LASTING INVESTMENTS

Believers should be motivated by the value of living a godly life as opposed to material gain.

Years ago my family and I moved overseas to serve as missionaries. Not long after we arrived in the country where we were to live, I had a long conversation with another missionary who already had been living there for several years. One of the things we talked about was how the strong desire for material things seemed to permeate other cultures just as it did in the United States.

My missionary coworker described to me in a parable his own family’s struggle with the temptation of materialism. He said, “When we answered God’s call to missions, we thought we were prepared to give up everything. We promised the Lord that we would be satisfied with a single donkey and a grass hut if we were in His will. Then we arrived on the mission field. We looked around and noticed that other folks had two donkeys and a two-story grass hut. We began to feel discontented with our one little donkey and small grass hut. Before we knew it, we started complaining that we deserved two donkeys and not just a two-story grass hut but also a detached garage on the side.”

My coworker’s words contained a warning: Even committed Christians must constantly guard against getting sidetracked by material desires and losing their focus on serving Christ. In this session’s Bible passage, Paul warned Timothy (and believers today) about the dangers of greed.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 TIMOTHY 6:3-21

Paul began his first letter to Timothy with a command to “instruct certain people not to teach false doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:3). The apostle explicitly addressed the false teachers’ destructive behavior several times in the letter
Moreover, the false teachers’ negative influence in the church frequently lay in the background of Paul’s instructions to his young missionary coworker. The two identifying marks of the false teachers were first that they had strayed from sound gospel teaching and second that their false teachings led them to practice and promote ungodly living (6:3). The false teachers and their followers were conceited, lacked understanding, and had an unhealthy interest in useless arguing. They created a toxic environment in the church characterized by envy, suspicion, and destructive talk. Their underlying problem was their attitude toward ministry; they considered that teaching false doctrine was a good way to make money (6:5).

Paul countered the greed of the false teachers by calling for believers to strive for godliness with contentment (6:6). He did not advocate poverty for poverty’s sake but rather challenged the Ephesian believers to live simple lives in order to stay focused on serving the Lord. Paul ended this discussion of the false teachers by detailing the self-inflicted wounds brought on by greed.

Timothy was to act differently than the false teachers. He was to flee from their false teaching and pursue the sound doctrine that resulted from God’s gift of eternal life. The path would not be easy; he would be required to “fight the good fight of the faith” (6:12). As Christ had done when standing before Pilate, Timothy needed to make “a good confession” in his struggle with his opponents (6:12-13). Paul ended this section with a doxology of praise to God.

Paul then gave a few final instructions to help wealthy believers use their wealth properly. He encouraged them to see their possessions as God’s gifts to be used for His glory. They were to be generous and ready to share, focused on eternal life that would be fully realized in the coming age (6:19).

In closing his letter, Paul again addressed Timothy by name and urged him to guard the gospel message and sound doctrine and to avoid the behavior that characterized the false teachers. Paul reminded Timothy of the urgency of his mission in Ephesus. False teachings had led many to make a shipwreck of their faith (1:19-20). Timothy knew the true gospel that was the antidote.
(see 1 Tim. 6:4-5). Faithful, effective church leaders deserved support for their spiritual labors (5:17-18). However, the false teachers were putting self-interest and greed above the church’s well-being. Paul had previously warned potential overseers and deacons about the dangers of greed (3:3,8); here in 6:6 he identified the believer’s proper approach: **godliness with contentment**.

The specific Greek word translated *contentment* appears in the New Testament only here and in 2 Corinthians 9:8. It refers to being self-sufficient and was considered a virtue by some Greek and Roman philosophers. However, Paul was not advocating a sense of independence from God gained through one’s own resources. Rather, he was urging just the opposite—a reliance on God that leads to a sense of satisfaction no matter the circumstances. Paul used a related word in Philippians 4:11 when he stated that he had “learned to be content in whatever circumstances” he encountered.

**VERSE 7**

**For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out.**

As support for his assertion that godliness produces a great gain, Paul pointed to the situation of human beings at both the start and end of physical life. When we are born, we bring **nothing into the world**. And when we die, we take **nothing out** in terms of material possessions. Here Paul may have echoed the dramatic words of Job 1:21, where that ancient patriarch declared in a moment of devastating loss: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will leave this life. The LORD gives, and the LORD takes away. Blessed be the name of the LORD.”

This world is a temporary abode, and all of the material possessions we collect are destined to remain in this world until the world itself is “set free from the bondage to decay” (Rom. 8:21). Nothing we possess is really ours, so the selfish craving to collect more and bigger things leads to emptiness. We are merely stewards of that which God created and owns; we cannot take material possessions with us. In the end, greed makes no sense.

