

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, September 29, 2019
16th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 26/Proper 21/Year C
Primary Text: Luke 14:25-33
Sermon Title: “*Fighting the Good Fight of the Faith*”

Theme

Timothy is reminded of the confession he made at his baptism and of its implications for daily life. His priorities will be different from those of people who merely want to be rich.

Text

⁶Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹But 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. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

¹¹But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. ¹³In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you ¹⁴to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. ¹⁶It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

¹⁷As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹thus 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.

Sermon

Often times, I find some difficulty needs to be overcome because of the context of any given reading. For example, in the Gospel Reading, we have the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The thing you need to know is that in the First Century there was no Social Security and so the only way a man like poor Lazarus could survive was to beg at the city gate. And it was part of Jewish culture that faithful Jews were supposed to give alms to the poor. This is written about in scripture, and it was the way Jewish culture was supposed to operate to take care of all their people. Today in most communities we are told not give to pan-handlers and beggars because we have support systems in place for people such as these. So in order for you to get what is at the core of the parable, which is generosity now for an even greater benefit later, I have to teach you about life in First Century Palestine.

But that is not the case with the Second Reading from the First Letter to Timothy. The points that Paul, the supposed author made, are timeless in my opinion. Let's see if you don't agree.

The reading is already divided into three convenient portions that you can observe in your bulletin.

- :6-10 "Warnings to Wealthy WannaBe's"
- :11-16 "Fighting the Good Fight of the Faith"
- :17-19 "Commands to the Already Wealthy"

The first portion, verses six through ten, I am calling, "Warnings to Wealthy WannaBe's."

The second portion, verses eleven through sixteen, I am calling, "Fighting the Good Fight of the Faith," which is also the sermon title.

And the third portion, verses seventeen through nineteen, I am calling "Commands to the Already Wealthy."

Let me begin by saying that there is nothing sinful about being wealthy. All of us are given spiritual gifts, some more than others, and then all of us are commanded by scripture to be good stewards of those gifts we have been given.

Among those spiritual gifts is the gift to make a lot of money. And that can be done by being good stewards of great intellect so that some will go on to be leaders in industry or creative authors, composers, or artists, some will be highly compensated professionals like doctors, lawyers, and other professionals. Again, there is nothing sinful about being wealthy, which, it could be argued, is the fruit of being good stewards of the gifts that God gave. We will come back to these folks in a few minutes.

The sinfulness in this first portion is that there were then and are some now who wanted to become wealthy and are willing to do anything to accomplish it. Paul wrote that,

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.
¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

"Warnings to Wealthy WannaBe's"

I have heard it said that it is really not all that difficult to become a millionaire. All I have to do is make the goal of accumulating \$1M the one single focus of my life.

- I will work all the time in a job that will reward my effort.
- I will save every bit of my income.
- I will live super-modestly, having just the bare minimum of expenses.
- I will take advantage of homeless shelters and free meal institutions.
- I will think only of myself and my goal of \$1M.
- Being so focused on my goal, I might resort to other illegal methods of the accumulation of wealth too.

If I do all that and more, I will in time achieve my goal of having \$1M. But that will require many personal hardships along the way, which is not living the abundant life God has in store for me. And at the end, having achieved my goal of the accumulation of \$1M at all costs, I doubt that I would have any friends or

family to enjoy it with, and no life of faith because I have demonstrated that all my faith is my wealth.

We occasionally hear of people who have done this and we have names for them like *miser*, *hoarder*, *cheapskate*, *tightwad*, and the like. They are portrayed well by the character of Ebenezer Scrooge in Dickens' "A Christmas Carol."

I hope you can see that this behavior and goal for life is not of God. On the contrary, Paul wrote that godliness is equated to be content with what we have. That that does not mean we have to settle or wait to have stuff given to us. On the contrary, all of us should be good stewards of the gifts God has given us, making the best of our gifts, but then being content with what we have.

For example, many pastors want to be best-selling authors, or travelling evangelist, or have a television presence. Say what you want about that, I want to be a parish pastor, serving the needs of the parish and community to which I have been called. I don't consider that settling. And I am content with the call I have received and am doing my level best in serving. If I wanted to be rich or famous I would have focused my vocation in another direction.

