Obviously there isn’t a direct parallel between engaging a human teacher and engaging the Bible. But, can a portion of scripture inspire us by eliciting both critical pause *and* grateful reception?

¹ Jouette M. Bassler, *1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus*. Abingdon New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 105. On the socially empowering nature of celibacy for women in the ancient and early medieval world, see Peter Brown, “Bodies and Minds: Sexuality and Renunciation in Early Christianity,” in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient World*, 479-493, ed. David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

Forget patting your head and rubbing your belly; can you furrow your eyebrows and open your heart at the same time?

I think you can. I think we can.

If the oppression-dismantling gospel of Jesus is our standard, then here in 1 Timothy, we seem to have drifted away from that standard—even when we factor in cultural norms of that time.² It's not just okay to say that, it's needful to say that. Because even in passages like this, where we feel baffled to observe acquiescence to dehumanizing cultural norms, even here, *we can see and know that those very responses of ours are part of what it means to be inspired and instructed by the scriptures*. As a person privileged in almost every social category, I confess that I acquiesce all the time to dehumanizing cultural norms. Well, here it is, too, in the Bible – a God-breathed and eminently human cultural product. Yet I truly believe there isn't a chapter or verse in the Bible that isn't a springboard for redeeming revelation. *In* the furrow-browed thoughts, and *in* the open-hearted feels, the Holy Spirit is teaching us and changing us.

Another way to be instructed by the scriptures is to listen for the wisdom contained within and alongside consternating passages, and then, to dig deep. A few weeks ago, Frances Woodson was our scripture reader for 1 Timothy chapter 2, which includes the famous injunction in 2:12, “I do not permit a woman to teach or assume authority over a man, she must be silent.” When I asked Frances how she was approaching this reading in her own mind and heart, she basically said, “I’m fine. I don’t expect anything different – this stuff is all over the Bible. Historical differences, cultural differences, yada yada yada... with an ancient book you’re going to get ancient mores. *Just get me to the good stuff*. I know there’s good stuff in there, right alongside that other stuff. As soon as I can find it, and focus on it, I’m all good.”

What an empowering way to approach scripture, right? In the spirit of Frances’ “just get me to the good stuff,” I’ve chosen today to highlight a specific portion of 1 Timothy 6 because of the deep truth it contains on the topic of contentment. Let’s listen...

Scripture: 1 Timothy 6:6-21

² Most scholars believe the Pastorals are written in Paul’s name several decades after Paul’s death. There are several reasons for this, but one of them is that the author doubles down on the restrictions placed on women and slaves, going much further than Paul does. In today’s passage, “younger women are barred from participating in [a] form of [celibate] spirituality nurtured by the widows’ group and restricted instead to domestic roles” (Bassler, 105). But Paul had championed celibacy (1 Cor. 7) and had declared that in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female (Gal. 3:28). Also, here in 1 Timothy, “slaves are exhorted to serve their masters—whether Christian or pagan” (Ibid.) with the obedience and deference that befits someone who’s owned by someone else. But Paul had “challenged... the compatibility of slavery with Christian love in his letter to Philemon” (Ibid.) and had stated that slave and free mean nothing in view of the larger reality of Christ (Gal. 3:28).

It seems the author of 1 Timothy is worried about what Roman outsiders will think if the Christian church appears to promote radical changes in the status or conduct of women and slaves. As in: “Don’t stand out too much, and don’t piss off your neighbors! We’re trying to make converts and avoid persecution, here. So just toe the line and stick to the social hierarchy!”

6 Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; 7 for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; 8 but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. 9 But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. 11 But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. 12 Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. 13 In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you 14 to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, 15 which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. 16 It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen. 17 As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. 18 They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, 19 thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life. 20 Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the profane chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge; 21 by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith. Grace be with you.

Real Life

I love the language in verse 19 of “*taking hold of the life that really is life.*” What does it mean?

All of us are primed to “take hold of life” in one way or another. When we exit the womb, our tiny fists clutch, our hungry lungs suck, our open lips search, latch, imbibe. From then on, we only get better at grasping the finite goods in our lives. As we get older, it’s about far more than the basics of food, air, shelter, and companionship. It’s about wealth and youth, accomplishment and beauty, admiration and pleasure, playthings and popularity.

The author of 1 Timothy, interestingly, does not condemn those who, “in the present age” have been given much in the way of finite goods. What he does say is that there’s a way of posturing one’s heart and one’s hands such that *the goods themselves* are not the source of life. The goods may still be in the picture, but the *real life* is flowing from elsewhere.

