

## **Taking hold of the life that really is life**

Jeremiah 32:1–3a, 6–15

Psalm 91:1–6, 14–16

1 Timothy 6:6–19

Luke 16:19–31

### **Text: 1 Timothy 6:18-19**

They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

### **Introduction**

“Now, this is the life!” Have you ever said that and what were you doing when you said it? Or maybe the question is, what do you imagine you are doing in order to be able to say “now, this is the life”? The message we get from our Lottery advertisements is common among many in our world; real life is having enough money to afford any luxury you wish. And, I suppose, if you thought that this life is all there is to life then one may reasonably conclude that real life is grabbing as much as you can. Jesus taught otherwise; his parable of the rich man and Lazarus stands in stark contrast to this materialist ideology common in our world. And the Apostle Paul taught otherwise—it is as we set our hope on God, asserts Paul, that we take hold of the life that really is life.

1. Prosperity gospel preachers are not a modern phenomenon. They existed in Paul’s day. Paul had written of some false teachers who imagine that godliness is a means of gain. The desire to be wealthy (love of money) corrupts many things. “Of course,” admits Paul, “there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment.” The word translated ‘godliness’ means piety towards God. Recall Jesus’ sermon on the mount where he spoke of prayer, fasting, and alms-giving as acts of piety. ‘Godliness’ is to live life oriented towards God. Such a life ‘combined with contentment,’ produces gain—and such gain is not limited to financial matters only.

We know the truth of which Paul speaks. There are any number of books today, not religious in nature, advocating the freeing benefits of living a minimalist sort of lifestyle. I recall the television show “Till Debt Do Us Part” starring Gail Vaz-Oxlade who helped couples in debt trouble to adopt money management skills along with disciplined spending habits to become debt free. I would say to you that my father and mother lived godly lives combined with much contentment.

Whenever I would tell my father about all the money we would save if he bought this or that particular item during an ‘amazing’ sale, he invariably would ask, ‘and how exactly are you saving money by spending it?’ (From my vantage point, he just didn’t ‘get it.’) And I can tell you that his children were beneficiaries of significant gain realized in my parents’ godliness combined with contentment.

Did you notice the general contours of Paul’s understanding of contentment; “but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.” Both of these words are plural and ‘food and clothing’ function together as a euphemism for the necessities of life. In the affluence in which we live I find that my definition of ‘necessity’ has become quite expansive. We need a dishwasher... to which my father would ask, with a twinkle in his eye, ‘why do we need a dishwasher when we have you?’ We all know that one of contentment’s blessings is deliverance from the acquisitiveness of the culture in which we live. People find themselves in all kinds of financial and relational difficulty in the drive to acquire the latest and the best. Listen to how Paul makes this point, “But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.”

In John Wesley’s England it was legal for the owners of mining companies to pay their employees with gin credits. The owner of the mine often also owned the gin store. You can picture the horrific social problems that ensued with alcohol consumption. The mission of Wesley’s Methodism was to spread holiness (think godliness) throughout the land. Wesley organized converts from his open-air preaching into small groups known as Methodist Societies. The Methodist stream of Central United Church began as a Methodist society in Unionville. In Wesley’s England Methodist society participants covenanted, among other things like prayer and regular Bible study, to be prepared to point out the faults of others as they pointed out yours. (Imagine if we did that today.)

The result was that for many miners who joined Methodist societies paychecks came home in currency rather than lost in a trip to the gin store. Families had food and children went to school—Wesley started schools of the children of miners. The general lot of a number of families rose out of poverty; godliness with contentment did produce gain. So much so that Wesley began to complain that his Methodist people were spending too much time in the tea shops—tea was an expensive drink in England in that day. With respect to money, Wesley taught, “earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can.” Wesley eventually came to chastise his

Methodist people because, while strong on the first two axioms, they had grown weak, in his estimation, on the third—give all you can.

Godliness with contentment. For many that sounds like a boring life. They want more of the here and now. Godliness doesn't prevent us from any of the goods God built into this life that he intended for us to enjoy. Contentment guides us away from the snares that abound in the love of money. Furthermore, says the gospel, there is a life that really is life—a life with a glorious future beyond this current life.

2. Why does Paul commend godliness with contentment? "... for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it."

It was just twenty years ago, on January 1, 2002, that 12 European countries began switching from their existing currencies—the lira, franc, mark, and so on—to the new currency, the euro. After a grace period of six or eight weeks, all traditional currency became worthless. According to a Chicago Tribune article, two men in Berlin "planned to fill an empty swimming pool with nearly \$45 million worth of deutsche marks, and invite people to dive in." The German government used shredding machines to dispose of old banknotes. The state government of Hesse burned its marks in a heating system, and organizers of the Cologne carnival planned to use shredded notes as confetti.... The Austrians plan was to turn their schillings into 560 tons of compost."

