

# Leaves from the Notebook of Generosity (and other Noble Pursuits)

A sermon based on 1 Timothy 6:6-19

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A hundred and sixty-some years ago a distinguished musician in Boston (Lowell Mason) met a university student (Ray Palmer) on the street, and in the ensuing conversation the musician mentioned that he was compiling a hymnal. He asked the young man if he had any hymns that might be included. "I just may have," said the young man, and pulled from his pocket a small morocco-bound notebook in which he had written down poetic verse that came to him in unexpected moments. The young man showed the musician a poem he had written a year earlier, and either out of kindness or perhaps out of genuine interest he asked for a copy. The two stepped into a shop, and the musician copied the six stanzas into his own notebook while standing at the counter.

A few days later, when the two men met again, the musician greeted his young friend with great enthusiasm and exclaimed, "Mr. Palmer, you may live many years and do many things, but I think you will be best known for posterity as the author of (this hymn). How prophetic those words were, for the hymn was the well-known and deeply loved "My faith looks up to thee."

My faith looks up to thee,  
Thou Lamb of Calvary,  
Saviour divine!

Now hear me while I pray,  
Take all my guilt away,  
O let me from this day  
Be wholly thine!

Humble little notebooks can contain unexpected treasures, and the casual notations of famous writers, musicians, heads of state and the like are often much sought after.

When the Apostle Paul wrote a letter to his young charge, Timothy, he had no idea that his own notations—some casual, some not—would be read, re-read, copied, re-copied, translated, published for posterity many times over, and pored over by countless congregations trying to grasp the essence of the Early Church's faithfulness in order to pursue their own.

Timothy was a new student of the Church—a *minor niner* in congregational ministry, if you will. Paul was his mentor, and in my sermons I've been playing with the notion of Timothy taking notes as Paul provides a smattering of advice about a wide variety of church matters. I'm suggesting that 1 Timothy provides us with three notebooks essential to our own congregational life, the first notebook entitled "Grace," and the second entitled "Prayer."

The third notebook could quite conceivably be either tiny or very large, for it has to do with Paul's thoughts on wealth, much of which Christians don't want to jot down in their own notebooks and therefore only a tiny notepad is needed. Or, they add to biblical exhortations on wealth so many qualifications, caveats, restrictions, conditions, stipulations, provisos and the like that they need a jumbo-sized notebook to record them all!

There is a cartoon on the door of my office picturing a minister who, making notes as he prepares his sermon, is reading out of a book entitled *Inoffensive Exhortations for Every Occasion*. It's hard to imagine that a notebook on grace could contain notations offensive to anyone, it's even harder to imagine that a notebook on prayer would cause anyone offense, but I can think of few biblical exhortations on wealth that do not cause offense.

The story is told of the preacher who asked the farmer, "If you had \$200, would you give \$100 to the Lord?" The farmer said, "I would." The preacher said, "If you had two cows, would you give one to the Lord?" The farmer said, "I would." The preacher asked, "If you had two pigs, would you give one of them to the Lord?" and the farmer said, "Now that ain't fair, you know that I have two pigs."

Jesus had more to say about wealth than he did about any other single topic, but his New Testament words should have a warning sticker affixed that reads, "These sayings could cause discomfort to the wealthy!" Our uneasiness with biblical pronouncements on wealth brings to mind another cartoon, picturing a man walking along, dragging his feet, the long shadow behind him betraying his feelings even more vividly, for the shadow depicts the man's fingers digging furrows into the ground, as though the shadow is being dragged along against its will. And the cartoon's caption reads: "John has decided to follow Jesus."

## A Page of Warnings about Wealth

The Apostle Paul's advice to Timothy contained in our third notebook includes several warnings concerning wealth.

- C Verse 9: "A...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."
- C Verse 10: "A...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."
- C Verse 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..."

Some of these warnings are explicitly addressed to those who are wealthy, others are addressed to Timothy in his leadership role. It's the latter that cause me particular discomfort, though it's the biblical exhortations aimed at ministers that congregations have been most eager to adopt. Nonetheless, though many Christians wallow in their own luxuries, most find it offensive, in fact, downright distasteful when Christian leaders adopt the lifestyles of the rich and infamous!