Real life, abundant life, eternal life: Our scriptures have so many beautiful ways of describing the transformed existence that Christ brings about in us. Our passage today pinpoints a hallmark of it, and that is contentment. For the remainder of our time, I want to share with you four “faces” (or dimensions) of contentment” that we can see shining through in this portion of scripture. The first face of contentment is enjoyment.

The First Face of Contentment: Enjoyment

In 1 Tim. 6:17 we read that God provides us with “everything for our enjoyment” (6:17). This is an extension of a thought offered earlier, in 4:4, which reads, “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving.”

These would have been fighting words for some receiving this letter. New Testament scholars believe there was a group of teachers in the community to whom this letter was written who advocated a lifestyle of strict austerity. Think: no drinking, no sexual activity, radical poverty, abstinence from foods, that kind of thing.³ The denigration of the material world was a common theme in many philosophies of the day, and early Christianity had to fight at every turn to defend the goodness of creation and Christ’s oneness with it.⁴

While the author of the pastorals certainly condemns drunkenness and licentiousness, so too does he condemn this harsh asceticism. The author completely rejects an “all or nothing” stance in relation to things like sex (3:2; 5:14, in view of celibate teachers), alcohol (5:23), and money (6:17-19). Instead he says: Enjoy sexuality!... but in relationships of monogamy. Drink a bit in accordance with health!... but don’t get drunk. If you are rich, all well and good!... but do not make wealth-acquisition your mainstay and be sure to live a life of generosity.

I have to say that I can really understand the radical ascetic position. Sex, alcohol, food, and money are notorious for cultivating profound *discontent* in human life, and I myself have struggled with addiction in at least two of these areas. It’s hard to recognize “enough” with these things. In a lot of ways, it’s easier to just stay away completely, to make a clean break, than to be constantly flirting with the devil.

As someone who’s been sober for just over four years, I have to say that there’s no single way to relate to the addicting things in creation. It’s going to vary according to your genes, your history, your psychology (etc.) and some of us do need to stay completely away from some of the good things in this world. But for the likely majority of people, the place we’re called to in relation to God’s yummiest gifts is in the land that lies between austerity and wantonness. This *via media* is a place of joy – a place in which I’m not just OK with what’s there, I’m absolutely delighted with, and thankful for, what’s there.

You see, when it comes to sex, alcohol, food, and money, you’ve got to be able to find the stop button and then press it when appropriate. And the only way to do find the stop button is to recognize when you’ve had enough. And the only way to recognize when you’ve had enough is to be mindful of the *delight* you’re experiencing as you eat your nachos or drink your beer or whatever. What gets us into trouble is mindless, numbing consumption. Or worse, captivity to an obsessive desire for just that *little bit more* that will finally bring fulfillment. In both of these scenarios, “enough” remains just beyond reach and we eventually crash on our hamster wheel of dissatisfaction. But reactionary abstinence can be just as dangerous. Why? Because when you’ve

³ Bassler, 26.

⁴ Irenaeus was one of the first theologians to offer a systematic rebuttal to the various gnostic Christianities of his day.

got a tamped down and muzzled inner Relisher, you've got a recipe for personal disaster. No matter how hard you press down on that lid, when the Relisher starts to boil and froth, it'll come out sideways and hot enough to burn. To avoid these extremes we've got to get to the task of enjoyment. We've got to be able to say, "Wow. Right here and right now – this is *good*. I'm so deeply thankful to God that I get to be a creature and to have the gift of this wonderfulness." This grateful joy is the contented Christian's ground zero.

The Second Face of Contentment: Surprise

Cheshire Calhoun, a Professor of Philosophy at Arizona State University, talks about contentment as a virtue. For her, contentment means "appreciate[ing] the goods in one's present condition and us[ing] expectation frames that enable such appreciation[.]"⁵ An expectation frame, as she explains it, is basically what we think we're entitled to. Expectation frames help to determine our stance toward our present situation – whether we're content with it or discontent with it. For example: I've got a plain turkey sandwich in front of me for lunch. If my expectation frame is that I'll eat *something* (hopefully something semi-nourishing) for lunch, then I'm content. If my expectation frame is that I'll eat like a five-star gastronome for lunch, then I'm discontent.

There is much in the biblical wisdom literature that would encourage us to have modest expectation frames with regard to the non-essential stuff of life. Reflecting on the basics of what's needed to live is one way to do this. In today's passage, we read: "for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these" (1 Tim. 6:7-8). There are actually a lot of reminders in scripture about the emptyhanded nakedness of birth and death.⁶ At the beginning and end there is nothing there at all except the immeasurables. A fragile breath. A delicate heartbeat. And, when death comes, even these most precious of gifts must be left behind.

