

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.¹⁸ Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.¹⁹ In this way 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.

²⁰ Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge,²¹ which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith. Grace be with you. (1 Timothy 6:17-21)

Are Blessings a Double Edged Sword?

Do you ever buy your kids or your grandkids happy meals? You know what I'm talking about, right? Those meals that come with a toy? We almost never do. Once in a while we have, though, and usually the toy is some cheap, movie related piece of plastic. It's worthless. But if you try to throw it away, you'd think that your kids had saved their allowance for a year to buy it. Have you had that experience with your kids? Have you been guilty of the same attitude as an adult? This morning, I want to talk about all the blessings that God gives us and how we respond to them. As I look at what God has given us and think about the words before us this morning, words that the St. Paul wrote to Timothy, I have to ask, **are blessings a double edged sword?**

I.

A double edged sword is something that can cut both ways. It can be a huge benefit but it can also cause real harm. The internet is a double edged sword. It makes an enormous amount of information instantly available. But it also can cause irreparable harm to people who aren't careful about how they use it and with whom. **Are blessings a double edged sword? Yes! Just take a look at wealth.**

God's word has a great deal to say about our wealth and about how we use it and what our attitude toward it should be. Paul says that God **"richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment."** Money is not evil or good. It's just there. Like the pews you're sitting on. They're neither good nor bad. What's good or bad is how we use them. If we use them as a place for our family to hear God's Word, that's good. If we use them as a place to lay our heads back and count the rafters until that boring sermon is over, that's bad. And our attitude towards those pews can be good or bad. If we're thankful to God that we have them, that's good. If the mere thought of how much we spent on them or how ugly they are or how different we think they should've been makes us mad every time we come here, that's bad.

The same is true about money. All that we have comes from God. You wouldn't have the car you drive or the house you live in or the money in your checking account if God didn't give you those things. Even what you earned by working and saving comes from God who gave you the ability to do those things. God gives us physical blessings for our enjoyment. Last week, after a particularly hot day, I took my family to get ice cream. One of my children thanked me not once, but three times for doing that. He enjoyed it and that made me happy. God gives us blessings, and he wants us to be grateful, certainly. But he also wants us to enjoy his gifts of love.

So it's not a sin to be rich. That's good news for us because we Americans are rich. Every one of us is among the wealthiest ten percent of all people who've ever lived. In the ancient world, even kings didn't get to eat oranges in the winter time. But we just go to the grocery store and buy them. Every one of us is more wealthy than two thirds of the people alive today. God has blessed us with a standard of living that most of the world envies. People still flood to this country because they want a better life – the life God has given to us.

It's not a sin to enjoy the life God has given us. All his gifts are good. But our hearts make God's gifts a double edged sword. Paul said, **"Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant ..."** It's easy for rich people to look down their noses at other people. Could we ever be guilty of that? Last spring, when I was considering the call to come here, someone told me that those people in Livonia think they're better than other people. I really had not encountered much of that attitude until last week when one of my sons repeated something that he had heard in school. He called Westland "Wasteland" and Garden City "Garbage City." What's the difference between Livonia and those cities? Isn't it their relative wealth? How

did our children pick up that attitude of arrogance? They learned it from their own sinful hearts. They learned it from us sinful adults. People with wealth often look down on people who have less. And that is a sin.

Paul also said, **“Command those who are rich in this present world not ... to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God ...”** The real problem with wealth is that we can make it into our god. Oh, we still come to church. But when push comes to shove, what are we trusting in? What do we depend on to take care of us when we get sick or old? What matters most to us? So often, the answer is our wealth. We trust in our pension plan and our investments to take care of us when we're elderly and in our health insurance to provide for us when we're sick. We put our job and our money ahead of everything, even our families. We pay our bills. We pay for our entertainment. Then, if there's anything left, that's what we give to the Lord.

My friends, the Lord is the one who's going to see you through sickness and old age. The Lord is going to make sure that when your life ends here, you go home to heaven. The Lord is going to watch over you and care for you every day between now and then. Now, I'm not saying you shouldn't work hard or be smart about your investments or careful about your spending. God does want you to do those things. But not with the attitude that this money is going to take care of us. Rather, with the attitude that this wealth is what God has given us to provide for our needs. Part of that is being faithful to him is how we use what he gives us here. But our trust is in him, who will always provide for us, even if our wealth disappears.

My friends, how often have we let money and the pursuit of money run our lives? How often have we made it the most important thing in our lives? And how often have we looked down on people who have less money than we do? Is there any person here who is innocent of these sins? I'm not. Our sinful hearts worship money and they rebel against God. For that, we deserve to spend eternity in hell.

