

## The Goal is Love (Part 7)

Passages: 1 Timothy 6:3-10, 17-19  
Matthew 6:25-34

Today, we finally come to the last sermon in a series on Paul's First Letter to Timothy.

As I've been saying each week, the background to this letter is essential for us to understand if we are to fully grasp what Paul is saying. You see, Paul has sent Timothy to Ephesus to pastor a church that was once a very healthy, vibrant, multi-ethnic community. Recently, however, the church has started to self-destruct as issues of culture and ethnicity begin to divide the Jewish Christians from the Gentile Christians. That's essentially why Paul sends Timothy to Ephesus, to pastor this church back to unity...to bring these two groups back together again as '*one in Christ*'.

At the same time, Paul writes this letter to Timothy filled with detailed advice on the practical issues of how this multi-ethnic church in Ephesus might truly function in unity. And so, Paul speaks about prayer, leadership, spiritual gifts and of seeing each other as God's family. All these things are powerful tools to help restore the unity of the church in Ephesus.

But, you know, there's still one topic that Paul has yet to discuss...one that he saves until the very last chapter. It is this topic that has the potential to be the most unifying (and the most divisive) of them all. **That topic is money.**

Let's pray.

Why does Paul bring up the topic of money at the end of a letter that has essentially been devoted to solving the ethnic divisions between Jewish and Greek Christians? To answer that question, you need only to look at the city of Ephesus itself!

According to the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Ephesus was a truly exceptional city by almost any measure. The very name 'Ephesos' means 'desirable'. Located on the western coast of modern Turkey, Ephesus had a harbor and road system that made it the most

accessible city in Asia. The climate was exceptionally fine and the soil was exceptionally fertile. All these attributes made the city very wealthy. The greatest wealth of Ephesus, however, came from its' religion. It was the home of the Temple of Diana, sometimes called Artemis. Not only did this magnificent building dominate the skyline, it was one of the principle financial cornerstones that made the city great. The Temple (built with 127 marble pillars) was such an incredibly sturdy building that its vaults were used to store the wealth of the surrounding peoples. This led to it becoming the banking centre of Asia. Much as London is the financial centre of Europe, the temple of Diana was the financial centre of the Eastern Roman Empire, and thus wealth naturally flowed into it. The temple was also a centre for the fine arts, essentially a museum where some of the finest statues and paintings could be seen. It was also home to a thriving 'religious industry' providing images and shrines of Diana to the temple's pilgrims. (Indeed, Acts 19 tells us that it was the silversmiths of the temple who first raised the alarm as to the damage that the new Christian religion was doing to their trade.)

What all this shows is that **Ephesus was a city of great wealth**, and this wealth came from three primary sources: Agriculture, Commerce and Banking. But, of course, not everyone in Ephesus was rich! Just as it is in wealthy cities today, there would have been a huge gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'! And this wealth and poverty would have been equally found in both the Jewish and the Gentile populations: there would have been very wealthy Jews and very poor Jews; there would have been very wealthy Greeks and very poor Greeks.

Moreover, this same gap would also have been reflected in the Ephesian church! And that is why Paul saves this discussion on money until last. You see, all his previous suggestions on how to re-unify this multi-ethnic church would fail if, in the end, the discrepancies and divisions promoted by the unequal distribution of wealth could not also be addressed and corrected.

And so, a logical place for Paul to begin this discussion in chapter 6 is with slaves and their masters. You see, a slave-owner was always someone with money. In fact, a person became your slave primarily because they were unable to pay their debt to you. Slavery was a way of repaying your debt.

Now, Paul certainly understood this economic relationship between the slave and his master. That's why he speaks directly to those slaves in the Ephesian church and encourages them to honour their believing masters by considering the relationship to them as an *economic partnership* of sorts.

Listen to verse 2—“***Those who have believing masters are not to show less respect for them because they are brothers. Instead, they are to serve them even better, because those who benefit from their service are believers, and dear to them. These are the things you are to teach and urge on them.***”

Slavery was an economic reality, and one that would require both slave and master to work together to gradually reverse the economic situation that led to the debt and which had enslaved that person in the first place. Paul, therefore, encourages those slaves in the Ephesian church to see their economic responsibility of working hard and freeing themselves of their debt.

But Paul doesn't stop there with his advice. He moves on to speak directly to the wealthy members of the Ephesian church (people like the slave-owners) who were both the Jewish and Greek Christians. And this is what he says to them:

***1Ti 6:9-10 “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. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”***

On one hand, Paul is encouraging the Christian slaves to work hard, rid themselves of their debt and be free, while, on the other hand, Paul is advising the wealthy Christian slave-owners not to fall into the trap of holding on to their wealth (or their slaves) but to be generous with their wealth. Perhaps there's even the idea of slave-owners helping to free their slaves by overpaying them so that they might more quickly repay their debts.

