

Life That Really Is Life

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Cradock Presbyterian Church

September 29, 2013

There are only 86 more shopping days until Christmas.

Yep, that's the right total, I double-checked it. Unless, you actually count today; then it's 87. But I figured you wouldn't want to count today, because it's Sunday, and who wants to go Christmas shopping on Sunday?

Only 86 more shopping days until Christmas. When was the last time you heard something like that said – a “countdown to Christmas” kind of thing? Used to be you heard that all the time, or saw it, in radio and TV ads, and in newspapers. I haven't heard it in years! There's a reason for that. Turns out I *should have said* “87 more shopping days until Christmas,” because there are lots of people who want to go Christmas shopping on Sunday. Or any other kind of shopping, for that matter. The reason we used to have the countdown was because stores were closed on Sundays and on Thanksgiving Day. So you had to count up the number of Sundays before Christmas, add one day for Thanksgiving, and subtract that number from the total days remaining before December 25th. It was kind of a “service” the retailers were providing you, that countdown. Yeah, and a subtle prod to get out and buy.

But they don't need to do that anymore, because, as we all know, stores are open every day now, on Sundays and even *on Thanksgiving Day!* Good God, I'm thankful I'm no longer in retail. You know why they're always open: in the minds of business people more hours open equals more money. Period. And that's the only thing that matters.

They should consider themselves lucky that Paul isn't around these days. His message to Timothy – and to us! – runs directly counter to the thinking of the people who decided that every day was a shopping day.

See, there's an underlying belief in that last thinking: that what's most important in life is making money. Because money buys you things; and "things" is where you find happiness, contentment, the true good life. Believe it or not, that was just as much a problem in the first century as it is now.

Paul is scornful of those who think it's the things of this world that are worthwhile. "We brought nothing into the world," he says, and notice how this last part is worded! "*so that we can take nothing out of it.*" Paul sees it as God's plan! The original language makes that clear. If you think about God and the things of heaven, you know that. Paul goes on to say that food and clothing are enough for our living. "Godliness combined with contentment," says Paul, and living simply, is how you live the TRULY good life. Perfect!

What happens if that's *not* how you live? Here comes Paul's scorn. You will "fall into temptation" and be "trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction." Why is that? Paul explains: "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil," says Paul, "and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains." Take note: that phrase, "the love of money" is translated from a single word in the original language. That word has more the meaning of avarice, or greed, or an unusual desire for luxury

and power. It's not limited to cash money. You could translate it, "the love of wealth and power" and be pretty much right on.

As I read these words, all kinds of images come to mind of people who have ruined their lives, or at least made a steaming mess of them. They didn't stay "godly and content," though they might have been when they started out. Take Michael Vick. From what I'm told, he was taken to church as a child. But he rose really fast because of his unusual athletic gifts. He made a *pile* of money – for a short while, he was the highest paid quarterback in the NFL. He tossed godliness out the window, that's for sure; I think his dog-fighting venture fits the "senseless and harmful" label Paul has given us. It definitely led to his "ruin and destruction!" He has said that he has returned to Jesus; by all accounts, he's trying. But you see what happens when you go far away from godliness?

Or there are the many pastors who ruin a really strong congregation of good people with their selfish actions. We had a famous situation like that around here a few years ago. If that pastor had been pastoring a small church of 50 people, how likely do you think it is that he would have indulged himself in the affair that wrecked everything? I don't think it was the wealth part of things, but the *power* part that allowed him to fall into temptation. Having an affair was certainly senseless and harmful; without a doubt, it plunged him into ruin and destruction. The sad thing is, it did the same for his congregation. They lost their church building because of the gigantic exodus that came from this, people leaving and taking their tithes with them.

I could go on and on with tons of examples. I bet I could open the floor, and most of you could chime in with others. That's not needed. Let me point out something again that will help you understand even more. Paul usually argues backwards. You look for the first cause at the end. What is the first cause, then? "For the love of money is the root of all evil." This causes you to fall into temptation; this leads you to be trapped into senseless and harmful things; these things lead to your ruin and destruction.

