

# Stewardship Forum

## An evangelical alliance Partnership for Change

### Stewardship Tools for Leaders : Sermon Library

**Title: TAKE MY PLASTIC: What's wrong with wealth? (1 Timothy 6:6-10;17-19)**

**Author: Rico Tice**

My parents are loyal Anglicans. Let me tell you what I mean by that. I mean that they would keep going to their local parish church even if Beelzebub were the vicar! And even if Billy Graham was preaching in the next door parish, they would never desert. You see, they grew up during the war, and they were taught that you stand by your post, no matter what; you stay loyal. So their slogan as they keep looking after me is 'parenthood stops at death'. Poor things! And how, you may well ask, has the Anglican Church rewarded them for their loyalty since 1974 when they returned from abroad to work in England? Well, it has ensured that they have never consistently been taught the Bible, in 25 years of church-going. They have never had this book opened to them. My parents have never known what it is to have the Lord Jesus Christ walk off the pages of Scripture and their hearts burn within them. That's what the Anglican Church has done to them in 25 years. I love my parents very much, and that's why I am passionate about men and women going into the ordained ministry and full-time Christian work. And I dream that one day someone will go from this church to my parents' parish and teach them the Bible. I would go, but because they changed my nappies, they cannot take me seriously! But I wonder about this. Could it be you? I'm serious now. Is that God's call on your life – to go and teach people the Bible? Could it be you? It is the most incredible privilege.

You may well ask at this point why I am introducing a sermon on 'What's wrong with wealth?' with such an introduction. Only for this reason – that the most gifted speaker that I knew of my age when I was in my early 20s is today nowhere near Christian ministry. He was brilliant. Those of us who grew up with him were in awe of his ability to teach the Bible. Yet he has since taken those remarkable gifts and attempted to build for himself what I can only describe as heaven on earth. I'd never say that if he was a layman and now the lynchpin of his local church. People like that are gold dust, and there are many here like that: gold dust. Or if he was courageously living for Christ as salt and light in his profession. But he's not; he's just gone AWOL – absent without leave. He's done it on all those fronts, as he sustains and builds for himself heaven on earth. At the same time, my parents, like millions of others in this country, have no one to teach them the Bible. Nobody. And it breaks your heart.

As I've prepared this week, I haven't been able to get that guy out of my head – or actually, to be more specific, I haven't been able to get his heart out of my head – because that was what was lost. At some point in our early twenties, his heart was stolen by Mk 4:17 – the parable of the sower – by the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desires for other things. And it is a tragic loss. He's gone and built heaven on earth. And I just wish that twelve years ago someone had taught him the passage that we have in front of us, for it provides two secure handrails with which to steady ourselves as we face the onslaught of

# Stewardship Forum

## An evangelical alliance Partnership for Change

Christmas and indeed, above all, with which to protect our hearts. What are we going to do with our short lives? The Bible tells us this: that in this short life, we are to love and serve Christ and we are to love and serve other people. And make no mistake, the Bible tells us that there's a straight choice to be made between devotion to God and devotion to wealth and materialism. And you cannot do both. Materialism, you see, fights a battle for our hearts with God. It claims to be the root to happiness, so the adverts on the TV and in the magazines say 'Trust me, buy me, wear me, eat me, want me and I'll bring you happiness. Come on, you owe it to yourself, come on do that.' And in response to that battle for the heart, the Bible says that you can't love God if you also love money. And you can't love your neighbour if you also want his things. And here are the handrails with which to steady ourselves and with which to protect our hearts.

0. The danger of wanting material things (vs. 6-11)

0. The duty of having material things (vs. 17-19)

1. The danger of wanting material things (vs. 6-11)

I suppose the question with wealth and materialism is the point at which we can say – 'Actually I've got enough. I'm now satisfied, I have all I need.' I may be wrong, but it seems to me that the advertising world is built on the fact that I should never say, 'actually I'm fine, I've got enough.' I should always want to consume. Indeed, a group of philosophers called the Stoics in Paul's day identified materialism as a major cause of human misery. People are unhappy, the Stoics said, because they want things that they have not got, and they pursue them under the illusion that once they have those things they'll be satisfied. So the pressure to consume grows and grows. It's like drinking salt water. You never can have enough to satisfy your thirst – it only increases. Now, doubtless the Stoics would have applauded this analysis of the 20<sup>th</sup> century culture we live in by Christopher Lash. This is what he writes in his book *The Culture of Narcissus*.

