

1 Timothy 6:17-19

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we've just read there in Psalm 49, or sung in Psalm 49, the manner in which God, pulling no punches, really speaks about wealth and the folly of trusting in wealth and imagining that our worth is measured by our wealth. And that's the same theme that we want to consider in the passage that we've read in 1 Timothy chapter 6. So if you turn with me to 1 Timothy chapter 6, and we're going to be thinking about verses 17 to 19. So three verses that dwell on this very matter of wealth and riches, what our attitude should be to them, and what our use should be of them.

Well, the two commands that we find there deal with these two aspects of wealth. Well, let me begin or continue by posing a question to you. And the question is simply this, is God a killjoy? The accusation has been made quite often that that is what God is. He's a killjoy.

His concern is to make our lives miserable, to forbid us from doing that which we enjoy, forbid us from taking pleasure in those things that give us pleasure. And so that is the caricature or the accusation that is often leveled against God, and maybe in a similar way against Christians.

What about us as Christians? Are we maybe just a little suspicious of too much pleasure and enjoyment? If you're enjoying life too much, then there must be something wrong. Is that an idea or a concept that we have? For those of you who are of my vintage, and I know not everybody here is, but some of you may remember that classic of, what is it, 1970s TV, Happy Days, with the fawns.

And the catchy theme, theme song of that series contained, I suppose you could call it a classic existential lyric, which goes along the lines of this, feel so right, can't be wrong. Rocking and rolling all week long.

[2 : 3 4] I imagine nobody's going to burst out in song to carry on the song. And you know, when we hear that, that philosophy expressed in those words, feel so right, can't be wrong. I think we, I think rightly, our response is, well, that's not right. And we raise our voice of protest, if only in our mind, and maybe swing in the opposite direction. It feels so right, it probably is wrong. And that perhaps is a pendulum swing that isn't always justified.

But back to God, is God a kill joint? In this passage that we're going to be looking at, in these three verses, Paul makes a quite remarkable declaration about God. There in verse 17, towards the end of the verse, he says this, God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. And we would, we could spend, I hope, or a helpful half hour thinking just about those words.

But we're not going to do that. We want to try and cover the totality, or at least in some measure, of the three verses within which that statement is found. But in due course, we'll come to that particular statement and comment a little bit more about it. In these closing verses of his letter, Paul instructs Timothy to direct two commands to a certain demographic within the church at Ephesus.

Timothy was in Ephesus when he received these letters, and Paul says, you need to command this group of people, we'll identify who they are in a moment, with these two commands that I'm giving you to pass on to them. You notice there in verse 17, it begins, command those, and then verse 18, command, begins, command them. So two commands that Timothy receives in order to pass on to others. And we want to think about these commands.

But first of all, let's just note, to whom the commands are directed. And I think in everything that I've said so far, even in the psalm that we've sung, it's pretty evident. We've read the passage as well. And Paul is nothing if not explicit. There in verse 17, command those who are rich in this present world. Command those who are rich in this present world. And then in verse 18, we read, command them to do good. And it's clear that the them refers back to those he has already identified, those who are rich in this present world. So the two commands particularly are directed to those that Paul so describes as rich in this present world. What does that mean? Well, it means to be materially rich, rich in this present world. The things of this present world, material, physical wealth is what is being spoken of. And those who enjoy a generous portion of such wealth. And that, of course, in the context of the letter and the time when Paul wrote the letter would have been in distinction to perhaps the majority of Christians in Ephesus who would have been poor and a significant proportion of them indeed would have been slaves. In this very letter, Paul deals with the reality of the poor and often the slaves being exploited by the wealthy. That was the reality for many of the Christians. But among the

[6 : 18] Christians, there were those who could be described in this way, those who were rich in this present world, those who were wealthy. And the commands particularly are directed to them. Now, how do we translate that context, the context of a church in Ephesus that was largely populated by poor people, how do we translate that to ourselves here in Bonacord this evening in Aberdeen? I wonder if as we read these commands, I wonder if some of us are tempted to sit back rather smugly and conclude that there is nothing here for us because, well, we're not in that group of people. And we might say, well, that's fine. These are great commands for the wealthy, but I'm not wealthy, so I get off scot-free. I don't need to listen to these commands. They're not being directed to me. The wealthy can listen to them and respond as they see fit. But if we think of where we are in the context of the big picture of humanity, the reality is that I would suspect that all of us here, in comparison to most of humanity across time, you know, across the centuries and millennia, and across space, across the world, those who are alive today. In comparison to most, we do qualify as rich or well-off. Now, some will be more well-off than others, no doubt. But I think all of us can legitimately see ourselves as being addressed in what Paul says. In the commands, as we look at them, you'll see that they are relevant in their content, even to those who are more modestly or are of more modest means. So I think we can, as we embark on looking at these commands, take them as commands that are directed to all of us. You know, take them as something that God is directing to you this evening.