There is a parable for us here; there will come a day when all currency will be of no value. This is the point over which the gospel and the materialist ideology of our world diverge sharply. Is there more life to come? The gospel says yes. Jesus certainly thinks so as his parable of the rich man and Lazarus indicate.

I was browsing in a bookstore while on vacation and my attention was arrested by the title of a book; Homo Deus was emblazoned in red print covering a full third of the book cover. Homo Deus means Man God; I just had to find out what this book was about. Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow is a book written by author Yuval Noah Harari, a professor at the Hebrew university in Jerusalem. In the book Harari explores the projects, dreams and nightmares that he believes will shape the twenty-first century—from overcoming death to creating artificial life.

Harari's thesis is predicated on his belief in evolution. In outline, he claims that the human has gone from homo erectus (standing man) to homo sapiens (knowing man) and the future is homo deus (god man) when the human will achieve godlike

character in, for example, overcoming death. Immortality, in other words. I just had to read this to see what someone who held this view had to say. The unexamined assumptions of this book are, in my view, breathtaking. I reference this book because the author is a materialist. He believes that this world is all that there is—nothing and no one beyond. Life, at bottom, is considered meaningless.

Harari writes, “once we accept that there is no soul and that humans have no inner essence called ‘the self’, it no longer makes sense to ask, how does the self choose its desires? In reality, there is only a stream of consciousness, and desires arise and pass away within this stream, but there is no permanent self that owns the desires.”

<sup>1</sup> The conclusion is that humans have no free will only streams of consciousness.

My point is that the good news of Jesus Christ stands in stark contrast to this materialist view of human life. I will not speak for you, but I find the materialist view of life depressing. My thoughts are just a stream of consciousness and there is no real ‘me’ to say that the thoughts are mine.

The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ witnesses something very different about human life. Consider Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Clearly Jesus teaches that there is a future life beyond this one and how we live now and the choices we make has implications for that future. Notice as well that the two individuals in that parable end up in the future. Jesus’ parable implies that there really is a you that owns your choices. This parable is from a section of Luke’s gospel where we are told that some Pharisees who were lovers of money ridiculed Jesus for saying that “you cannot serve God and wealth.”

The parable doesn’t say that the rich man ended up in hades because he was rich. Jesus denounces a particular kind of wealth, wealth that does not see poverty and suffering. About the food that fell from the rich man’s table; it was apparently customary among the wealthy that bread was used to wipe your hands and then discarded. Jesus attacks the idea that possessions are for one’s use and that they are owned without responsibility to God and other people. Clearly Jesus implies that each person matters. The point of the parable is to open our eyes and see Lazarus at the gate. According to the gospel, God sees each human’s life. It is noteworthy that Jesus gives a name to this poor man in his story—I think it is the only time he does in all his parables. ‘Lazarus’ means ‘God helps.’

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<sup>1</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, Penguin Random House, 2015. p. 332.

In Jesus' parable his depiction of the rich man who was dressed in the finest the world had to offer and feasted sumptuously every day paints a picture of a person who could say, "Now this is the life!"; at least by the standards of many in our materialistic culture. The gospel declares that he failed to take hold of the life that really is life.

3. I invite you to reflect again on what Paul wrote regarding what the good news of Jesus Christ says to those who are wealthy. And we Christians here in Canada, even if we think our life modest, are wealthy in comparison to much of our world. "They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life." A few sentences before Paul wrote that only God is immortal. To take hold of the life that really is life is to take hold of Jesus Christ by faith. It is to cling to him. Notice that Paul implies that we take hold of that life in living for him in this life.

In his first Corinthian letter Paul wrote that 'no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.' (1 Corinthians 2:9) In other words, the greatest of all our luxuries that we humans have created for ourselves pale in imagination when compared to what God has prepared for those who love him.

In an essay by the late Richard John Neuhaus, founder of the journal *First Things*, he wrote of what we might call a near death experience. He was gravely ill and endured complicated surgery. Neuhaus wrote that "It was a couple of days after leaving intensive care, and it was night. I could hear patients in adjoining rooms moaning and mumbling and occasionally calling out; the surrounding medical machines were pumping and sucking and beeping as usual. Then, all of a sudden, I was jerked into an utterly lucid state of awareness. I was sitting up in the bed staring intently into the darkness, although in fact I knew my body was lying flat. What I was staring at was a color like blue and purple, and vaguely in the form of hanging drapery. By the drapery were two "presences." I saw them and yet did not see them, and I cannot explain that. But they were there, and I knew that I was not tied to the bed. I was able and prepared to get up and go somewhere. And then the presences—one or both of them, I do not know—spoke. This I heard clearly. Not in an ordinary way, for I cannot remember anything about the voice. But the message was beyond mistaking: "Everything is ready now."

I am sure that Neuhaus heard the same voice that spoke in the upper room to his disciples; I go to prepare a place for you. 'Everything is ready now.' I wonder if

the disinterest in our Lord's promise of eternal life in our culture is because we have so much of this worlds' goods.

Let us heed Paul's admonition and take hold of the life that really is life.