

True Life, False Loves

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1 Timothy 6:6-19 and Luke 16:19-31

The Mazatec Indians in Southwestern Mexico are an interesting people. One of the most intriguing things about them is the fact that they seldom wish one another well. This odd behavior stems from a cultural concept of "limited good." They believe there is only so much good to go around. To wish someone well means you have just given away some of your own happiness. The Mazatec Indians entire approach to life is rooted in a myth of scarcity, that you and I might judge to be primitive superstition. But before we look down our noses at their ignorance, we might want to open our eyes to the myths by which we live.

That's what the Apostle Paul seems to have been doing when he wrote to his young protégé Timothy to expose the myth of scarcity that had infected his church. It's difficult to say exactly what was going on in the congregation where Timothy was pastor, but clues point to the possibility of some people using their position in the church for personal financial gain.

I grew up in a home where there was a cynical attitude towards organized religion. "Churches are only after your hard-earned money" was the only Doxology that was ever spoken in our house. What I discovered in ministry is that even for people *inside* churches, money and stewardship can be touchy subjects. Scarcity thinking doesn't magically dissolve when you walk through these doors. Even among the most skeptical church givers I have met, very few were in my estimation lacked a desire to be generous. But their generous instincts were hobbled by scarcity thinking.

Paul confronts the money issues going on in Timothy's church, and he goes right for the scarcity myth that is the elephant under the steeple. His primary argument isn't based on how much good their generosity could do for others. He makes the case for how much better they will feel about *their own lives*, when they are generous. There is great gain to be found in following Christ, he says. But the gain is not about material things. The true gain comes in discovering contentment with what you already have.

Contentment with how God has provided for your needs builds a foundation for trusting God to continue that in the future which frees you to be more hopeful about the future and lessens the financial stress of being generous towards the needs of others. Contentment draws us closer to God and increases our compassion towards others.

Scarcity thinking is the exact opposite of being content with what one has. And it has the precise opposite effect on who we are. Ebenezer Scrooge summed up scarcity thinking and the way it drives a person when he said, "There is no such thing as rich enough; only poor enough."

Paul warns that people who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. There is not a single word in that sentence that sounds like the “good life.”

“The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil” Paul says. Not that money *itself* is the root of all kinds of evil. The Bible doesn’t condemn wealth, per se. Money is neutral. It can be used to bless abundantly or to curse. Money can be the tool by which we help to free others from poverty, desperation and hopelessness; or it can be the wall that isolates us from true human community. But the LOVE of money is the root of all kinds of evil.

A short list of the kinds of evil that grow from the love of money might be:

- The ways that acquiring and keeping wealth can erode our relationships with each other.
- The evil that comes when love of money encroaches on our relationship to God. And anything that competes with God risks becoming something that we worship in place of God.
- The evil we inflict on ourselves when we base our sense of fulfillment and happiness on how “successful” we are.

The love of money, Paul points out, is a false love. It is a false love because instead of delivering the security it seductively promises, it deepens our fear of the scarcity that drives us into its arms. It is a false love because it owns us and tempts us into all kinds of selfish impulses, instead of producing a generous approach to loving our neighbor. Most of all, it is a false love because it lures us into abandoning the only pure and reliable love in the universe. The love of God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment."

The parable Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus paints a compelling picture of the insidious power of wealth to shut ourselves off from God’s love for us and God’s loving others through us. From the first sentence of the parable, it is clear that the rich man’s earthly material needs are being met. He is dressed in the finest of clothes and he feasts sumptuously. Every day.

But it is just as clear that he is lacking something of eternal importance. Just outside his gate lies a poor beggar. The poor man would have been content with just the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table. The rich man’s wealth gave him the opportunity and the means to relieve the suffering of another human being without any real sacrifice to himself, but he did not.

In the end, the wealth which insulated him from all earthly discomforts can’t save him from his own mortality. In the afterlife, the false loves to which he devoted himself are exposed for what they really are. It wasn’t the rich man’s wealth that condemned him, it was the way his wealth blinded him to the needs of others like Lazarus.

He is tormented, but not by a wrathful God. His torment comes from his confrontation with the false loves he embraced and the true life he forfeited. He pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus back to the land of the living with a warning for his brothers, who are still betrothed to the same myths of scarcity that he lived by.

Scarcity thinking is not confined to superstitious tribes or the modern uber-rich. It is something with which we all must contend. Paul's advice for resisting the fear of scarcity which leads to the love of money is to, "Take hold of the life that REALLY is life."

True living isn't about what we own or trusting in money to save us. True living is about being righteous stewards of what we have been entrusted with by being rich in mercy and compassion towards others; being generous and ready to share. In other words, it's about doing the very things that scarcity thinking teaches us are foolhardy.

The word Paul uses for "taking hold" of true life is a powerful one. It means something like "to seize" or to "hold onto without letting go." It's ironic that Paul coaches us to be "tight-fisted" with the life that really is life if we want to resist being tight fisted with material things. Paul says that taking hold of REAL LIFE means letting go of the myths of scarcity which keep us in fear of not having enough, or of losing what we already have, and which never let us settle on the plateau of contentment.

That poor man's name in the parable was Lazarus, which means "God helps." Taking hold of the life that is really life begins with living by a "God helps" way of thinking, instead of a scarcity mindset. A faith in a God who provides for our needs, and who often provides for the needs of others through our generosity with what we have been given.

The choices we make around stewardship may be the most accurate barometer of our faith because that is the area where we have the hardest time trusting in God, despite what is printed on our currency. It is only as we come to terms with the myths that shape our attitudes about money that we can respond to God's provision as faithful stewards. And in the course of doing that, it is we who are rewarded with the treasure of a good foundation for the future.

As we consider what our pledges in support of the mission and ministry of this church will look like in the year ahead, may we look through eyes that see with 2020 vision the great potential to be realized in sharing of God's abundant provision to us, and not through the lens of scarcity thinking. In the course of helping others to experience the life that is really living, we may even find ourselves experiencing it like we never have before.