The beauty of an appropriately humble expectation frame is that we are surprised – in a good way – by everything we receive in life. We don't take things for granted. We're prone to astonishment. We're amazed at the fact that, not only have we been given a life---one glorious life---to live to the fullest, but *also*, there are things we come across that seem to support and encourage this life, things that seem to want us to live, too. A turkey sandwich, for example.

Or a morning in which we wake from sleep. In the later nineteen sixties, Karl Rahner, the brilliant 20th century Roman Catholic theologian, wrote this wonderful little essay on theology and sleep. He surmised that often when people are having trouble falling asleep it may be because they fear loss of conscious control, which is a sideways expression of a deeper fear of death. In sleep, dreams – delightful or terrible – bubble, unbridled, from our depths. We do not know for sure whether we will wake. The world around us keeps on, sometimes imperfectly because we're not there to manipulate it. (When I was nineteen and sleeping, my house caught on fire and burned to the ground.) Falling asleep, then, is this beautiful moment when we, in

⁵ Cheshire Calhoun, "On Being Content with Imperfection," *Ethics* 2127 (January 2017): 327-352.

⁶ Job 1:21; Eccl. 5:15; Wis. 7:6. See also Seneca, *Epistles* 102.25.

Rahner's words, "quietly yield ourselves again to a life which is not ours"⁷ despite the risks. When you think about sleep this way, waking becomes this little miracle, this cause for true wonder. "I let go of it all for eight hours, and here I am again! How amazing!" This surprised or astonished feeling – which is closely related to true gratitude – can be cultivated not just for sleep but for the other things you might put in your modest expectation frame – a meal, a breath, a bath, a hug, a roof over your head. Such cultivation is one of the keys, I think, to being content and to minding Jesus' charge to not ruminate over material concerns, but to receive everything as gift (Matt. 6:25).

The Third Face of Contentment: Stillness

Verse 9 of today's passage says this. "[B]ut those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction" (6:9).

Trapped. Have you ever seen a trapped animal? My parents took me to the Como Zoo a lot when I was a kid. The late eighties were dark days at that zoo. I don't know how many helpless, hapless creatures I saw pacing walls and shaking cages. They looped and lumbered and leapt, and then did it all again. They *could not be still*. A fruitless courtship of a freedom that would never come.

A human soul fixated on its own sense of unfulfillment, hellbent on acquiring more of this and possessing more of that, is like a caged animal. It never stops its restless roving. It always thinks the next loop or turn will be the one that brings freedom and rest. But freedom and rest never come, "enough" never comes. This is what Calhoun calls "chronic discontentment"—where we're unable to stop and appreciate what is good even in imperfect circumstances,⁸ and so we *just keep going*. Unhappiness is utterly exhausting.

Lately I've been pondering how the ruinous drive to acquire and consume isn't just about material things. In myself, I notice this frenzied need to gather unto myself more and more facets to who I am, and what I do, and what I know, and who I know. The phrase that comes to me is "identity greed." I get up each morning, and how many selves *must* I own and master? Attentive mother, engaging professor, attuned theologian, honest preacher, present wife, wise friend, careful reader, healthy cook, regular exerciser, responsible homeowner, exuberant auntie, "woke" ally, insightful writer, encouraging mentor, supportive daughter. Not to mention: plant-waterer, laundry-folder, grocery-shopper, and person-who-doesn't-let-the-soapscum-completely-annex-the-bathtub.

You better believe it's almost impossible to find stillness most days. You better believe I often feel like a caged animal. You better believe all of this often feels "senseless and harmful," and that the pressure I put on myself to be "all that" sometimes does threaten to plunge me into "ruin and destruction."

⁷ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* III.16.

⁸ Calhoun, 329-330.

I try to avoid projection, but I do wonder if others around me struggle with this nomadic craving to be something just a little bit more or a little bit different. In this country we switch jobs every 4.2 years. We overschedule our kids. A quarter of us move houses every 5 years. Sixty-one percent of us report not having enough time to do the things we want to do.⁹ We're restless to get after that next thing that's really going to make us feel complete.

What's this roving and amassing really about? What are we afraid of missing out on? What would "enough" look like? What would it mean to get ruthless in the pursuit of a singularity of intention? To cull expectations, to discern calling, to choose the one thing necessary?