It's this attitude to money which, quite obviously in Paul's mind, connects directly to the issue of godliness. After all, what is godliness? Paul defines it, more or less, as *a relationship with God that leads you into state of contentment.*

***vv6-8 “But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.”***

The point he's making is that the wealthy members of the Ephesian church

must not see the point of life as making more money. Contentment in life is found, not in the accumulation of wealth but in using one's wealth for the sake of others...all in the service of God.

This is why Paul becomes even more direct with Timothy when, in verse 17, he says:

**1Ti 6:17-19** ***“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 do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. 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.”***

Now, in case you missed it, these words are a direct reflection on Jesus' words in Matthew 6!

**Mt 6:3** ***“But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing...”***

**Mt 6:19** ***“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.***

**Mt 6:24** ***“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.***

**Mt 6:25** ***“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?”***

**Mt 6:31-34** ***“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”***

Clearly, the whole point of Jesus' words is to help us see ourselves as co-labourers with Him in the universal expansion of the blessing of His Kingdom. If you love God and want to serve God, then the best place to start is with your money. Use it to free people from slavery; use it to help those in need; use it to bless those who are suffering; use it to further the agenda of God's Kingdom of peace by investing it in the welfare of your

church members.

Back in the late 1970's, a pastor and theologian by the name of Ron Sider wrote a provocative book entitled "*Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*", recognized by *Christianity Today* as one of the top 100 most influential religious books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It basically encouraged Western Christians, like you and me, to see our responsibility both locally and internationally, to use our wealth to change the world.

Thirty years later and Ron Sider hasn't stopped preaching this message. In his latest book entitled "*The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*" he writes: "*In light of what the New Testament says about economic sharing in the one Body of Christ, the church should stand out in stunning contrast to the surrounding materialism of the world as Christians give 10, 20, 30 percent or more of their income away to do the work of the kingdom, including empowering fellow Christians and others (around the world) to escape poverty.*"

Getting back to Paul's situation in Ephesus, what does all this have to do with multi-ethnic churches? Well, in case you didn't know it, the inequalities of wealth are often connected to race!

Here are some American statistics that may shock you!

Whites have a 11-to-1 advantage over Latinos, and a 14-to-1 advantage over blacks with regard to accumulated assets (savings accounts, stocks, and homeownership)

In the period between 1996 and 2002, net worth for white households increased 17 percent between 1996 and 2002, and rose for Latino households by 14 percent to about \$7,900. It decreased for blacks by 16 percent, to roughly \$6,000.

By 2002, 33 percent of black families and 26 percent of Latino families were deeply in debt or had zero or negative net assets, compared with 11 percent of white families.

According to a 2000 Census, Asian Americans occupy the extremes of the spectrum from wealth to poverty. While one-third of Asian families have incomes of \$75,000 or more, one-fifth have incomes of less than \$25,000.

Of course, these statistics are for the USA. Nevertheless, they reflect something of the economic disparity that is also found here in Australia. (we just don't see it as much because of our generous welfare system!)

Nevertheless, the question is, **What difference does it make being a Christian?** Are we willing to live in a counter-cultural manner...in a way that breaks free from the selfish individualism of our surrounding society to proclaim and display a new way of living as a truly Christian community?

In Paul's day, when wealthy Christians of both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds offered their money to help their poorer brothers and sisters in Christ (regardless of their background), **a huge statement was being made!** This was not the cultural norm! The cultural norm was to economically exploit the differences between the ethnic groups and to favour those who looked like you. That's why Paul commanded all those who were wealthy in the Ephesian church to help all those in need..., not because Paul was some kind of socialist...but because he believed in the church as a new creation...a new humanity...where there was no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, but all are one in Christ!

Can you imagine the impact that the church would make today if it not only became a place of multi-ethnic reconciliation but also a place of multi-ethnic economic stabilisation???...of true economic sharing between the *haves* and the *have nots*, regardless of your background??

No wonder Paul saves this discussion of money until last! Because the generous use of money (found in the harmonious relationships of a variety of ethnic groups) is, at the end of the day, the most outstanding evidence that the Kingdom of God has come near! Surely, if we want to solve the problems of racism in this world, we must never neglect to attack it from an economic angle.

This is what the church is all about as we pursue the goal of love.

Let's pray.