**VERSE 8**

**If we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.**

Paul acknowledged that while all the material things of this world are temporary, physical survival does have certain basic requirements. The two Greek words translated *food* and *clothing* are found only here in the New Testament. The word rendered *food* refers to anything that sustains or nourishes the physical body. The term rendered *clothing* describes anything that covers—and therefore protects—the body. It could refer either to
garments or, by extension, to shelter. Paul’s admonition echoed Jesus’ teaching that worrying about food and clothing was needless. Jesus gave His followers this admonition in the context of warning them about the dangers of greed (see Matt. 6:24-25; Luke 12:16-22).

The Greek word translated we will be content can also mean “be sufficient,” or “be satisfied.” The term appears also in Luke 3:14, a verse in which John the Baptist counseled some soldiers who wanted to be ready for God’s coming kingdom to “be satisfied with your wages.” The writer of Hebrews used the term as well to warn his Christian readers against greed: “Keep your life free from the love of money. Be satisfied with what you have ...” (Heb. 13:5). The real issue for Paul and other New Testament writers was not about having the necessities of life but about the direction of the believer’s focus in life. Paul counseled believers to maintain a simple lifestyle in which they could stay focused on honoring and serving the Lord Jesus Christ.

VERSE 9

But those who want to be rich fall into temptation, a trap, and many foolish and harmful desires, which plunge people into ruin and destruction.

Paul turned his attention back to the false teachers, describing them as those who want to be rich. This group probably should be distinguished from the group Paul later described as “those who are rich in the present age” (1 Tim. 6:17). The group mentioned in 6:9 was characterized by a selfish desire for riches, not the possession of them. Paul was not condemning the possession of wealth but rather the craving for possessions that overshadowed a desire for true godliness. The description was particularly appropriate for the false teachers who were bent on using their position in the church to increase their personal wealth.

Paul laid out three things that often happen to those who are obsessed with money. First, they fall into temptation. In this context, the Greek word translated temptation describes an enticement to sin, not a trial. James spoke of a person’s being “drawn away and enticed by his own evil desire” (Jas. 1:14). The desire that lured the false teachers from a focus on the true gospel was their longing for wealth.

Second, the false teachers who crave material gain fall into a trap. The Greek word rendered trap originally referred to a device used to catch or ensnare an animal. It was used figuratively to describe anything that might bring a person under the control of a hostile force (see 1 Tim. 3:7; 2 Tim. 2:26). Third, the false teachers, by their obsession with gaining wealth, fell into many foolish and harmful desires. The pursuit of wealth as a life
goal opens up a person to using unscrupulous methods to achieve that goal. Foolish desires were part of the believer’s old life from which Christ had set Christians free (Titus 3:3-5).

Such foolish desires inevitably result in moral collapse; they are the kinds of desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. The Greek word translated plunge could also describe a sinking boat (see Luke 5:7). Craving material wealth can have disastrous consequences.

**VERSE 10**

**For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and by craving it, some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.**

To drive home his point, Paul employed a proverb that was familiar in both Jewish and Greek cultures. Several observations about the proverb are helpful to consider. First, in line with what Paul had said previously in this section, the issue was not with money per se but with the love of money. In Ephesians 4:28, Paul encouraged the Ephesians to work hard so that they might have “something to share with anyone in need.”

Second, Bible translators disagree on whether Paul viewed the love of money as a root (one root among several) or the root (see KJV) of all kinds of evil. Both options are acceptable translations of the Greek text. Paul placed the word root in an emphatic position in the sentence. However, the love of power, fame, or sexual desire can also lead to many different acts of evil. In my judgment, it is best to recognize that the love of money is one cause of sin—perhaps even the primary one—but not the only cause.

In a third observation to make about Paul’s use of the proverb concerning the love of money, the apostle described the kinds of ruin and destruction that materialism brings. The Greek word translated craving (literally, “stretching for”; “coveted after,” KJV; “eager for,” NIV) can be used of both positive and negative desires. The false teachers’ craving for wealth had severe unintended consequences. Instead of gaining contentment, the false teachers wandered away from (”erred from,” KJV) the faith. Instead of finding joy and satisfaction, they pierced themselves with many griefs. The word rendered griefs is a general term that describes all sorts of losses. Relationships suffer whenever greed and selfishness rule. Possessions cannot replace our need for meaningful community and Christian love. Ultimately, the accumulation of wealth does nothing to prepare people for eternity. The misery the false teachers created was self-inflicted pain. By abandoning sound doctrine and allowing greed to control them, they missed the truth that true contentment is to be found only in godliness.
EXPLORE FURTHER
What does it look like for a believer in today’s materialistic culture to pursue Christlike contentment over material wealth? How have you seen the obsessive pursuit of wealth result in wandering from the faith or being pierced with many griefs?