'The contemporary climate is therapeutic rather than religious. People today hunger not for personal salvation but for the feeling, the momentary illusion of personal well-being, health and psychic security.'

So what is he describing there? Actually, he's describing comfort shopping. That's what people do. Paul acknowledges that the Stoics have a point as he's debated with them, and he uses the word that was right at the heart of their philosophy. And he hands it on to his young protégé Timothy as the key means by which you guard your heart from this pressure to consume. See the word at the beginning of verse 6 - 'Contentment'. The word literally means 'self-sufficiency'. It's a technical term which describes the wise man's ability to live independently of his circumstances. It's a sort of inner source of peace. And that contentment, says Paul, is based on vs. 6 'godliness'. But godliness with contentment is great gain. Now this is the most important word in the passage. Because this is where my heart should be. 'Godliness'. That's what our lives should really be about. This is our goal; this is Paul's great priority. Do you remember Paul in gaol, writing to the Philippians, 'For to me, to live is Christ'? He is put under three enormous pressures – three great tests of that

# Stewardship Forum

## An evangelical alliance Partnership for Change

commitment: his freedom, his reputation and his life. And he says no, I'll sacrifice all those things – freedom, reputation and life - so that I can know Christ. For to me to live is Christ. Now we don't have a problem with the first six words there 'For to me to live is...'

Our problem is that it could be my car, my flat, my job, my family, my relationship, my debt, my status, whatever. But for Paul, it was Christ. That was who he lived for. That's the heart of godliness, what drove him. That's what got him out of bed in the morning. So he says to the Philippians that he wishes 'that I might know Christ and the power of his resurrection.' That's the motor in his heart. He says, 'I want to know God through Christ.' He doesn't just want to know *about* him. He wants to enjoy a deep, life-transforming fellowship *with* God. Do you know that? Do you know that life-transforming fellowship with God? Becoming more like him. Seeking to become more like him in character and behaviour. That's what it's about, with this Lord Jesus Christ who God raised in the power of an endless life. And all that is what he means by this word 'godliness'. That's the heart of the passage and our great aim. Can I say that if that doesn't excite us tonight, it proves how little we know of God. If you are not excited by godliness, then I'm afraid that's a reflection on you – and I say that humbly. It shows how little you know of God. For what I've observed is that the most godly people are the people who know God best. And the people who get to know God are the people who grow most in godliness. None of us has less of God than we really want, and we're told in the Bible to train ourselves in godliness.

Just flick back to chapter 4:7. What are we told here? 'Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales.' So he doesn't want the church revolving around gossip. Rather, 'train yourself to be godly.' So godliness is to be the focus of our spiritual energies. All our training, all our exercise, all our energy goes into growing in godliness as we cultivate godly, Christ-like living. And Paul says here that just as an athlete trains himself to achieve his goals - and if you watch any world-class athlete you'll know that they don't just train for five minutes in the morning – he says, in the same way, give your time, practise, form the right habits. We're being told to train ourselves to be godly. So make sure that you do meet the Lord Jesus each morning in the Bible. Make sure that you cultivate habits of prayer. The most striking thing that was said to me this year was by Michael Baughen when he came here. He said, '90% of the problems I encounter spiritually in Christians are because they've stopped reading the Bible and praying each day. We've got to train ourselves.' And he said that after 37 years in the ministry.

Training yourselves, why? Because vs. 8 'physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things.' Why, because it holds promise both for the present life and for the life to come. So if you're training yourself in godliness, you're making an eternal investment for the life to come. You're being very wise because your eyes are on the far horizon. That's what we do as Christians, isn't it? We live in the present because the future governs that – the future governs our present. And so if we look back at 6:11 – it's very striking. 'But you, man of God, flee from all this and pursue righteousness, godliness.' What's he saying about materialism? He's saying, flee.

My brother and I once got into a field when we were arrogant and young and it said 'beware of the bull' and we thought the sign was lying, and it wasn't. And when we ran, you wouldn't believe it! Fleeing something means you just sprint to get out of there! So, we flee, but on

# Stewardship Forum

## An evangelical alliance Partnership for Change

the other hand we're meant to pursue righteousness, godliness. It's to be pursued. And that word is the word of the hunter chasing his quarry. It doesn't just happen. Please remember this: You will never wake up one morning and find yourself godly. There's a lot of teaching in the Church that seems to suggest this, and it is not true and it is not scriptural. It will not happen like that – it has to be worked at. It has to be the great passion and goal and aim of our lives.