Listen to Thomas Merton's words on this subject [excuse the non-inclusive language as I read it verbatim]:

One who is content with what he has, and who accepts the fact that he inevitably misses very much in life, is far better off than one who has much more but who worries about all he may be missing . . . the relative perfection which we must attain to in this life if we are to live as sons of God is not the twenty-four-hour-a-day production of perfect acts of virtue, but a life from which practically all the obstacles to God's love have been removed or overcome. One of the chief obstacles to this perfection of selfless charity is the selfish anxiety to get the most out of everything, to be a brilliant success in our own eyes and in the eyes of other men. We can only get rid of this anxiety by being content to miss something in almost everything we do. We cannot master everything, taste everything, understand everything, drain every experience to its last dregs. But if we have the courage to let almost everything else go, we will probably be able to retain the one thing necessary for us— whatever it may be. If we are too eager to have everything, we will almost certainly miss even the one thing we need. Happiness consists in finding out precisely what the "one thing necessary" may be, in our lives, and in gladly relinquishing all the rest. For then, by a divine paradox, we find that everything else is given us together with the one thing we needed.¹⁰

The Fourth Face of Contentment: Generosity

Generosity is the last "face of contentment" I want to us to consider this morning. In our passage, those who've been given much are told to be "rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life" (1 Timothy 6:18-19).

When Ryan and I were in our early twenties, we volunteered for a crisis call center in Minneapolis called "Love Lines." We often took the red-eye shift, from 1:00 am to 7:00 am. At Love Lines we learned much about the contours of human suffering and the almost miraculous power of a listening ear and a praying voice. But before they put us on the phones, we had to go

⁹ <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/how-often-do-people-change-jobs-2060467>; David Elkins, "The Overbooked Child: Are We Pushing Our Kids Too Hard?" *Psychology Today* 36. No. 1 (2003): 64-70; https://www.protectamerica.com/home-security-blog/just-for-fun/many-times-americans-move-lifetime_12718

¹⁰ Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, 133-137.

through a series of training sessions. I remember one session very vividly because of the woman who led it. She was a seventy-something charismatic Christian who was white, probably middle-class, retired, likely a grandma. This woman's body, voice, and comportment seemed to sing with the fullness of the divine presence. I remember her eyes shining as she told us this:

I've found the secret, people! I spent most of my life searching for it and now, oh, it's more wonderful than I ever could have imagined! Here it is: I have all I need, and the more I give it away, the more it comes to me! I've no longer anything to fear, people, because each day I wake up and I receive from God, and then I shower it on other people. And when I lay my head on the pillow at night, I'm shocked to remember that, tomorrow, it's all coming back to me and then some.

If you want to work these phones, you have to accept God's manna each morning – all the gifts and resources, everything he drops into your mind, your heart, and your pocketbook. And you've got to be satisfied with it and openhanded with it and unworried about it. And then you've got to shower it on others! It's like living in a river sourced by a never-ending stream. Folks, do you know how alive this will make you? Do you know how healing it will be for hurting souls to encounter you? Do you know how powerful your prayers will be? You'll be a regular Jesus with skin on! Halleluiah!

I doubt this woman's earthly life persists any longer. But the holy energy that flowed through her continues to enliven my spirit each time I call her to mind. She had found *the* way of being to which we are called at the end of 1 Timothy. She rested in a state of joyful, easy gratitude. She made radical trust in God's care her constant dwelling. She actively rejected a life of self-gratifying accumulation. And she gave, and gave, and gave – her time, her money, her presence. She gave not because she was forced to do so by someone else in power; that is another thing entirely. Hers was a strong, self-assured generosity. She had found and owned the Kingdom treasure Jesus was always declaring and enacting. You know, barrels of water turned suddenly to wine; five thousand fed from one boy's lunch; banquets thrown for profligate squanderers; healing lavished on shattered bodies; fresh life conjured from stone cold death. In other words: shocking, preposterous abundance. Abundance *against all odds*. Abundance that *can't not* just fill you right up and spill out onto others. This is “godliness combined with contentment” (6:6). This is “the life that's really life” (6:19).

Let's pray.

Prayer

God I confess to you, in the presence of these your beloveds, that I, who have been given so much, am so often discontent and restless. I pray that you will give me, and anyone here today who is like me, a new resolve to seek you and the contentment that only you can give. Shepherd us to the place where we're able to say, with the Psalmist: “I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother; like I weaned child I am content” (Ps. 131:2). In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Benediction

May you enjoy God's yummy gifts. May you come to find rest in the land of "enough." May you not take for granted even the smallest of life's blessings. May frenetic striving cease. May fear of scarcity have no place in your heart. May you splash around in the stream of God's abundance and pull others into the stream along with you. May you come to discern, and then fix your eyes entirely upon, the "one thing necessary." Go in peace.