So let's look at the commands. Now, both have to do with wealth or riches. And as I said at the beginning, the first command has to do with our attitude to wealth. So take a mental note of that, and we'll look at it in a moment. But the first has to do with our attitude to wealth, and the second command has to do with our use of wealth. So very related, but still quite distinct.

The first one then, to do with our attitude to wealth. That's in verse 17. Command those who are rich in this present world, not to be arrogant, nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain.

And then it goes on. And this first command is, we might call it a double-barreled command, with two parallel and connected commands. A don't and a do. We sometimes speak of do's and don'ts. Well, what we have here is a don't and a do. Well, something we ought not to do, and something that we ought to do.

And we'll look at each in turn. And we'll notice how each in turn has a reason attached to it for keeping the command. So let's look at the don't there in the first command. Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant, nor to put their hope in wealth. So there's two things there. Those who are wealthy, those who have a measure of material comfort and possessions, we are warned not to be arrogant. You know, the psalm that we've sung, you know, really speaks very eloquently of that great temptation, of that great danger that when we have great possessions, when we have a measure of wealth, that in a way that we find difficult really to resist leads to pride and arrogance in us. Even if we were not so crass as to say it, the reality is that we often just presume unthinkingly that our wealth is evidence of our worth.

[10 : 32] And that is a big mistake. Your wealth does not determine your worth. And as I say, I don't think any of us here would say that. None of us would say, oh yes, all that really matters, all that determines how what worth you have as a human being is how wealthy you are. You know, nobody would be so crass as to say that. But actually, we often operate that way. Actually, often the way we see other people is determined that way. We even speak about people, how much are they worth? And you'll say, what, how much is that person worth? And it's really to do with how much money do they have? How big their house is?

You know, how nice their cot is? And so we say, oh no, I don't believe that. Actually, we often do live as though we did. And yet what Paul is saying to Timothy, he's saying, warn these rich people that they're under this great temptation to imagine that because they're wealthy, they are worth more as people. They're more important, more valuable than the poor people, than those who are slaves, those who don't have the possessions that they have. And he's saying, tell them to be careful, not to be arrogant, not to be proud. That is a great temptation for those who are wealthy.

So that's the first thing that they're told not to be, not to be arrogant. But also, they're told, they're commanded not to put their hope in wealth. Now, how do we understand that? In what way can we be guilty or make the mistake of putting our hope in wealth? Well, I think sometimes we can imagine that wealth can provide us with meaning. It can provide us with happiness. It can provide us with security.

And these are things that we all aspire to. We all want to know a measure of security in our lives. We all want to know and experience a measure of happiness. We all want to have a sense of purpose and meaning. And we sometimes imagine that if we had wealth, or we imagine that wealth can provide these things for us. If only we had that job, if we only got that promotion, if we only earned that little bit more, then we would have these things. And so that is our goal. That is what drives us to secure that measure of wealth that we imagine will provide us with these things. And so we're putting our hope in wealth. But we're wrong to do so because wealth cannot provide these things for us.

What does Paul say in terms of giving us a reason why we ought not to put our hope in wealth? Well, what does he say? Well, he tells us there in the passage, command those who are rich in the present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain. So he gives a reason there. And this is one of the reasons, it's not really the only reason, but it's one of the reasons why it is not wise, why it is foolish to put your hope in wealth, because it's so uncertain.

[13 : 31] Wealth cannot provide ultimate happiness and solid security. But even if it could, which it can't, but even if it could, it is so uncertain. And so if you're imagining that your security and your happiness is dependent on wealth, then be careful because that wealth could be lost. It could go.

