

## **The money trap: 1 Timothy ch.6**

*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.*

Do you remember National Savings? Those little stamps with a picture of Princess Anne or Prince Charles that you stuck into a little book — and then when you got enough, you could pay them into the Post Office? Sticking my stamps into my book was a highlight of the week when I started school in the 1950's (simple pleasures!) — but somehow, you were helping to rebuild the post-war economy and building up your savings at the same time. I was quite sad to close my P.O. account when I got married — and put the £54/7/6d towards our first mortgage. Now it's all about “wealth management” (a term that makes me slightly queasy) — or else you just buy a ticket on the National Lottery and give yourself a chance of becoming a billionaire.

Attitudes to money have always been a bit of a sore point for Christians. All those uncomfortable stories in the Gospels about giving up all your possessions — woes to the rich and blessings on the poor — seem to imply that you're better off without it. Jesus lived a life of radical poverty, and inspired many of his disciples to do the same (like St Francis). But does that work for everybody? Isn't money a sign of God's blessing? Why are there so many warnings in the Bible about the dangers of wealth?

“Money is the root of all evil” — isn't that what the good book says? Actually, no — not quite. What it says is this: *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. 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* (vv.9-10). It's not money itself that's the problem. It's when making money (and having money) becomes an end in itself, when it becomes an all-absorbing addiction, detached from the society — the community — of which it's a part.

One of the things we've learnt during this year of coronavirus is the interdependency of health and wealth. At the beginning — back in March — it was all about protecting the NHS. We were prioritizing health (saving lives) over wealth (keeping the economy going). But as time goes by, it becomes clearer that you can't really do one without the other. Saving lives costs money — money well spent, but it's got to come from somewhere. Shutting down businesses dries up the flow of money into the economy that keeps the NHS going. It also creates more problems. If people can't work, they can't eat, they can't pay the rent — and they're more likely to get sick. Making money and saving lives are mutually interdependent — somehow, we've got to get the balance right. (Who wants to be the Chancellor of the Exchequer? Not me!)

Some years ago, I heard Tony Benn give a lecture on the Bible and politics. He talked about what he called the “civic socialism” that transformed the big industrial cities of the 19<sup>th</sup> century like Manchester, when the money-makers, the manufacturers (the ‘Cottentots’ who built Alderley Edge) began to put their money back into the life of the city. When they began to realize that drains, and sanitation, and roads, and schools, and housing for the poor — all the infrastructure that makes life in the city tolerable — were actually their business. They weren't just making money for themselves, but ploughing it back into the world they were part of. Many of them were Methodists, or Quakers, or Unitarians — like Mrs Gaskell and her husband, or the Gregs of Styal Mill.

That's an attitude to wealth that 1 Timothy would approve of. If you've got it, don't hoard it: use it wisely and well: *They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasures of a good foundation for the future, so that they make take hold of the life that really is life* (vv.18-19). Being “rich in good deeds” means using your money (whether directly or through taxation) to benefit society. (And yes, since you ask, I do believe there is such a thing as society!)

By itself, money isn't either good or bad — it's neutral. What's dangerous is when it becomes a craving (v.9), an addiction, an end in itself. I do actually know someone (nobody you know) who will leave the table in the middle of Christmas dinner to check her shares — it's rather sad, really.

Most of us haven't got that sort of money, thankfully. But the people 1 Timothy was talking to are not the mega-rich — just ordinary artisans and small businesses, the backbone of the early church. And cultivating a sane and healthy attitude to our possessions (however small) is something that affects us all. Ultimately, it's about learning to inhabit the world as a community of giving, not a community of getting. It's about living a life of contentment and thankfulness for what God has given us: *A devout life does bring wealth, but it's the rich simplicity of being yourself before God. Since we entered the world penniless and will leave it penniless, if we have enough bread on the table and shoes on our feet, that's enough* (vv. 6-7, *The Message*).

*Thanks be to thee, Jesu Christ,  
for the many gifts thou hast bestowed on me:  
Each day and night, each sea and land,  
each weather fair, each calm, each wild.  
Each thing I have received, from thee it came:  
each thing for which I hope, from thy love it will come;  
each thing I enjoy, it is of thy bounty;  
each thing I ask, comes of thy disposing.*

God bless, Loveday  
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