

*Posture of Simplicity*  
1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19  
September 17, 2023  
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Our text for today comes from the first letter to Timothy, which is written by an early Christian—maybe Paul, probably not. Either way, it gives advice about how to live and be a community that follows Jesus—advice that I think we still desperately need.

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1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19

*<sup>6</sup> Actually, godliness is a great source of profit when it is combined with being happy with what you already have. <sup>7</sup> We didn't bring anything into the world and so we can't take anything out of it: <sup>8</sup> we'll be happy with food and clothing. <sup>9</sup> But people who are trying to get rich fall into temptation. They are trapped by many stupid and harmful passions that plunge people into ruin and destruction. <sup>10</sup> The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some have wandered away from the faith and have impaled themselves with a lot of pain because they made money their goal.*

*<sup>17</sup> Tell people who are rich at this time not to become egotistical and not to place their hope on their finances, which are uncertain. Instead, they need to hope in God, who richly provides everything for our enjoyment. <sup>18</sup> Tell them to do good, to be rich in the good things they do, to be generous, and to share with others. <sup>19</sup> When they do these things, they will save a treasure for themselves that is a good foundation for the future. That way they can take hold of what is truly life.*

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To listen to the loudest Christian voices these days, we might think most of the ethics of the Bible revolve around sexuality, gender, and family structure. But money and economic concerns are far more central.

There are easily more than 2,000 verses about money in the Bible—more than faith and prayer combined. Jesus talked about it all the time. Almost 40% of his parables were directly about money. Scriptural perspectives on money address our individual choices and the broadest political and economic policies that affect how we distribute resources throughout society. But we sure don't talk about it—except for the four weeks each year when we ask you to pledge money for the next year's operating budget. I've certainly been guilty of that. Money's uncomfortable.

But it's real. So real. And it drives far more of our lives than we'd like to think. When I was maybe 9 or 10, my dad and I were in the car together, quiet, lost in our thoughts, when he broke the silence suddenly and said, out of nowhere, "Sarah, our entire economy, our entire world, is based around breaking the tenth commandment: Thou shall not covet." This is the kind of thing that passes for normal conversation when your father is a Hebrew Bible scholar.

He wasn't wrong though—from our most far-reaching policy decisions to how we choose to spend our days, we are all—*all*—caught in system that places profit and the productivity that produces profit above all else.

And the author of this letter is having none of it. Money, he says, is the root of all evil. When we make profit our goal, he says, we impale ourselves. It actually hurts. This passage is addressed to folks like us—extraordinarily wealthy by any global standard, and more secure than most right here in these mountains. “Watch out!” this text says. Loving money, trusting in money, making money our goal will not lead to life—which is what God wants for us.

I think we know that. We may try to forget it or rationalize our way out of it, but honestly, we know that this way of life is killing us, everyone around us, and the earth as we've known it.

I think the youth and kids among us know that best of all. My kids have certainly taught me a lot. Zoë received an absolutely adorable sloth stuffed animal from my mom and they love it. It sent them down this whole rabbit trail of research about three-toed sloths. I got their permission to tell you this. As they researched they learned all kinds of cool facts—sloths are slow, of course, but they are also super strong swimmers. I had no idea. Or, my favorite fact, they tend to only come down out of the trees once a week to do their business and then they head right back up. Who knew?

Zoë also learned that they are critically endangered—mostly because the Amazon is being cut down. Which sent me down my own rabbit hole of learning.

For all of human history the Amazon has been an abiding presence. The river which gives life to it, and thus to the earth, was once a westward flowing river that was part of the Congo River system in what is now Africa. Tectonic plates separated and collided, over time pushing the Andes high into the sky. A lake formed, and then 10 million years ago the water began to flow east, watering more than 3 million square miles of land, nourishing an unbelievable diversity of life.

Humans only arrived there 16,000 years ago. For most of that time we played nice with the forest, taking our place in the web of reciprocity. Sixty years ago, we began cutting it down in earnest. We want lumber, and oil, and bare land for cash crops. The single largest driver of deforestation is cattle ranching, much of which is not even for the purpose of bringing beef or leather to market, but simply for establishing land claims. We are destroying the lungs of our planet just for the possibility of future profit—and to keep anyone else from getting it first. The author of 1 Timothy may not be overstating it. The love of money is the root of all evil.

If we're going to survive, we have to learn to live more simply, with less, wanting less.

We know that. And still... I will confess that one of my preferred ways of alleviating stress is to go buy things I don't need at Target. Much of it plastic—plastic that will never disappear. That has taken up residence in our very cells. And I buy clothes, that I don't need, that are made at the cost of laborers' lives and the health of countless rivers and streams. And I do that so that maybe someone will say, “cute top!”

I know this is killing me. It's not good for the earth. It's not good for our souls. Which brings us back to the same question we faced last week: what do we do? How do we cope?

The author of 1 Timothy counsels contentment, satisfaction, generosity, living simply. All of which my heart longs for.

And all of which I can have if I just buy the right book or follow the right Insta or TikTok. When you look on Good Reads for suggestions of books on living simply, it gives you 1,392 options. And I love these kinds of books. Part of me is convinced that if I just find the right system, the right chart, and the right storage solutions, my life really would be better.

When profit drives the world, even living with less can be capitalized on by the enterprising entrepreneur.

We're haunted by despair. And even more I think, when it comes to wealth and consumption, we're haunted by guilt.

But God's not about guilt. God we know in Jesus is about saving us from guilt, setting us free because guilt does not solve things. It just gets in the way.

Instead, says the author of 1 Timothy, "take hold of what is truly life!" Ultimately, getting free of our love of money and choosing to live more simply isn't about denial and deprivation. It's about life. Real life. Life with a capital L.

We know what that kind of life is like. True life is having good friends and time to be with them. True life is being with family, calling your 90-year old mother every morning and evening, just to hear her voice while you still can. It's sharing a meal. True life is found outside, forest bathing, and inside, watching the hummingbirds hover and drink. It's growing things and fixing things and making art—the weirder the better. It's living in community, with all the meetings that requires, and saying, "I have enough. Here, you take some. There's plenty to go around."

This is real simplicity. It's not about deprivation and denial and guilt. It's about freedom. It's real life. The life we long for.

That's what's waiting for us as we bit by bit set down all the stuff we drag around with us, and detach from our habit of accumulating for the sake of accumulation. Maybe it all boils down to asking ourselves honestly: does this give life? This thing, this use of time, this relationship—does it give life? Does it give me life? Does it give life to others? Does it give life to the Amazon and the Eastern bluebird and the New River?

And if it doesn't, how would it feel to just... let it go? Would our shoulders relax down away from our ears? Would our lungs expand with more breath? Would our stomachs stop hurting?

How would it feel to live simply? More simply? To open our constantly grasping and clenched fists?

Try it with me. Close your eyes if you'd like. Or not. And clench your fists. Hard. Hold on tight—to everything. All of it. Hold it. Then, when you're ready, when you'd like to, relax your fists. Let the blood flow return. Let your hands float open of their own accord. Let them hold nothing for a change. Just that which cannot be earned. Life. Real life.

~ Sarah W. Wiles, 2023