

**“Content to Serve”**

**“The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil”** (1 Timothy 6:10). Pastor Paul, the Apostle, wrote those words to his young colleague Timothy, along with the warning that this love of money has ultimately shipwrecked the faith of many. It is a serious matter. The love of money is so acute a threat to our faith that Jesus describes it this way: **“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God”** (Mark 10:25). And along with those words from the mouth of our Savior, you have already heard today two compelling examples of this truth in action.

One example: a man came to Jesus, looking to prove himself and his worthiness before God. He boasted that he had obeyed the commandments, and it is very reasonable to assume that his outward life was indeed impeccable, that he was careful to avoid so many of the outward actions condemned by the Ten Commandments. But he was certainly not perfect, and Jesus wanted him to realize that. To this wealthy man Jesus said, “Sell your stuff and give your money to the poor, and follow me.” But the man couldn’t bring himself to do so. He stood face to face with Jesus, the Lord. He talked with the man who could have given him the whole world, the Savior who would one day go to the cross to pay for his sins, for all sins, and he walked away because he would rather have his stuff and his money (Mark 10:17-27).

The other example we heard concerned the servant of one of the most prominent prophets in the history of Israel. At his master’s command, a foreign leader was cured of leprosy. Gehazi the servant had seen not only this but so many other miracles as well. He knew the power of God and the love of God. But he saw some expensive clothes and gifts, and he couldn’t leave them alone. Sure, he thought no one would ever find out, but he was wrong about that. Because God always knows, even the thoughts of our hearts that we would most want to keep hidden from everyone. And Gehazi received a punishment that would be a constant reminder of the danger of greed and materialism (2 Kings 5:14-27).

Is it any wonder then, that we hear a similar warning repeated in the letter to the Hebrews? At first glance, it may seem a bit surprising. After all, this letter was written to Christians undergoing persecution. They were terrified for their lives and their livelihoods. They were on the verge of turning away from Christianity in order to embrace once again the Judaism from which they had come. They had bigger things to worry about. They had immediate threats. But the power of greed is so intense that the writer of this letter, directed by the Holy Spirit, still warned them: **“Keep your lives free from the love of money.”** He still encouraged them: **“be content with what you have.”** These are words that we also need to pay attention to. We need to hear the encouragement: be content, content to serve.

And there is only one way for that to happen: it happens through Jesus. We can be content because of his promises. We can be content because God has said, **“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”** Not in the face of persecution. Not in suffering or pain, not ever. It’s a promise that we could never have earned and a love we could never deserve. For the Hebrews, their wavering and uncertainty was a display and a demonstration of their sinful natures. They reasoned that things would be so much easier and so much less painful if they just gave up on Christ and on Christianity. And so, for that moment, the only thing that mattered was their comfort and their security.

Have you had those moments? Have you experienced those times when personal comfort and security seem at odds with your life as a Christian? When it is so much easier to just be like everyone else, to just go along with the crowd, even in sinful ways? Do you know those moments of doubt and uncertainty?

Then hear the same message that was proclaimed to them. Jesus is greater. He is greater than any other option, than any other possibility. For the Hebrews, that meant that Jesus was greater than the angels, than Moses or any of the prophets, greater than the priests that served at the temple or the whole system of Old Testament sacrifices. Jesus was better because he was the true sacrifice. He offered himself once and for all for the sins of the whole world. He spoke and continues to speak the Word of God. He gives the assurance to his people that their sins are forgiven, that they will rise from the dead and live forever

with him in heaven. Judaism couldn't give that to the Hebrews, and nothing aside from Christ offers that to us. He is greater than our temporary comfort, greater than our wealth, greater than our family members and friends, greater than anything else to which we might look for security or hope. Only in Christ do we have eternal hope.

And that is his promise. Never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you.

The key to contentment is knowing and trusting in the promise of God. The rich man who walked away from Jesus has long since passed away. All of his wealth and all of his possessions are no longer his. They mean nothing to him now even though they once meant everything to him. Be content because of God's promises to you. Be content because of the promises fulfilled in Jesus. And be content to serve him.

Interestingly enough, the writer to the Hebrews begins his closing remarks to them by urging them to consider their behavior as Christians. Not only has he encouraged them not to give up on Christ, he also encourages them not to leave behind their Christian conduct. **"Keep on loving each other as brothers"** is the first admonition. It is a general encouragement that in the next few verses is applied in several specific ways. Brotherly love is the appropriate response of faith. Galatians 6:10 likewise encourages, **"Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."**

This brotherly love is to be extended to strangers, to those in prison, and to those who are suffering. That's an interesting list. Regarding strangers, the writer notes that some people have entertained angels without realizing it. We know from the Old Testament about times when Abraham and Lot both welcomed angels to their houses. Perhaps there are other examples that we don't know about. The point is not that perhaps we, too, will have angels stop by, but that our approach should be the same as theirs, that we welcome those who need welcoming. That we don't only show love to those we know and are close to, but also are hospitable toward outsiders.

The Hebrews likely knew some Christians who were in prison or who were suffering in other ways due to the persecution they were facing. They were to take a special interest in these people knowing that they could easily be in the same position. We, too, ought to continue to consider how we can love others as we love ourselves, and how we follow the direction of Jesus to do to others as we would want them to do to us. See, this is a whole new attitude that says because God has given me everything and I can be content in every circumstance, then I can also make an effort to help others, not to be focused only on myself.

Marriage is mentioned as another area in which we let our lights shine. Unfortunately, even many Christians today have taken their views and thoughts about marriage from the society around them instead of from God who created marriage. They don't worry about keeping the marriage bed pure, but look at sex and marriage as more ways to serve themselves.

And then our list of encouragements returns to the overarching theme of our service today, that of greed or materialism. Keep your lives free from the love of money. Don't go down that road that has led so many to destruction. Be content with God's promises and his blessings. Be content not to serve yourself, but to serve others and to serve God.

None of these actions come naturally to sinful human beings. But they do come naturally to Christians. Jesus explained, **"A good tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit"** (Matthew 7:18). As Luther once explained this, "Good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works." God has forgiven our sins in Jesus and made us into good trees. And now he invites us to do good works, to serve him and to serve our neighbors. Greed and materialism hurt ourselves and those around us who would otherwise benefit from our loving service. God says that he is always with us and will never leave nor forsake us. That means that we can be content to serve. It means that we can say in all circumstances, **"The Lord is my helper. I will not be afraid."** The Lord is my helper, and I will listen to his direction.

The text: Hebrews 13:1–6 (NIV84)

Keep on loving each other as brothers. <sup>2</sup> Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. <sup>3</sup> Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

<sup>4</sup> Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. <sup>5</sup> Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”

<sup>6</sup> So we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”