TRUE RICHES (1 Tim. 6:11-16)

VERSE 11

But you, man of God, flee from these things, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness.

The break between this verse and the preceding one is dramatic. Paul began with the forceful words but you, sharply contrasting his expectations of Timothy’s conduct from the false teachers’ behavior. Timothy was a man of God, and his behavior was to be consistent with that reality.

The Greek phrase rendered man of God, while appearing in the New Testament only here and in 2 Timothy 3:17, occurs more frequently in the Septuagint [sep TOO uh jint], an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament. The title was applied to Moses (Deut. 33:1), Samuel (1 Sam. 9:6), Elijah (1 Kings 17:18), and to others who went unnamed (see 1 Kings 13:1). These men were God’s prophets; they delivered God’s messages to His people. By using the title to refer to Timothy, Paul reminded his young missionary coworker of the high calling to gospel ministry.

In this verse and the subsequent one, Paul then gave Timothy instructions by way of four imperatives. First, Timothy was to flee from all the things (attitudes, teachings, and conduct) that characterized the false teachers. Second, he was to pursue (“follow after,” KJV) the virtues consistent with his calling as a man of God and his gospel mission in Ephesus. The two terms righteousness and godliness related to the manner of conduct Paul had instructed the Ephesian believers to exhibit (1 Tim. 2:2). Similarly, Timothy was to pursue faith and love by constantly demonstrating his commitment to God and love for both God and the Ephesian believers. Finally, endurance (“patience,” KJV; “steadfastness,” ESV) and gentleness (“meekness,” KJV) would be needed in Timothy’s confronting the false teachers and guiding the congregation back to spiritual soundness. The Greek word translated gentleness describes someone with the opposite of an overbearing attitude. These virtues would equip Timothy to finish his assigned task.
VERSE 12

Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of eternal life to which you were called and about which you have made a good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

Paul’s third imperative was for Timothy to fight the good fight of the faith. The phrase rendered fight the good fight could refer to any type of athletic contest, especially of the sort contested in the ancient Olympic games (boxing, wrestling, running). Here Paul used the phrase to refer to the Christian life as spiritual warfare with the powers of evil as well as inevitable daily struggles with temptations, false teachings, and the hardships of pastoral ministry. He used the same phrase in 2 Timothy 4:7 in evaluating his ministry as he approached the end of his life. Paul well understood the difficulties facing Timothy at Ephesus; he urged Timothy to remain faithful in the task.

Fourth, Paul commanded Timothy to take hold of eternal life. In other words, Timothy needed to grasp and hang on to the promise of salvation that God gives all who put their faith in Jesus Christ. The words to which you were called pointed not only backward to Timothy’s conversion experience but also forward to the life to come in which Timothy, like Paul, would receive the crown of life from the Lord, the righteous Judge (see 2 Tim. 4:8).

Paul reminded Timothy that he had made a good confession of his faith in Christ in the presence of many witnesses. Perhaps Paul was referring to Timothy’s baptism as his good confession. Another possible understanding is that Paul was referring to multiple times on the missionary journeys that Timothy had confessed his commitment to Christ in the face of opposition and even persecution. In any case, Paul used Timothy’s bold confession to encourage him to remain faithful in Ephesus despite hardship and opposition.

VERSES 13-14

In the presence of God, who gives life to all, and of Christ Jesus, who gave a good confession before Pontius Pilate, I charge you to keep this command without fault or failure until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

As Paul drew near the end of his first letter to Timothy, he issued a solemn challenge to the young church leader. Paul’s seriousness in the matter can be seen by whom Paul called to witness it: God the Father and Christ Jesus. In naming the Father and the Son, Paul reminded Timothy of the Lord’s powerful presence with him as he fulfilled his mission in Ephesus. Paul described God as the One who gives life to all. The Greek word rendered gives life emphasizes both the source and sustainment of life.
Timothy needed to look no further than to Christ Jesus the Son for an example of making a good confession in the face of adversity. The phrase *before Pontius Pilate* could describe either Jesus’ fulfillment of His divine mission during Pilate’s lifetime or more specifically the face-to-face testimony Jesus gave before Pilate at the time of His crucifixion. Either way, Timothy could take courage from Jesus’ bold testimony in the face of adversity.

The charge Paul gave Timothy was to **keep this command**. To which command did Paul refer? Bible scholars have identified a number of possible solutions:

- Paul referred to an unwritten charge given to Timothy either at his baptism or at his appointment to ministry;
- The *command* referred to the entire epistle, which opened with a word of instruction (1:3);
- The term refers to Paul’s command that Timothy pay close attention to his life and his teaching (4:16) or the command that Timothy guard what had been entrusted to him (6:20);
- Paul referred to Timothy’s need to keep making a good confession of his devotion to Christ and his teaching of the true gospel. I believe the fourth solution best describes the heart of Timothy’s mission in Ephesus—to turn back the threat of false teaching with sound doctrine and faithful living.

