

Ministers make mistakes; hard to believe I know, but ministers make mistakes.

I was reminded of one of mine on Thursday at our First Annual Golf Tournament; we were celebrating Christmas Eve in 2004. My first year here was complete and we were off to a great start! Our church was filled to overflowing; the energy was electric! My heart was filled with joy, but my head had some space available.

We read lessons. We sang carols. We enjoyed “tidings of comfort and joy,” but I forgot the offering.

Now, of all the services to forget the offering, Christmas Eve (and Easter) are not the ones, but ministers make mistakes; and we’re not the only ones when it comes to money and it’s place in our lives.

In our lesson from I Timothy, the Apostle Paul writes to Timothy about mistakes that ministers are making; money means too much and misery and pain result; but there is a better way. Paul writes words that are both familiar and often misunderstood: *1 Timothy 6:6–7 (NRSV)* <sup>6</sup> *Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment;* <sup>7</sup> *for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it;* *1 Timothy 6:10 (NRSV)* <sup>10</sup> *For 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.*

Ministers make mistakes, and we can learn from these mistakes; we can learn to be content; we can learn to live a life that is truly worth living; we can “*take hold of eternal life*” and live with rich simplicity.

### ❶ Something from Nothing

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When money makes our world go around, it doesn’t take long for us to decide, “Stop the world! I want to get off!”

It’s easy to condemn ourselves and say that money shouldn’t mean so much to us; it’s also easy to excuse ourselves and say that money doesn’t mean that much to us; either way, we’re evading the question: How much is enough? What will it take for us to be content?

“I’ll be content when I’m not living paycheck to paycheck.” “I’ll be content when I have 6 month’s salary in the bank.” “I’ll be content when I don’t have to worry about the future.”

These are all worthwhile goals; to budget, to create a financial plan with goals in mind, to save for a desired future; these best practices are not condemned by the Bible; they are not unfaithful, but no matter how well we budget, no matter how carefully we plan, *“the uncertainty of riches”* can reduce our best laid plans to rubble.

We hoped to have something, but because some Prince in the Middle East had a bad day, oil prices rose by 30% in a week resulting in a rise in food prices and fuel prices; our energy costs skyrocket, and our ability to make ends meet unravels. We hoped to have something, but due to circumstances beyond our control, we have nothing.

Or, we hoped to have something, but then we started having terrible headaches; our doctor ordered tests; the results were clear; the news wasn’t good; treatment might work but it would take all that we had – physically and financially. We hoped to have something, but due to circumstances beyond our control, we have nothing.

We have nothing but faith; nothing but God; nothing but the promise *2 Corinthians 12:9 (NRSV) ... , “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.*

God offers us something from nothing. So long as we strive to secure our contentment through *“the uncertainty of riches”* our lives will be at the mercy of forces that ebb and flow and come and go. Paul describes our fate when we follow that path: *1 Timothy 6:9 (NRSV) 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.*

By contrast, *1 Timothy 6:6–7 (NRSV) ... there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it;*

John Calvin, our dour forebear who is considered among other things to be an intellectual ancestor of capitalism, wrote this about this passage: “[Contentment] may refer either to the disposition of the heart, or to the thing itself. If it be understood as referring to the heart, the meaning will be, that “godly persons, when they desire

nothing, but are satisfied with their humble condition, have obtained very great gain.”, If we understand it to be “[contentment]” of wealth’ (and, for my own part, I like this view quite *as well as the other,*) it will be a promise, like that in the book of Psalms,

*“The lions wander about hungry and famished; but they that seek the Lord shall not be in want of any good thing.” (Psalm 34:10.)*

The Lord is always present with his people, and, as far as is sufficient for their necessity, out of his fullness he bestows on each his portion. Thus true happiness consists in piety; and this [contentment] may be regarded as an increase of gain.<sup>1</sup>”

What will it take for us to be content? How much is enough? Money cannot cash that check. Faith can. Faith receives what we have as the gift that it is. Faith gives thanks and goes on. By faith, we can have a lot, and be content. By faith, we can have a little, and be content. By faith, we can *“take hold of eternal life,”* and receive something from nothing.

## ② Rich Simplicity

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Eternal life is more than what awaits us in the sweet bye and bye. Eternal life is a quality of life that we can experience, indeed that we are called to experience in the here and now. Eternal life is that true happiness that Calvin spoke of which consists in piety, which is to say, best Christian practices.

Paul shows us some of those practices when he writes of those who are rich (notice that there are rich people in the early church): *1 Timothy 6:18 (NRSV) They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share.*

Eternal life, life lived in the presence of God in the here and now, does good, is rich in good works, generous, and ready to share.

Eternal life is different from ordinary life, life lived in the absence of God; these spiritual best practices make it different and make us different so that we can make the difference we are called to make as the people of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin, J. (1998). *1 Timothy* (electronic ed.). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

This brings us back to the mistake this minister made: the offering. In that moment, we implement eternal life. We take the offering together; the ushers come forward; the plates are passed from hand to hand; and we present our money and ourselves for the purpose of God.

That's how we do it, but there are other ways; some make it a private affair; as you leave, there may be plates in the box in which you can contribute (or not). Others make it mandatory; if you are going to be a member of this church then you will bring the elders your tax return from last year and you will pledge 10%.

We seek a balance between these approaches. On the one hand, we have envelopes so that we give in private; our generosity is between us and God. On the other hand, ours is a pledging church; we make commitments to one another and to God to support the work of our church so that when the plate is passed, we've given it some thought and are ready to share.

Our hands play a key role in the offering. We take our money in our hands and we let it go. Our open handedness is the key practice, because open hands offer what we have to God; open hands receive what we have from God; open hands cannot grasp in anxious desperation; they can only wait in quiet trust for the need to be met.

Eternal life is lived with open hands; eternal life is marked by a rich simplicity that does not demand to possess but cherishes the opportunity to receive.

What will it take for you to be content? How much is enough? Money cannot cash that check. Faith can. Faith receives what you have as the gift that it is. Faith gives thanks and goes on. Live a life that is truly worth living; *"take hold of eternal life"*; live with open hands; implement these spiritual best practices – good works, generosity, always ready to share; godliness with contentment will be your treasure when you live with rich simplicity. Amen.