



**"A Measure of Your Generosity"**  
**Scripture – 1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19**  
**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, September 24, 2023**

Commenting on a New Testament passage, John Calvin wrote, "It is a major plague which we find rampant among us." Calvin was writing in the 16th Century; the bubonic plague had swept through Europe 200 years earlier, so to what plague do you suppose he was referring? Not bubonic, not the Spanish flu, and not COVID. I'll finish his sentence: "It is a major plague which we find rampant among us, that we have a mad and insatiable desire for possessions that ultimately have no lasting value."

If Calvin considered people's desires for possessions a plague in the 16th Century, can you imagine what he would name our behavior today? Picture his reaction to one evening's worth of television commercials or pop-up ads on our computer screen. They constantly persuade us to believe that our lives are unfulfilled if we do not own a car that was born from jets or have the latest smart phone or deck ourselves in diamonds.

Whenever we gather for worship, we reflect on what we genuinely value. We set aside the clutter of our lives, we step out of our hurried schedule, and we focus on what truly counts. We ponder those things that make life worth living.

In today's scripture lesson, Timothy is instructed to tell others to be careful about the values they assume and the choices they make. He is told, "Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires. These temptations can destroy their lives. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil."

Timothy is shown what constitutes a fulfilling life by contrasting the path that leads to nowhere with the path that leads to somewhere; the path that leads to emptiness with the path that leads to fulfillment; the path that spirals downward with the path that launches upward.

Note that the writer does not say that money is the root of evil, but the **love** of money. Most of the ways we use our money is for good – food, housing, clothing, transportation, and so on. Our text is not focused on money itself, but rather our attitude toward it.

Richard Niebuhr, one of the great American theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, said that everyone has a “center of value.” This center of value is the foundation that guides the way we think and act. It is what gives our lives meaning. Whether or not a person is religious, the center of value is that person’s god.

Today we are challenged to ask ourselves: “Who or what is my God? What is the object of my ultimate loyalty? Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Our passage from the First Letter to Timothy reminds us of something we know, but often push to the back of our minds: All that we have is a gift from God. We may study diligently with the minds God gave us. We may take advantage of the opportunities our families afford us. We may capitalize on the fact that we have grown up in an affluent society with educational opportunities, job opportunities, clean water, abundance of food and so much more. We may congratulate ourselves for working hard and putting in long hours to make ourselves successful, but we ought never forget that life and each one of its blessings flow from God. Without God, we do not even exist. A key element of our spiritual journey is how we handle what we have been given.

A steward is someone who manages another’s property or financial affairs. The Bible calls followers of Jesus stewards to remind us that what we have is not our own. It is temporarily on loan from God. Our lives serve as a test of what we will do with what comes our way.

Our culture says that what we do with our money is private. The Scriptures challenge that assumption. The First Letter of Timothy says that we are to be “rich in good works, generous, and ready to share.” If we are generous and ready to share, we will not veer off track and live a superficial existence. If we are generous and ready to share, we will not confuse our priorities and miss out on the things that bring true joy. If we are generous and ready to share, we will experience the deep, inner peace that comes from God. If we are generous and ready to share, we will feel the depth of love that comes from giving to someone in need.

The key to living the rich existence God intends is whether we are in charge of our money or if our money dictates our lives. The chief way of determining whether money has too firm a grip on us is to give a portion of it away.

The great Scottish theologian, William Barclay, wrote, “There is nothing like generosity for giving you a clear and undistorted view of life and of people; and there is nothing like a grudging and ungenerous spirit for distorting your view of life and of people.” If you envy the success of others and begrudge their happiness, resentment finds a foothold within you. But if you approach life with a generous spirit, you will celebrate the success of others which will arouse joy within you. Generosity compensates for many shortcomings, while a selfish spirit overshadows your virtues.

We are beginning our annual stewardship campaign when all of us are asked to make a financial commitment to the church for the coming year. Today I'm focused on our financial giving to the church. But rest assured. Whenever I preach on stewardship, I am well aware that there is a fine line between a long sermon and a hostage situation.

Russian author, Leo Tolstoy, wrote: "Joy can only be real if people look upon their life as a service and have a definite object in life outside of themselves." All of us know this. It warms our hearts when we do something for someone else.

Lutheran pastor Heidi Neumark recalls serving a church in the South Bronx. This was back in the 1980s when she was called to a church in an impoverished neighborhood. Violence, drugs, and the trauma of AIDS blanketed this section of town.

And as she looked around the vicinity of the church, she noticed that many of the neighborhood buildings were abandoned, and they had metal sheets covering the upper-story windows.

The metal sheets had been painted to resemble windows with curtains or shutters or Venetian blinds. Some depicted plants with flowers that never faded. One showed a black cat that sat motionless for years. Up high, the neighborhood looked pleasant and safe.

However, down at the street level, the buildings were covered with graffiti. Cinder blocks and gaping holes stood where windows belonged. And yet, the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development spent \$100,000 on the art up high. For a long time, the new pastor could not figure out why the city would go to all that expense for something that had zero positive effects on the people who lived in the neighborhood.

Then she discovered that the art was not painted for the sake of the people who lived there – the poor, the ill, and the frightened. Instead, it was painted for the benefit of the people who drove by there on an elevated highway.

The drivers buzzing through the neighborhood on the elevated highway could glance over and see the pleasant buildings sporting lace curtains and plants that never wilted. The art provided an illusion for the passersby that all was well. And unless they took a wrong turn and descended from the elevated highway, they never had to confront the reality of the need and suffering below.<sup>1</sup>

Many people do not want to face messy things like human need and suffering, but our church family is not content to cruise the elevated highway. We see beyond the pretty facades and drive down into places of need. Whether it is supporting Friendship House or serving meals at Emmanuel Dining Room; whether it is supporting homeless families or helping Guatemalan women start their own business; whether it is hosting an AA group or a grief group; whether it is supporting Urban Promise or mentoring a child; whether it is setting up a meal train or supporting Syrians with chickens and bees and sheep; whether it is speaking out against gun violence or providing clean drinking water for children in Gaza; whether it is an uplifting worship service or classes for children and youth; whether it is supporting the

Teen Warehouse or providing furniture for people rebuilding their lives after serving time, we follow Jesus into the places where people are struggling.

It's impossible to know how many hearts we touch and how many lives we lift, but you can be certain that Westminster's ministry and mission is making a difference.

You can give to the church out of a sense of duty. Each of us has a duty to support Westminster and its ministry. But I hope you will take the step beyond duty and give because you are grateful for the blessings of your life, and you know that making a personal financial sacrifice is a way of saying thanks to our Creator. Also, I hope you will give because you have learned that true joy comes when your focus is not inward, but outward to the needs and pain of the world.

In a couple of weeks, you will receive a letter from the church and when you pull out the pledge card, do not simply ask yourself: How much will I give? Instead, ask yourself what kind of person you want to be. Do you want to be a generous giver who finds great joy in making good things happen? I hope so.

#### NOTES

1. Shannon J. Kershner quoting from Heidi Neumark, *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx*, pp. 73–74.