But hell is not God's plan for us. Jesus Christ has dealt with the problem of our sinful hearts. He replaced them with his own perfect heart. God demands that we humans love him first of all and that we treat all our blessings as his gifts. We cannot do that. So Jesus came and did it for us. God gives us credit for the perfect life and perfect heart of Jesus. Jesus died and paid for the greed and the arrogance and the idol worship that we were born with in our hearts. He suffered everything that our sin deserves, including hell. He has wiped all that sin away. He erased our record and now, God finds us innocent in his court. Knowing that is the only thing that can give us the power to change our lives and our attitudes. Paul told believers not to be arrogant or to trust in their wealth. It's a temptation we believers have to face and fight against. But with the power of Christ, each day we repent and return to God and he changes us. We won't be perfect in this life, but we can grow in our trust and in our new attitude every day. In fact, God promises us that we are growing. If you have faith in Jesus, then your life is changing.

Paul said, **“Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.”** A person who is rich in wealth but also in faith, loves God and follows his commands. And he loves the people around him. A person who knows his wealth is a gift from God is generous and willing to share that wealth. If money is your god, then you're going to hoard it and try to get as much as you can for yourself. You're going to resent any time you have to give it to the Lord or to other people. But if you live in the love of Christ, you have a new attitude. You're willing to dig deeply into your own pockets for the benefit of someone else.

Paul says, **“In this way 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.”** When our faith guides our actions, then we are living for the Lord. Then we have the only life that is real. The life we see here is nothing. It's all going to end. The life to come is the life that matters. The life to come is our treasure. Putting that life first changes the way we live here. God calls us all to commit ourselves to putting the life to come first.

II.

The New Testament talks about money a great deal because it's such a hard issue for us. But it isn't the only gift that we struggle with. The greatest gift we have is the Bible, the message of how God overcame our sin and gave us eternal life. But sinful hearts abuse even that gift. **Are blessings a double edged sword? Yes, consider even the Word of God.**

Paul closed this letter with an exhortation to Timothy, a pastor, to continue to be faithful. He told him, **“Guard what has been entrusted to your care.”** He means the message. He explains that Timothy needs to **“turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge.”** The only

way to be faithful to the word is to avoid all the things that try to replace the word. To avoid false doctrine. To avoid false teachers. He calls the words of people who disagree with him “godless chatter” and “falsely called knowledge.” Paul doesn’t see any value in a free exchange of ideas with false teachers. He doesn’t tell us, “There are things you can learn from those people, just be careful.” He says, “Turn away!”

How different that is from the attitude that prevails today! A member of my previous congregation once told me that she attended a non-Lutheran Bible study. I was concerned that she might learn false doctrine. Her answer was, “Oh, I keep my wits about me!” She made it very clear that she didn’t want to hear anything that would contradict her decision to go to a false teacher. I wonder how many of us are more in sympathy with her position than with St. Paul’s?

But Paul made that bold statement because he was concerned about Christians wandering from the faith. All false teaching is poison. If you let it grow and fester in your heart, it can destroy your faith. God has given us the word in its truth and purity. But the temptation to compromise, to introduce our own ideas, to think that we can learn a lot from false teachers is very hard to overcome today. The problem is not the word of God. The problem is our sinful heart. We get bored with the same old thing every week. We don’t like to listen. We think that we’re smart enough that we can stay on our toes and avoid the falsehood. The problem is the pride that led to the first sin and that still leads us to sin every day.

What is the solution? Paul says it in the very last words of this letter: **“Grace be with you.”** God’s grace is the love that we don’t deserve but that God pours out on us anyway. God’s grace is Christ paying even for our sinful desire to listen to lies and our boredom with what God has given us. God’s grace is the Scripture and communion and the announcement that we are forgiven all working together to change us. To lead us to treasure his word. To lead us to turn away from all the things that lead away from him. Jesus has won that forgiveness for you. God has wiped your pride and sin away. Now follow him and reject the pride that says you’re smart enough to do your own thing.

Are our blessings a double edged sword? I know I’ve been saying all morning that they are. But that really isn’t true, or at least, it doesn’t come close to being the best way to think of them. Our blessings are gifts of God’s love. In this world, we have to fight a war against the sin in our hearts. That sin can give us the impression that all these blessings are double edged swords. But in Christ, even the things we wrestle with are blessings. All the good things of this life are blessings from God. The greatest blessing is forgiveness, which is what we learn about in the Word. Hear that word and treasure those blessings. Amen.