Vs 11 – 'it has to be pursued as a hunter pursues his quarry.'

It is well worth pursuing because it gives us the best of both worlds. That's what we're taught. No one can take your godliness from you here, and you can take it with you when you go. Looking at some of you, it's not going to be long now until you go! And you can take your godliness with you! And it's the only thing that you can take with you when you go.

I was with a member of this church last night and I was with the family and they're almost certainly going to turn off the life support machine, and what is the one thing the person can take with her when she goes? Her godliness. Paul's great concern here is that Timothy's heart will have a real passion about pursuing godliness. So that he (and we) will stand against the spiral of acquisitiveness that is the affluent society. Paul clearly outlines the danger Timothy faces here in vs. 10. He says 'Guard your heart, Timothy, for the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.' Let's just clear the misquote – it's often wrongly said that it's the root of all evil. That's not true – it's all *kinds* of money. Some people eager for money, like that super speaker I mentioned earlier who's wasted his life, have wandered from the faith, and pierced themselves with many griefs. If you read 1 Timothy, you can see that Paul is provoked into discussing the subject of the love of money as a result of his observation of the mercenary motives of some false teachers whom he's discussing in a previous part of the chapter. They've come up in vs. 5 – these false teachers think that godliness is a means to financial gain. So in Ephesus what had happened was that a group of false teachers had invaded the church of which Timothy was the minister. And they were hypocrites. They called people to asceticism and self denial but actually, they themselves were very acquisitive. They taught people one thing, but actually they lived another.

Vs 10. Right at the heart of their motivation was the fact that they were eager for money. They had no genuine interest in teaching the truth. They were just concerned with a popular line to hawk and they wandered from the faith as long as it was marketable. That was their motivation and priority. Their godliness was nothing but a front, a front that they wore in the same way that a salesman wears a smile, to encourage you to buy. Paul says be a godly contented Christian because your piety is no good to you unless it is practised within the total absence of avarice. And he gives two reasons to be contented:

The first is that godly contentment is the only rational policy to pursue. Vs 2 'for we brought nothing into the world and we take nothing out of it.' Paul could be thinking here of a number of Old Testament passages – perhaps he had Job in mind. 'Naked I came into the world and naked I will go.' Of course you don't have to be a Christian to see the sense of this. Proverbs says exactly the same thing – you can't take it with you when you go. 'Or our life is but an empty show, naked we come and naked we go, both for the humble and the proud; there are no pockets in a shroud.'

# Stewardship Forum

## An evangelical alliance Partnership for Change

I love the famous misprint at a rich man's funeral when they were singing a line from Bread of Heaven. 'Land me safe on Canaan's side' was what it was meant to say, but it said 'land my safe on Canaan's side'.

The issue here in vs. 7 is that you cannot take it with you when you go, and Paul says here that we should be content therefore with the basic necessities of life. 'But if we have food and clothing we'll be content with that.' He's saying, all you need is food and clothing, and my focus is not on acquiring more which will not last anyway. My focus is godliness. That is the passion. That's where my heart should be. That's the perspective of eternity. That's the ultimate reality of the far horizon. And I'm going to let that future reality dictate my present needs. Therefore if I'm tempted to wealth when I walk down Oxford Street then I've got to allow that experience, the expulsive power of the new affection of godliness, to dominate my life. I've got to say, I'm here to be godly, I'm here for Christ, I'm here to serve others, I'm here to serve the gospel and therefore I'm not going to launch myself into this. That's the harder bit. Godliness. I won't try and build heaven here. That's what so many of my school friends do, I look around and I see them trying to build heaven on earth. Are you trying to do that? Are you actually saying 'all my resources are going to go into this heaven on earth that I'm going to build'? It's not rational and it's not common sense because you cannot take it with you. It'll last you sixty, seventy years and that's it. So grow up and be rational – that's what Paul is saying!