In Reinhold Niebuhr's diary of his congregational ministry in Detroit, entitled *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, he tells of receiving a letter informing him that a certain congregation had called a new pastor. He writes: "After trying futilely to find the right man, who was to have as much scholarship as his predecessor and more 'punch,' they decided to raise the salary to \$15,000. ...I suppose it is not easy to get a combination of Aristotle and Demosthenes, and on the current market, that ought to be worth \$15,000. Nevertheless there must be some limit to this matter of oversized salaries." (*Leaves...*, page 55) My starting salary when I arrived at OMC in 1978 was \$14,000, so \$15,000 in 1924 does strike me as a tad high! If he was playing baseball, that would be another matter, I suppose.

Paul's perspective on wealth, quite consistent with Jesus' perspective, does not have an anti-material bias. "God...richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment," Paul tells Timothy (1 Timothy 6:17) Paul is much more concerned with the insidious effect wealth can have on our spirits, with the corrosive effects it often has on compassion and generosity.

A teacher at a Christian school started a unit on social justice in her religion class, and one of the exercises she planned for them was to go around the room asking the children what Christians could do for the homeless. The first response came from a child who said that we didn't have to do anything for the homeless. He said that his father always told him that it was their fault they were homeless. The next child responded that her mother had told her to stay away from the street people because they stole children and did bad things to them. Yet another said that whenever he was with his mother she always said to look the other way, to just pretend that the street people weren't there. This at a Christian school!

Street-proofing kids is one thing, but blocking their compassion by insulating them from the pain and needs of this world is tantamount to stopping the circulation of blood to the human heart. The Christian heart requires the flow of generosity and compassion, the risks notwithstanding. Mother Teresa is purported to have said, "I would rather make mistakes in kindness and compassion than work miracles in unkindness and hardness."

Another community, its residents bothered by the migrant workers who came to pick through their garbage, "solved the problem," so to speak, by putting locks on the dumpsters. Wealth, said Bishop Helder Camara of Brazil, has a dangerous way of putting scales on our eyes, a dangerous way of freezing our hands, eyes, lips and hearts. There is something about wealth that inspires pursuit of it, pursuit of it to the exclusion of nobler pursuits.

Enough is never enough. If we get more, we want more, a little like the worker who exclaimed, "Oh, if I only had a hundred dollars, I would be perfectly content." Overheard by a wealthy woman who had learned that wealth does not guarantee inner peace, she told him, "Since I would like to see someone who is perfectly contented, I'm going to give you a hundred dollars." She gave him the money and left, but before she was out of earshot she heard the man remark, almost bitterly, "Why on earth didn't I say \$200?"

Paul told Timothy, "...those who want to be rich...are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge (them) into ruin and destruction. ...in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith...." (1 Timothy 6:9-10) I think Paul is rather gentle compared to the voices in our other Scripture readings. Amos has nothing but warnings, castigating the idle rich who "lounge on their couches" (Amos 6:4), sing "idle songs" (6:5), indulge themselves (6:6), and sadly, have lost the capacity to grieve over spiritual losses (6:6). The "revelry of the (se)lounge shall pass away," says Amos (6:7).

Jesus, in our reading from the Gospel of Luke, engages more stealth to convey the same message, weaving a cunning story of a rich man and a poor man, both of whom died and went to their respective eternal destinations. Therein lies the surprise, however, for the rich man, burning in hell, has no argument with the "reversal of fortunes" that has occurred, but he cannot understand why he was blind to his eternal destiny while enjoying his luxuries on earth!

Wealth requires serious spiritual monitoring, lest the pursuit of it become an ignoble pursuit. Reinhold Niebuhr tells of visiting a luxurious home, driven there in a black and white Packard car, complete with liveried chauffeur. He writes, "I don't think I would have reacted so strongly against this kind of life if I hadn't been reading (the) Life of St. Francis on the way down and was inclined to look at the world through the little brother's rather than my own eyes." (*Leaves...*, page 145) We need to hear the biblical perspective on wealth time and time again, lest we lose perspective altogether.

