

Eternal Life

A Sermon for September 18, 2016

1 Timothy 6:6-19

[Lansdowne UMC](#)

I want to focus this morning on our reading from 1 Timothy chapter 6. And I want to use one verse in it as a springboard, but it's almost certainly not the verse you are thinking of. It's verse 8, which reads like this.

Paul writes to Timothy, "But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these." What do you think? Could he really mean it-- that he's content with just food and clothing? Actually the word translated clothing more literally means "covering," and so I imagine that Paul the tentmaker might have had also envisioned shelter as part of his "coverings."

But could Paul actually be telling the truth? Could he actually, really and truly mean it? Or when he says in Philippians 4 that he had "learned how to be content in any circumstance," do we believe him to be telling the truth? Or do we think he was saying what he thought the church wanted to hear?

As I've mentioned before, I grew up in the United Methodist Church. I reached a crisis point in my faith in high school, not because of any particular circumstances in my life, although there were plenty of those, but simply because I started paying attention to what was going on in worship. I began to ask myself questions. First it was just a simple, if somber question: "does

anyone in this room believe what they're saying when they pray the Lord's prayer?" Later the questions got more difficult: did the resurrection actually happen? I came to wonder if all of our words were simply empty church-speak. Perhaps you've had similar thoughts from time to time.

Part of my problem, I think, was that what I heard at church was detached from reality as I experienced it. We were urged to have good, holy thoughts and actions. Church was the pep rally that cheered us into being good people. We came to church for morality therapy-- to try to help us to do better in the future than we'd done in the past. (I'm getting really honest this morning!) Of course, the name of God was invoked to provide it with some extra "get to it!" force, but at the end of the day, it seemed to me that the elephant in the room was that nobody actually believed it.

As far as I could tell, we would try not to willfully trespass across the boundary lines that God had set, and we'd try to do good deeds. But when we failed, we'd just go ahead and pray, get forgiven, and then go back to business as usual. Maybe when we were feeling particularly inspired, we would try a little harder the next time.

Although I never would have said it this way, I felt that the good news was just good advice.

For some time, the words of the church became for me empty Christianese. It seemed to me like church had this shared language of self-deception-- or at least suspension of disbelief.

I'm not saying that I was an atheist, but I did worry that I was Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, and the whole congregation was chanting, "pay no attention to the man behind that curtain."

To brutally shorten a long story, what ended up bringing me face-to-face with God's grace were people I came to know whose lives only made sense if the good news was more than good advice. People who witnessed, not only with their words, but with their very being.

I've spoken a little bit about the mission work that Katie and I are a part of in the Dominican Republic. Well, more than 10 years ago, before Katie and I were married, I met Pastor Mercedes. She and her husband, Pastor Isaias, had come to stay with Katie's family. Katie had told me about the incredible faith that she'd witnessed in the Dominican Republic. She'd also told me about the desperate poverty that many there face. So when Pastors Mercedes and Isaias came to visit, I was interested to witness their faith and get to practice my spanish.

As it turned out, Pastor Mercedes family was blessed indeed. They never lacked food to eat (rice and beans), or clothing to wear. Their family of 6 lived in a 10 foot by 20 foot room behind the altar of the church. By all American accounts, these should be desperately sad people. But when I met her, Pastor Mercedes showed me what the bible means when it talks about the joy of the Holy Spirit. She was not simply content in her circumstances-- she oozed joy and a love for life viewed through the eyes of the God whose power had come into her life.

Pastor Mercedes showed me that being content with food and coverings is not empty idealism. Whereas so many, rich and poor alike, tie their joy up with their circumstances, Pastor Mercedes put God first. Her joy is not dependent on her possessions.

You may recall that in Matthew chapter 6, Jesus teaches his disciples, saying “Don’t worry and say, ‘What are we going to eat?’ or ‘What are we going to drink?’ or ‘What are we going to wear?’”³² Gentiles long for all these things. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them.³³ Instead, desire first and foremost God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness.”

Before meeting Pastor Mercedes, I could not imagine that Jesus’ words were true. “Desire first and foremost God’s kingdom.” I thought those were empty idealistic words. Of course I would never have said that to anyone because you don’t say that about Jesus. But once I met Pastor Mercedes, I’d met someone whose life was unintelligible if the words of scripture weren’t true.

God filled Mercedes’ heart with love. And that love had to be poured out into action. At some point about 25 years ago, she began to take rice and beans to a Haitian worker village. Every day she went and just fed them. She didn’t ignore the Lazarus on her doorstep. If someone asked her about her reasons, she told them about her God who loved her and gave her love for others. But otherwise she just loved.