"Commands to the Already Wealthy"

Now, let's say that you are wealthy, like the people Paul wrote about in the last portion of this passage. First of all, he presumes that the wealthy folks are members of the Christian fellowship. He is not speaking to the rich outside the fellowship, just those inside the fellowship. The writer also presumes that your wealth has come by honorable means. You have been good stewards of the gifts God has given you, and for your efforts you have been fairly compensated.

Paul warns the rich that there are traps that come with great wealth. Often times the wealthy get full of themselves. Paul has a word for that and it is "haughty." Haughty is defined as,

haughty – disdainfully proud; snobbish; scornfully arrogant; supercilious; contemptuous

The wealthy are not somehow immune from or excused from ministry in the church. On the contrary, the writer wrote,

¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share,
¹⁹thus 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.

PIC of GWOH DoS

So, when we have ministry opportunities here at Zion, they are intended for all of our members for the sake of the Gospel, and sure enough, on God's Work. Our Hands. Day of Service, we had young and old, rich and poor, and all vocations represented. It was a beautiful tableau of our fellowship. No one in this fellowship is too good, haughty, for the work of this ministry.

"Commands to the Already Wealthy"

And the author reminds you that are wealthy, that you have the opportunity to be a blessing that others of modest means don't have. You have the opportunity to be a blessing with your wealth.

One day Jesus observed the faithful people coming to the Temple to give their tithes. He noticed a wealthy man making a show of his tithe because it was a great gob of money. Imagine what a tithe, ten percent of income, would be from Warren Buffet or Bill Gates. Their tithe alone would more than enough to cover our ministry expenses, wouldn't it? But Jesus gave honor to the example of the poor widow who gave a mite out of her poverty. Why did he honor her faithfulness that amounted to little, more than his faithfulness that was a great sum? Because Jesus is more concerned about the heart of the faithful than he is the amount of their giving, and hers was a real sacrifice. She would have to have great faith in God that she would survive. But we need not be concerned about Bill Gates and Warren Buffett getting by on the other ninety percent of their income, do we?

In another place Jesus said,

From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and
from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.

Luke 12:48

So, to those to whom much has been given, Paul wrote, don't be full of yourself. You're not that special. You have been given the blessing of wealth that is to be a blessing to others. Like everyone else, you are to be a good steward, and when you do that your real treasure will be laid up in heaven or as Paul wrote, "the life that really is life."

"Fighting the Good Fight of the Faith"

But most of us are probably not, *Wealthy Wanna Be's* or the *Already Wealthy*. What does the author have for us? I was hoping you would ask.

Ephesus, was an important port city on the west coast of what is now Turkey. As the evangelist to the Gentile world, the apostle Paul planted a Christian church in Ephesus that was made up of Gentile converts to Christianity. To the Ephesians, Christianity was a completely new and foreign religion; not the continuation of and completion of the Jewish faith that the other apostles conveyed to predominately Jewish communities. To the Ephesians, and really to all people, Paul wrote in that middle portion that we are to:

pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

When he wrote their "good confession" to his new converts he was referring to their turning their backs on their previous ways of life and their turning to and only to Christianity and the way that Paul was teaching them to live it out. That is a timeless message that all Christians need to learn anew every day.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

"Fight the Good Fight of the Faith."

So finally to all of us I say, pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. These are not new concepts to us, but it is good that we are reminded today and every day, because we are in a battle against the consumerism of the culture in which we live. A culture that teaches that because we earned it, we owe it to ourselves to consume it all on ourselves, so that everyone knows how special

we are. This is what Paul referred to when he wrote that we are to "Fight the Good Fight of the Faith."

In contrast to that message, I want to remind you that the one who was and is king and heir to all the riches of the universe died on a cross naked and alone, so that at the end of this age we might be joint heirs with him in heaven. It is through him that we have any worth at all, and for his sacrifice for us, we owe him everything.

Prayer

Loving, giving, and merciful God, remind us daily of your son's call on our lives. Remind us that we have been set apart by our confession of him as our Lord, and that that means we are to be different, that we are to live to his example. And though that is an impossible task, send us your Holy Spirit that we may be guided in all godliness, every moment of every day. This we pray in his name. Amen