It's not certain. It's no, there's no guarantee. I remember, I guess it must have been, what, three years ago when there was the big plunge in the price of oil, that 2014 into 2015. And I remember speaking to somebody from the congregation who told me about one of their colleagues. And this colleague was employed in the oil and gas industry, had a well-paid position in one of the companies, I don't know which one it was. And, you know, with this very healthy income that he enjoyed, signed a contract for the delivery of a high-end personalized BMW. So he went to the BMW showroom, he saw this, you know, one of the most expensive BMWs in the showroom. And then you had the option of paying extra to have it personalized in different ways. And so this young guy, he says, right, I want this and I want that. And he signed the contract, signed the contract. I know he was happy as Larry as he headed home looking forward to the delivery in due course of his BMW. Well, the ink had hardly dried on the contract. That's maybe being a bit dramatic. It may have been a few days or a few weeks later, but certainly before he took delivery of the BMW, he lost his job. And there was no way he could get out of that contract. It was a legally binding contract and he had no means of paying for that BMW.

Wealth is uncertain. You know, we can have it all stored up and we think, oh, we're fine. Remember the parable of the foolish man and he built his barns and he built more barns. And what did God say to him?

Today, your soul will be required of you. Wealth is uncertain. It's one of the reasons that Paul gives for not putting your hope in it because it is uncertain, but perhaps even more fundamentally because it doesn't deliver on those things that we imagine it delivers. That's the don't. Don't be arrogant. Don't put your hope in wealth. But then there's also the do. And the do, and we're still in the first command about our attitude to wealth, the do is do put your hope in God. Don't put your hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but put your hope in God. And obviously it's expressed in such a way as it's to be directed to the wealthy. And so it says, tell them to put their hope in God. That is what we are to do. Not to put our hope in wealth, but to put our hope in God. Trust in God as the one who can and will give you the meaning and the happiness and the security that you crave. Put your hope in the giver and not the gift. Perhaps when we put it that way, it just, it's, it's so obvious that it makes more sense to put your hope in the sense to put your hope in the giver rather than in the gift. Why are we to put our hope in God? On what grounds is that a sensible course of action? Well, it is here that we find

Paul's astonishing affirmation that I commented at the very beginning that reveals strikingly and beautifully the nature of God as a giving God. Let's remind ourselves what Paul says there to, to, to ground his command to hope in God. Why should we hope in God? Because he is the one who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. It was there at the end of verse 17.

[17:23] God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. It's almost as if in that one sentence you have a systematic theology of the generous God, because there are three things that are said about our generous God and his giving. In those few choice words, we're told about the manner of God's giving.

We're told about the scope and scale of God's giving. And we're also told, very strikingly, of the purpose of God's giving. Can you see those elements? I'm sure you can spot them for yourselves there at the end of verse 17.

First of all, the manner of his giving. God who richly provides. So when God provides, when God gives, he does so richly. He does so extravagantly. He doesn't hold back. He doesn't just give us the bare minimum. God is a God who richly provides. So that speaks about the manner of God's giving, and that speaks about the kind of God that we have. He gives richly. So that's the first thing that we discover in the statement of Paul. But it also speaks about the scope and the scale of God's giving, because Paul tells us, God who richly provides us with everything, with everything, everything we receive comes from God. Every good and perfect gift comes from above. Everything that you have comes from God. And so that the scale and the scope of God's giving is also identified in these few choice words. But maybe the most striking thing that Paul says, and maybe the most surprising for many, is what Paul says concerning God's purpose in richly providing us with everything. And what is that purpose? Well, there we read it. Who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. It doesn't say for our sustenance. It doesn't say so that we can just get by, but for our enjoyment. God would have us enjoy that which he richly provides for us. You know, we began by asking, is God a killjoy? Well, Paul certainly seems to have a very different perspective, a very different opinion. He says, God gives us richly, provides generously for our enjoyment.

And in identifying, and maybe it's worth noting this to just draw to the statement there, the context in which Paul is writing. In identifying our enjoyment of the purpose of God, Paul is really taking a necessary swipe at the false teachers that Timothy had to contend with. Let's just notice very quickly what Paul says in chapter 4, in directing Timothy as to deal with these folk who had come into the church and who were teaching false teaching, and he had to contend with them. And there we get a flavor of the kind of things that they were teaching in chapter 4. So in chapter 4, in verse 3, we kind of jump into the sentence as it were, but sufficient for our purposes. It says, they, so these are the false teachers, they forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving. You see what was happening? There were people coming in and saying, if you want to be a real Christian, if you want to be truly committed, then you need to abstain from all pleasure. You know, don't get married, don't eat certain foods. Those are bad. That's evidence of not being spiritual. And Paul says, that's nonsense.