Paul challenged Timothy to keep the command **without fault or failure**. The first of these terms, *without fault* (“without spot,” KJV; NIV; “unstained,” ESV) was used also to describe Jesus as a sacrificial lamb without any defect (see 1 Pet. 1:19). The second term, *failure* (“unrebukeable,” KJV; “free from reproach,” ESV; “blame,” NIV) is the same term Paul used in 3:2 to describe an overseer’s living “above reproach.” A consistent, Christlike lifestyle was one of Timothy’s most effective weapons in the struggle against false teaching.

Finally, Paul challenged Timothy to keep the command **until the appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ**. In this context, the word *appearing* clearly refers to Christ’s return. This reminder gave a sense of urgency to Paul’s charge to Timothy.

**VERSE 15**

*God will bring this about in his own time. He is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings, and the Lord of lords,*

Paul assured Timothy and the Ephesian church that God would initiate Christ’s return **in his own time.** The Greek term rendered *bring ... about* could also mean “point out,” “display,” “demonstrate,” or “make known.” Just as God’s power will be revealed in Jesus’ second coming, so also will His sovereignty become evident. He and He alone will control the timing.
Paul then launched into a stirring doxology. The Greek word translated **Sovereign** could refer to anyone in a position of power over others, including human rulers (see Acts 8:27). Paul insisted, however, that God was the **blessed and only** true **King of kings**. The titles **King of kings** and **Lord of lords** appear in reference to the risen, victorious Jesus Christ in Revelation 17:14 and 19:16.

**VERSE 16**

who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see, to him be honor and eternal power. Amen.

God is the only One for whom immortality is an essential, innate attribute. He **lives in unapproachable light**. Consequently, no human being **has seen or can see** Him in His fullness. Thus, it was necessary for God to approach us in a way that we could see and know Him. That way was in the incarnation. The Son of God, Jesus Christ, became flesh and blood and lived among us, revealing God’s magnificent glory (see John 1:14,18). Paul exclaimed that such a unique and sovereign God deserves our highest praise: **to him be honor and eternal power.**

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read the article titled “Immortality” on pages 793–794 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How does reflecting on God’s eternal, infinitely gracious nature cause you to praise Him? How does it cause you to think about the miracle of the incarnation?

**STEWARDS OF GOOD WORKS** *(1 Tim. 6:17-19)*

**VERSE 17**

Instruct those who are rich in the present age not to be arrogant or to set their hope on the uncertainty of wealth, but on God, who richly provides us with all things to enjoy.

Paul had previously warned those who desired to be rich (6:9); here he addressed **those who are rich in the present age**. The Ephesian congregation likely was economically and socially diverse. At least some believers may have been quite wealthy. They needed to remember the spiritual pitfalls that wealth could bring if not used properly.
Paul gave several important instructions for handling wealth properly, the first two of which are in 1 Timothy 6:17. First, those with wealth must guard against becoming arrogant ("highminded," KJV; haughty," ESV). This instruction echoed God’s warning to the Israelites not to become proud when they became prosperous in the promised land, saying to themselves, “My power and my own ability have gained this wealth for me” (Deut. 8:17). A Christian’s wealth is a gift from God, pure and simple.

Second, wealthy Christians must always set their hope ... on God and not on their wealth. The Book of James warns also about the fleeting nature of wealth; like flowers under a hot sun and scorching wind, it can disappear quickly (see Jas. 1:10-11). God, on the other hand, can always be trusted to provide His people with all things to enjoy. This is not a guarantee of material excess but of the things that He knows we need (see Matt. 6:31-33).

VERSE 18

Instruct them to do what is good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and willing to share,

Next, Paul instructed rich Christians to use their wealth to do what is good. All believers, of course, are to act this way. However, wealthy believers may have many more opportunities to be rich in good works, especially if they are generous and willing to share with others who are in need. Paul was encouraging rich Christians to have an attitude that was grounded in the certainty of Jesus’ return and that viewed material possessions as a way of investing in what would truly last.

VERSE 19

storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of what is truly life.

The generous attitude Paul advocated would produce heavenly treasure in the coming age. He was not saying the wealthy could purchase favor with God. More likely, he was echoing Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (see Matt. 6:20). Believers who love God and others above themselves take hold of what is truly life.

EXPLORE FURTHER

How can we as believers guard against arrogance while living in one of the wealthiest nations in the world? How can we be rich in good works toward people groups in other, poorer nations?