And so you make sure your stores are open on Sundays, and even on Thanksgiving Day, and now, heaven help us, *for limited hours on Christmas*. What are you thinking, WalMart? Senseless and harmful? You be the judge. Contented? Not a chance in the world!

There is, says Paul, a better life.

Paul lays it all out: Shun pursuit of wealth. Pursue instead the godly things of righteousness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. "Fight the good fight of faith," he says, which means to "take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called." Righteousness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness – these are all about people, and about caring for other people besides yourself. Where's he going with this? Paul says, "I charge you to **keep the commandment** without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus" – in other words, until the end of time.

What commandment is he talking about? It seems to me there is only one: the double commandment of Jesus. This Letter to Timothy was written very very late; it seems likely that drafts of the Gospels might have been around, or at least the traditions that the Gospels were written from. I think Paul is talking about the Double

Commandment of Jesus. You remember the story, when a teacher of the law asked him what was the greatest commandment. Here it is from Mark, chapter 12: "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." If you can keep this simple "double commandment," Paul says, *perfectly* – that's what the "without spot or blame" means, perfectly – you will have godliness and great contentment.

In an age where even the President of the United States tells you to go out and buy, buy, buy! – it's hard to imagine telling folks that there is a better way. So let's look at the supporting evidence.

Since the last huge recession got underway in about late 2007 – and I don't believe for a minute the news that it ended in August of 2009! – since it began, the rates for heart attack and major depression began to climb again. Not just a blip, but big jumps. Really troubling is that for the first time, the big jump in suicides is in *middle-aged* people – usually, the most stable people in our society, folks most like you and me. Oh, and the folks who've been losing jobs, and therefore their way to attain wealth? The pressure has gotten enormous; life is no longer as simple. It's hard to be content.

Think about how most of you grew up. I remember how I did. I grew up well! The things you were expected to have in your home to have a good life were a TV – black and white with rabbit ears on top probably; a *dial* telephone; a washer and dryer *maybe*; and a well-stocked refrigerator. In the driveway you only needed *one* car,

because only Dad was working, and he made enough money that you lived well! In the few homes where Mom worked, her earnings would have been enough, too. Compare that with today. You *have to have* cable, or DirecTV; you need multiple TVs to keep everybody happy. Never mind families watching TV together in the evenings. You need multiple fancy touch-tone phones, and the phone company charges you more for that. But you need cell phones, too, for you and each person in your house. You better have a washer and dryer. You better have a BIG refrigerator, with water and ice dispensers through the door. Everybody in the place who has a drivers license needs wheels! And of course, *don't forget the computer!* – which means monthly internet charges. And periodically, you have to buy a new computer because the software has gotten so big, your computer won't run it anymore. And why stop with just a computer? Don't you *really need* an iPad or some other tablet? To make it tougher, you're not getting good pay raises, the costs for all that stuff is going up, and there's fear you might lose your job. Lots of fear!

Is this the life you want? Where's the hope? Paul was right to scoff at those who “set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches.” It's God who sees to it that we have what we need! And if that's true, then all of our pushing for “things,” all of our “love of money,” is just a waste of time!

That's why Paul says that those who do these things, obey the commandment – even wealthy people! – are able to “take hold of the life that really is life.” God is the one who gives us what we need – we can give God what *God* needs: people to do the work of his kingdom. Our reward is God's presence, God's blessing: a life that really is

life. It's not the helpless, panicky running around of today. It's the purposeful, fulfilling, powerful life of God's people, who know what they'll do and where they're going. We're going to help *somebody* in this world, hopefully lots of somebodies; we're going to join God in his heaven afterwards. There's nothing senseless or harmful or very complicated about that!

We're blessed here with many opportunities to be rich in good works, and generous, and ready to share. On the second Saturday every month, we host the Southeast Virginia Food Bank. They distribute food; we distribute something worth much more. This winter we'll host and feed homeless people again, a thing that overflows with blessings for both the homeless and our people who work with them. We do lots of other things, too. You will have your chance, in powerful and unusual ways, to grab hold of the life that really is life and be blessed. I think I know where your hope – and contentment! – really lies.