## A Page of Noble Pursuits

The Apostle Paul's notations on wealth are not only phrased more gently than those of Amos, he includes, along with the warnings aimed at the pursuit of wealth, inducements to nobler pursuits. "Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness," he writes (1 Timothy 6:11) "There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment," he writes, adding the commonsense notion that as we brought nothing into the world we can expect to exit with the same amount, and that between our entrance and exit "food and clothing" alone should go a long way towards contentment! (6:6-8)

There are those whose pursuit of wealth becomes a rather immoderate and unmitigated pursuit because they believe therein lies security and contentment. Vigorous pursuit of contentment strikes me as an oxymoron! Yet some, like the rich man in Jesus' story, just don't get it. Even if they get close to staring at happiness and contentment in the face, they're still asking, "What good is happiness if there's no money in it?"

Our pursuit of security and contentment often undermines itself, making us scurry hither and yon in pursuit of it. When one man kept bringing work home night after night, his daughter, a first grader, asked him why. The father carefully explained that he had to work hard to succeed and make money, and that he had so much work to do that he couldn't finish it all during the day. "Well, then," she asked, "why don't they put you in a slower group?"

Someone has written a book entitled *Pinstripe Prayers: Or How to Talk to God While Pursuing Mammon*. I don't know if the title is tongue-in-cheek or what, but to those whose pursuit of wealth becomes a rather immoderate and unmitigated pursuit, Paul suggests a change of focus. He counsels Timothy, "Command them not to...set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, 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 6:17-19), "the life that is truly life." (NIV)

Perhaps John Wesley serves as a good model of Paul's positive words to Timothy concerning wealth. Wesley said that sermons often condemn money but rarely talk about using it properly. After all, money can be the means of doing all kinds of good. Therefore, Wesley counselled, you should gain all you can, so long as you do no harm to yourself or your neighbour; secondly, you should save all you can, not wasting God's good gifts; and thirdly, you should give all you can, doing good, all possible good, in every possible kind and degree, allowing yourself only the plain, simple necessities.

A simple formula, perhaps, but when you consider Wesley's own example, it becomes more compelling. Wesley was said to earn 1400 pounds a year from his books. In his time the eighteenth century 1400 pounds a year was a fortune! Wesley, however, paid himself just 28 pounds a year and gave the rest all away. He wore cheap clothes and ate simply. If I leave behind ten pounds, he wrote, you and all humankind bear witness against me that I lived and died a thief and a robber.

To our notebooks on grace and prayer we add a third notebook, and perhaps, instead of opting for either the tiny notebook or the jumbo-sized notebook, we could use our chequebook! When an elderly woman died, her children went to her home to gather her things and close up the family home. One of the children found her mother's chequebook and began to thumb through it. After every recorded deposit of her pension cheque, the first cheque she wrote was to her church exactly ten per cent of her deposit. Then came cheques for utilities, food, medicine and other necessities. Then cheques for presents for her grandchildren, and then donations to a number of other charities. The family was deeply touched by what they read, realizing the depth of their mother's kindness and love. As one of them said, "The story of Mom's life is written in her chequebook."

The notations in our third notebook reveal the extent to which we've imbibed Christ's generous spirit. As Paul wrote to the Corinthian congregation, "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for (our) sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty (we) might become rich (spiritually)" (2 Corinthians 8:9) Paul encouraged us to "set (our) hopes...on God," (1 Timothy 6:17-19), and to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share for the benefit of God's kingdom.

May our prayer be the prayer of the young fellow who wrote the hymn *My faith looks up to thee*:

May thy rich grace impart  
strength to my fainting heart,  
my zeal inspire.  
As thou hast died for me,  
oh, may my love to thee  
pure, warm, and changeless be,  
a living fire.  
(verse 2)

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All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.