God is a God who gives generously, and He gives for our enjoyment. So when here at the end of the chapter, it's almost as if Paul just gets that final dig in at the false teachers. It's not just that God gives generously, but He gives for this end, for our enjoyment, and not for us to overindulge, not for us to be greedy and to deny others what they need, as we'll see in a moment. But nonetheless, this is why God gives generously. Now, of course, I think in this passage, Paul is thinking particularly, he's already spoken about those who are rich in this present world, so those who are materially wealthy. And so when he speaks of God giving, maybe that's what he has particularly in mind. But of course, what he says extends beyond that to every gift that we receive from God. And it includes, wonderfully, the indescribable gift of His own Son. In the giving of His own Son, God acts in this same manner. He gives richly everything for our enjoyment, for our blessing, for our good. For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son.

[22 : 26] Well, that's the first command. Let's think just more briefly about the second command that concerns our use of wealth. So the first command is about our attitude to wealth. The second command about our use of wealth. And how can we summarize what Paul is saying in this command in verse 18? In verse 19, he gives the reason for obeying it. But in verse 18, you have the actual command. And if we did have to summarize it, it's not a very long verse, so we don't need to do much summarizing. But if we did have to summarize it, I think what Paul is saying is that the wealthy, and indeed all of us, should be like our Father. See, Paul has just said that this is what God is like. God gives richly. God is generous.

And he's saying that's what you should be like. You know, you're sons of God, you're daughters of God. You should reflect your Father's likeness. And just as He is wealthy and generous, then if you're wealthy, well, you should be generous. You should be like God. Be like your Father. And this call to be like our Heavenly Father contains three elements that build on each other. Notice the verse there, verse 18. Command them, first of all, simply to do good. Very general. Command them to do good.

And I think implicit is that this good will be done to others, for the good of others. Command them to do good. But then he continues and goes from the very broad to narrowing it down somewhat.

Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds. Obviously, there's a play here on the idea of wealth and riches. He's saying so many of these wealthy people, and maybe even those who aspire to be wealthy, they consider that riches is about money and about property and about things and stuff. And he's saying, no, that's not in God's sight, true wealth. True riches is to be rich in doing good, to be rich in good deeds. That's the kind of wealth that you should aspire to. Now, if God in His grace grants you material wealth, then good and wealth. There is nothing in these verses that even suggests that there's a problem per se in being wealthy. Quite the reverse. You know, he's acknowledging that there are Christians who are wealthy, and that's fine. It's about how you use that wealth. That's worth just stressing. And that recognition that true wealth is about being rich in good deeds. So, do good, be rich in good deeds. And then it continues, we are to be generous and willing to share.

And the call to be willing to share, if we just focus in on that particularly, and I focus in on that because the language that Paul uses is quite revealing. The language that is translated in English as willing to share is from a Greek word, koinonia. Some of you may have come across that word, koinonia before. It's a word that in other parts of the New Testament would be translated quite often as fellowship. And so, the command is for the wealthy to be, if we could make up a word, it's to be fellowshippers or sharers. So, he's saying to the wealthy, be generous and be sharers. But the key point is that the language requires or involves personal engagement with those we are sharing with. So, what Paul is saying isn't simply, well, if you've got lots of money, write a check, or write lots of checks, or write big checks. No, by all means, write big checks. But that's not what he's saying. He's saying you need to share with those that you are seeking to help. You need to engage with them at a personal level of the wealth that you've been given. Live in such a way that that wealth is enjoyed with others, with others. So, not just at a distance, you know, thinking, oh, well, you know, there's poor people in wherever, in Yemen. I'll write a Christmas check and I'll feel good because

[26 : 25] I've done something. No, by all means, do that. But that's not what Paul is saying here. He's saying that the rich people shouldn't imagine that they can step aside, be in their own little world, their own bubble of wealth with wealthy people around them, and then do a bit for charity. No, they need to engage with and share with and live alongside, using their wealth for the good and the benefit of others, being generous in the lives that they live. So, this is the command that Paul gives concerning the use of our wealth. Before we think about the why, which is where we'll finish, I think it's, when we read these things, I can't imagine that anybody here tonight would turn around and say, well, I'm not sure about that, you know. This command to do good, is that really what we're meant to do? Or this command to be rich in good deeds, like, nobody's going to say, no, I don't agree with that. That's not right. We don't need to do that. I don't think anybody's going to turn to me and say, be generous, really? I don't think we really need to be generous.