But to that argument of common sense, Paul adds a more explicitly Christian argument. He says it's also safe. He says godliness with contentment is the safe policy to adopt. Look at vs. 9. 'People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction.' Now the vivid word picture Paul uses here is that of a snare into which the unwary plunge and find themselves pierced. It's a picture here of the death trap which was used to kill wild animals. So you dig a pit, you put a sharp vertical stake at the bottom, you loosely cover it, and then you dangle some bait and as the animal sprang for the bait, it would fall and impale itself on the stake. In the same way, says Paul, the desire to be rich lures men and women into ruin and destruction, for they find themselves ensnared in a vicious circle of frustrated desire and they're unable to distinguish a luxury from a necessity. That's the great battle, isn't it? And believe me, Timothy, he says, you can pierce yourself by the love of money.

Question: where can we pierce ourselves? Where are the stakes on which we can pierce ourselves? Where is my heart capable of being wrapped up on this one? That's what I have to ask myself, and it'll be different for different people. Maybe there's chronic overspending, credit, a constant desire to eat out, clothes that I want, expensive holidays, big mortgages so I can build my heaven on earth, lavish entertainment, a flash postal address. It may be those things. But in London, the heart of the pain is actually in broken relationships. London is full of rich people who've so focused their attention on earning and achieving in their careers that they have totally neglected their families, they've made large deposits in their bank accounts and huge withdrawals in their personal relationships. And now the account of their personal relationships is empty. For some, their family life is dead. They have pierced themselves. It is tragic and it's a terrible warning. We've got to guard our close relationships. Our careers

# Stewardship Forum

## An evangelical alliance Partnership for Change

and our desire to achieve can often cause us not to maintain them. Others have married for money, not for character.

I love Mrs Merton – she's always very amusing. And recently she was interviewing Debbie McGee who is Paul Daniels' wife, and she said at the start of the interview: 'So Debbie, what first attracted you to millionaire Paul Daniels?'

We've just got to control this. We've got to say, why do I value somebody? Where are we in danger of not being content and of piercing ourselves? And when Paul says the love of money is the root of all evil, he's saying, there is no kind of evil in the world that cannot be generated from a heart that is materialistically greedy. That's what he's saying. If you break the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment, Thou shalt not covet, you'll find yourself willing to break any of the other nine. There's no aspect of the moral law that you will not transgress for the sake of financial gain. So people have murdered for money, people have lied for money, people have committed sexual immorality for money – look at the phone boxes. People have even abandoned their parents for money.

In my family when my father wanted to make over his house to the three of us, his three children, his solicitor pleaded with him not to do it. He said, 'Don't do it, Mr Tice, because my experience is that one of your children might want their share in your lifetime and force you out.' That's heartbreaking, isn't it? Children quite willing to break up a family for money. Furthermore, to the shame of the Church, we read here that people even teach lies for money. Beware, Timothy, Paul cries, of such a mercenary desire. It can shipwreck you. Look at the false teachers; they've abandoned sound doctrine for something more easily marketable. They've become puppets, dancing to their heroes' whims and fantasies. Wouldn't that be a terrible thing if in order to please people we stopped teaching the tough bits of the Bible, so that our bank accounts would grow? That's what they were doing. It's a terrible exchange to gain the whole world but to lose your soul. There's no more tragic exchange than that. And our hearts should weep as we see those that we love and care about doing it. At the heart of godliness is also, like the saving God, that we reach out to people who are doing that; throwing away their souls for the sake of financial gain. So, flee from this, says Paul. Instead, set your heart on godliness and contentment.

Question: In all honesty – where is your heart? Is it on the far horizon, on godliness, or is it focused on wealth? That's what he's asking here. And one of the keys to keeping godliness is Proverbs 13:20. 'He who walks with the wise grows wise, but the companion of fools suffers harm.' All of us need relational VIPs with whom we can walk through life, whose values, convictions and morals will keep us on track. So intentionally, why not seek out people whose hearts you can trust and allow them to ask you the tough questions. I've got four friends like that. We meet every three months for a day. And they have spoken such wisdom into my life over the last five years that whatever they say is a free hit. I just trust them – they have my best interests at heart. And we've all got to develop that. You're not going to fight this battle with materialism alone, are you? That's madness! Look at the pressures. You've got to find people who will put their arm around you and say 'Brother/Sister, how's your heart? Where's your heart? Are you focused on godliness or are you trying to build heaven on earth?' That's the battle. That's what we've got to do. We've got to have people who love us enough to ask the tough questions and again, that means investing

# Stewardship Forum

## An evangelical alliance Partnership for Change

in relationships. And if I've got a really intense career, I've got to carve out the time to do it. You may well be the person under the most pressure. Get others to help you. Guard your heart, and keep it focused on godliness and contentment.