A year after she began doing that, people started to say, “You know, this whole operation would be a lot easier if we had a

building that we could meet in and serve out of.” And so they built a church, so that they could be in ministry to their community. Today that church has a school that feeds 150 children daily. They have a water purification system that supplies 5-gallon jugs of water to some 2000 people in the village and beyond. Dominicans love to hate Haitian refugees for coming across the border illegally, bringing disease, crime, and burden to their public systems. But God gave her love for them, not just in her actions, but in her heart as well.

Mercedes was not the last person I would meet whose life made no sense if the Gospel weren't true. Whenever this would happen, I'd begin to realize how little faith I actually had. I don't know about you, but my first reaction to people like this is to dismiss them as spiritual superheros-- people who have powers that we ourselves could never have. In the same way, we like to dismiss Jesus.

Jesus tells us in John chapter 14 that those who believe in him will do even greater things than he did. But we don't listen to the one that God sent back from the dead. We're like the Rich Man, begging that God be proven true for others, but when the proof comes in the witness of people who have come out of death and into life, we don't believe them.

The only thing that makes sense of witnesses like Paul, witnesses like Mercedes, is that scripture is telling us the truth. Not just idealistic gas, but God's honest truth.

Paul is a person whose life is unintelligible if the gospel is not true. You don't willfully give up everything you have to live on for the sake of the gospel unless the gospel is a true reservoir of life. Paul had been the greatest persecutor of the Christians who became the Church's greatest ally in reaching out to the Gentile world for Christ. *This* is the one who says, "if we have food and clothing we will be content." Maybe it's worth listening to what else he says about his source of life.

Verse 12: "Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called"

Verse 13: "I charge you before God who gives life to everything.... Keep this commandment without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Verse 17: "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in **wealth**, which is uncertain, but to put their hope in **God**."

Verses 18-19: "Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds and to be generous and willing to share-- In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of **the life that is truly life**"

You see, there is this assumption underlying the hope that the new testament speaks about. We live in the overlap of two ages of history. One of these, scripture calls "the present age." This is the life as we see it, with its violence, its pain, and its suffering. The other age is "the coming age" or "the age to come." This is the age of eternal life. The age of the Kingdom of God on Earth. And the conviction of Scripture is the the coming age has indeed

come in Christ, and is now overlapping with the present age, which will soon pass away.

When scripture speaks about *eternal* life, then, it's more than simply life after death. It's the life of the age to come being brought into the present. This is the life that is truly life. And it is characterized by hearts and lives that have been renewed and recreated to live according to God's will.

In other words, the Christian hope of eternal life is not that one day you will have pie in the sky when you die. It's hope that comes from the reality that Christ has sent his Spirit as a down-payment on the fullness of the eternal life that is coming when Christ again appears. And so real sense it doesn't matter what your circumstances are-- you can be content.

But *how* we get sucked into the life of the present age that isn't really life. Paul warns us not to put our hope in wealth, because it's fleeting and empty rather than eternal and fulfilling, like hope in God. Paul knows that whether you want "a lot more money," or even if you are just always wanting "a little bit more money," you are not content in your circumstances.

We hear that we shouldn't desire more money, that we should be content with what we have. We might be able to intellectually affirm why this is the case. Maybe we can imagine how the love of money is the root of kinds all evils. And while many love to say that "money can't buy you happiness," how often do seem to hope and bet on the fact that maybe it just will after all.

Paul tells Timothy to run away from all of this. Run away from from the traps and the temptations that have caused so many to get caught-- from what Paul says are the “foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.” Flee these things. Don’t entertain them. Run the other way. And what is the other way? Toward the things that the Spirit brings-- righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.

Do you feel it happening already? Do you feel yourself hearing Christianese rather truth? It’s amazing how much we’ve trained ourselves to dismiss everything that scripture says, isn’t it? Things can become empty words so quickly. And apart from God’s grace, apart from the presence of God in your life, these are just empty words.

The reality is that apart from Christ, we are held captive to the ways of the present age. Our hearts don’t long for God, our hearts long for money, or other things don’t have life. We could not even know that this age to come, part from the power of God at work in lives that witness to God’s truth: Jesus, Paul, Pastor Mercedes-- and countless others whose lives are unintelligible if the gospel is just good advice.

But Paul said in Galatians 1:4 that Christ gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age. The lives of faithful Christians only make sense if salvation isn’t about fudging the numbers on God’s scorecard of sin or virtue. They only make sense if God’s grace transforms us into people that will be able to act as Paul describes.

Charles Wesley's hymn "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing," is the first one in our hymnal. He writes his conviction: "He breaks the power of canceled sin, He sets the prisoner free;"

The conviction of the earliest Methodists, and the conviction of Scripture, for those with ears to hear, is that Christ breaks the **power** of sin. And that this very power of Christ comes into our lives when we put our trust in Christ, and makes us witnesses.

You can trust the one that came back from the dead. In him, you will find the only source of life that is truly life. In him, you will find the only source of true contentment in your circumstances. In him, you will find *eternal* life.