Be willing to share? Nah, that's, you know, that's old hat. We don't need to do that. No, we all give our mental assent. We all say, yes, that's right. I think the challenge is for us to sit down and think about, well, how do I do that? How do I move from where I am today to where God would have me be that I would become more wealthy in good deeds and not be content with where I am? How do we examine ourselves and say, well, actually, you know, I'm not that wealthy in good deeds, and I really should be wealthy in good deeds because that's what God is saying I should be. So, what do I concretely need to do to move from where I am to where I should be? Because simply saying, yeah, that's all good, and we all agree with that, and of course, yeah, that's right, and we go home, and, you know, everything just continues the same.

Well, what's the point? So, the challenge is for all of us to think about, well, how do I obey this command? You know, how do I do good in a manner that I'm not currently doing good? How can I become wealthier in good deeds? How can I be generous in a way I'm not currently generous? How can I share with others in a manner that I'm not currently doing? That's for each of us to take on board and grapple with. There's a reason given also. As the first command had a reason, so this one also has a reason, and that's found in verse 19. So, the reason for obeying this command, or at least something that accompanies obeying this command, is there in verse 19. In this way, they, that is, those who obey the command, those who are wealthy in this present world, they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

What reason is given for being rich in good deeds, for being generous, for being willing to share? Well, we're told that by doing so, we lay up treasure for ourselves as a firm foundation for the coming age. You see how Paul is drawing a deliberate contrast between the present world, those who are wealthy in the present world, and the coming age. He's, he's encouraging and challenging us to have that eternal perspective, and in doing that, he's simply echoing what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, when he called on his disciples, on all his disciples, to lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. And the same priority is captured by Jesus' call to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these other things will be added unto you. So have that eternal perspective in the life that you live, and that will bring spiritual blessing to you. Now, it goes without saying, I think, that to stress that Paul, or it goes without saying, to stress that Paul is not arguing here that generous giving is somehow meritorious and can earn us, you know, a place in heaven or earn us God's favor. It's rather the case that our new identity in Christ leads us to live as citizens of the coming age, with new priorities and new desires, a new understanding, a new attitude to wealth, a new use of wealth as citizens, of the kingdom, as citizens of this coming age that is being ushered in.

And Paul adds a complementary reason for obeying the command. And again, in his final commands, he manages to again use really quite striking language, where he says there at the end of verse 19, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life. What a striking use of language.

[31 : 05] You know, how many people in the city of Aberdeen today would say, I want to truly live. You know, this life that I've got, it's not enough. I want to experience what life to the full is. Well, this is what Paul's speaking about. He's saying, well, this is life to the full. This is truly life.

Life that is truly life. And really, this use of language is really just another way of saying what he had said to Timothy in verse 12. We saw that a couple of weeks ago. Fight the good, fight the faith, take hold of the eternal life to which you were called. And here he says that we are to take hold of life that is truly life. So another way of speaking really of eternal life, life that is truly life. And this life that is truly life, this eternal life is to be taken hold of and lived in the here and now, as well as in its fullest dimension in the coming age.

So take hold of life that is truly life. Well, let's return to where we began as we kind of draw the threads together and draw things to a close. We began posing the question, is God a killjoy? Well, what's the answer that we can give in the light of what we've discovered in these verses? What do you think? This God whom we worship, this is a God who we are told and who we experience, richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. And with all that he provides, he commands us to be like him, to follow his example, generously sharing with others for their and for our enjoyment together. This is the life that is truly life. And so I leave you, or the word of God leaves us or gives us a few thoughts to ponder on and commands to obey as we approach the season of goodwill or conspicuous consumption and self-indulgence, however way you see the coming festivities. How are we to respond then? By enjoying what God gives us and by sharing of all that he gives us. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you and we acknowledge the truth of what we have read, that you are the God who gives richly to us everything for our enjoyment. And we pray that we would enjoy what you give us, that there would be no guilt associated with enjoying your good gifts, but help us to enjoy them in a manner that is pleasing to you, that is glorifying to you. Help us to be like you in a sharing of what we have with others, shading not only our material resources, but our lives and our time in a generous way for the good and the blessing of others and ourselves. And that as we do, we would take hold of and experience and enjoy life that is truly life. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.