So that's the danger of wanting material things.

Secondly, and far more briefly, the duty of having material things.

There's a very helpful balance if we look at vs. 17-19. Notice here in these verses that Paul does not say, as you may think, after vs. 6-10 'command those who are rich to abandon their riches'! What he says is that they are to complement their riches with a different kind of wealth. Vs. 17-18. '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. Command them to be good, to be rich in good deeds, to be generous and be willing to share. And in this way...' what will they do in vs. 19? 'lay up treasure for the coming age.'

So use your riches to be godly because then you can take them with you as you invest them in other people. As you give them away. The New Testament does not expound the general ethic of voluntary poverty. In some parables it does, like the covetous rich young ruler. But the New Testament does not teach that wealth is in and of itself wicked. Being rich is not sinful. Indeed, Paul accepts here the presence of wealthy Christians in the church. He doesn't argue for them to be rebuked or excommunicated. He just insists rich people display a Christian attitude towards their wealth, which consists of three things:

- Humility (vs. 17) 'Command those who are rich not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth.' It's all too easy to allow status symbols to make me contemptuous towards others. We can make our job, our car, our flat, our education, our holidays, our golf club, our clothes, a badge of pride, a status symbol. You mention to someone something about your background or your job and you know that their estimation of you will go up. Because that is how people's minds work. Paul says this is a stupid thing to do because wealth is so uncertain (vs. 17). As Jesus says elsewhere, 'moth and rust corrupt, thieves break in and steal'. So today's 'yuppie' is tomorrow's 'puppy' – previously upwardly mobile professional! John Stott comments on this: many of us have gone to bed rich and woken up poor, or he says. 'Like the rich fool in Jesus' parable, not woken up at all.' So be humble because your wealth is precarious, it has wings. And if the financial climate of the last three months has taught us anything, it's taught us that.
- Don't just be humble but be joyful. Vs 17. 'but to put their hope in God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.' Perhaps that's an unexpected statement. Sure, says Paul, we're to be content with food and clothing (vs. 7,8 ) so we're to be satisfied with a simple lifestyle, but if it should please God to give us more, then Paul says we don't turn our noses up at it, which is what the Stoics did. No, we accept it with gratitude and enjoyment. Notice the word vs. 17 'enjoy'. Provided for our enjoyment, as a divine provision, which it is. You see, the material world is God's good creation, so accept wealth as the divine generosity it represents, gratefully, not

# Stewardship Forum

## An evangelical alliance Partnership for Change

conceitedly or arrogantly – it's given to you to enjoy. So let's be content in plenty, and in want. That's the heart of contentment. If I'm given a good bed or a good meal, then I don't turn my nose up at it, I don't despise prosperity. I just make sure – this is the last point – that I'm generous (vs. 18).

- Lastly, I'm to be generous.

'Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds and willing to share.' And that's the great question here. Are we generous? In the world's terms, we are all wealthy. The fact that we're in the western world makes us wealthy. Paul says here, 'do not neglect the good you can do with your wealth.'

I love the story about the vicar at his church, like ours, which had two large brass collection plates. And they came back after the collection with two buttons, a couple of foreign notes and some pennies, and as he received the collection he said, 'Lord God we thank you for the safe return of these plates!' And that asks the question, what about our giving? Don't be like the rich man in Luke 16 whose miserly omissions to help the beggar witnessed against him at judgement. No, invest your wealth in good deeds.

If you're part of this church, this is the immediate application: be humble, be joyful, be generous. So if you want to work out the covenants, giving forms, wills, then speak to someone at the end of the service. We must be generous. Today's the 40<sup>th</sup> celebration of the All Souls Clubhouse. I go in there four times a week because my post is delivered there. There is this delightful granny who must be 85 and she's there morning, noon and night. That clubhouse will love her until the day she passes away. And we have got to fund that. Let's make sure we're generous people and fund All Souls and fund the Clubhouse. Let's sort our giving out. And to those of you here who are amazingly generous, can I thank you. There are many of you in this church who are amazingly generous and it's such a privilege to work with you for the gospel.

So three things about wealth – be humble, be joyful, be generous. The key to not being trapped is that I focus on the far horizon and godliness. And the key application is that I have friends who help me do that. Who are your mates who are going to help you focus on the far horizon and keep you godly? Can I plead with you to build a team to walk through life with, and then together we can not waste our lives but use them for the glory of the Lord Jesus.