



“What Are You After?”

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Scripture (CEB):

1 Timothy 6:6-19

⁶ Actually, godliness is a great source of profit when it is combined with being happy with what you already have. ⁷ We didn't bring anything into the world and so we can't take anything out of it: ⁸ we'll be happy with food and clothing. ⁹ But people who are trying to get rich fall into temptation. They are trapped by many stupid and harmful passions that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some have wandered away from the faith and have impaled themselves with a lot of pain because they made money their goal.

¹¹ But as for you, man of God, run away from all these things. Instead, pursue righteousness, holy living, faithfulness, love, endurance, and gentleness. ¹² Compete in the good fight of faith. Grab hold of eternal life—you were called to it, and you made a good confession of it in the presence of many witnesses. ¹³ I command you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and Christ Jesus, who made the good confession when testifying before Pontius Pilate. ¹⁴ Obey this order without fault or failure until the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁵ The timing of this appearance is revealed by God alone, who is the blessed and only master, the King of kings and Lord of lords. ¹⁶ He alone has immortality and lives in light that no one can come near. No human being has ever seen or is able to see him. Honor and eternal power belong to him. Amen.

¹⁷ Tell people who are rich at this time not to become egotistical and not to place their hope on their finances, which are uncertain. Instead, they need to hope in God, who richly provides everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸ Tell them to do good, to be rich in the good things they do, to be generous, and to share with others. ¹⁹ When they do these things, they will save a treasure for themselves that is a good foundation for the future. That way they can take hold of what is truly life.

Sermon:

What kind of hunter are you? Well, maybe y'all don't hunt...but most of us shop, and shopping is a lot like hunting. What kind of hunter are you? Some of us, when we go into a store, we just wander around, and then the sales person comes up and they ask, "What are you after?" Usually I'll say something like, "Nothing, just looking." But there's another way to shop – the single-minded pursuit of a particular object of our desire.

When Deb and I were preparing for our wedding, two years ago, (it's been TWO YEARS!) I was looking for a pair of white, high heel shoes. Doesn't seem like a rare item, does it? You think a gal could find a pair of white, high heel shoes in June and July, right? Turns out it's way tougher than it seems. I must have looked in ten stores. The sales staff would see me searching and ask, "What are you after?" and I would respond, "White, high heel shoes." "Oh..." they'd say, and look sorry. "We only have..." And they'd show me the one or two pair of inadequate examples of female footwear. Beige, they had. White sandals they had in droves. Same with white, casual, canvas shoes. Completely unsuitable for my wedding day. What I was after was white, high heel shoes. I finally found what I was after, and even though they were a full size too big, and hurt like crazy, I had bagged my quarry and was triumphant. I didn't quit looking till I had found what I was searching for. I was after white, high heel shoes, and I got them! What are you after?

I'm fascinated with words, and I can spend hours looking up the definitions of both the Greek and English words when preparing for a sermon. In this lectionary reading, I saw a lot of different verbs – falling, plunging, wandering, being impaled - - - - and - - - - running, pursuing, grabbing or seizing, commanding, obeying, and telling. Some of the ones that caught my attention were found in:

- Verse 11 – to flee: to shun – to turn your back on. The way the Common English Bible has it, from which we read today, it is translated run away from.
- Verse 12 and 19 – One Greek word translated into two different English words and phrases here - to grab, or take hold of: take hold of suddenly and forcibly, take forcible possession of, take (an opportunity or initiative) eagerly and decisively. The standard Greek lexicon suggests this word means "take hold of, grasp, catch, sometimes with violence."

Paul calls this Christian life the “good fight of faith.” We progressive Christians often don’t like fight language, because we advocate for peace over war, and dialogue over dogfights, but the Greek word here is *agon*, from which we derive our English word *agony*.

Agony is defined as: 1) anguish, torment, torture. See pain. Antonyms = comfort, ease, pleasure. So, are we supposed to *agon*, fight, the good fight of faith? Are we supposed to be in *agony* all the time for the sake of our faith? No. Rather, I think Paul is urging us to fight, to *agonize*, in the pursuit of righteousness, holy living, faithfulness, love, endurance, and gentleness. To flee the temptation to be at rest, or to be idle; to seek ease and comfort when our human companions are NOT at ease. To fight in order to achieve the goals of eternal life and real life.

Paul tells us to grasp, sometimes with violence, two things: eternal life, and real life. Eternal life is not what lies in our future. Eternal life is now...and from now till forever. Jesus said, “the Kingdom of God is at hand.” Now. The kingdom of God is in the here and now. Christ brought the eternal to us, and we, when we acknowledge the gift, can access eternal life now. We can live our lives in the knowledge that though things will pass away, we will never pass away. We can live in the now knowing that, when we die, we pass into the presence of God.

The second kind of life that Paul urges us to seize is real life. *Ontos zoe* or true existence – the Greek term for real life. The commentary I use to prepare says that Paul is contrasting the destructive life of vain pursuits with a constructive and productive real life. I see that idea in the text, but I also see it another way, the difference between a passive existence and an active one.

Look again at the verbs. All of the verbs used to describe the destructive life are passive. Falling and wandering, plunging and being impaled. These are all things that can happen when you are not paying attention. But the verbs used to describe real life, a productive life, are all active. Running, pursuing, grabbing, seizing, commanding, obeying, and telling; these actions take effort.

Here’s my point, we don’t attain eternal life or real life accidentally. We don’t just wander into righteousness. We’re not going to fall into holy living, or plunge aimlessly into faithfulness. If we want these things, we’re going to have to really want them. We’re going to have to pursue them. To gain love, endurance, and gentleness, we’re going to have to single-mindedly chase after them. Seize them, grab onto them, with force, even with violence if necessary. We’re going to have to fight the good fight.

Will it be agony? I hope not. But I know that we will have to move out of our comfort zones, stop taking things so easy, and allow ourselves to express some displeasure over the way things are. It will be in the selfless work for others that we attain real life. A true life. A righteous, faithful, productive life.

There's one more verb I want to highlight. In verse 14, Paul commands us to do something, and in verses 17 and 18, Paul finally says what it is we are to do – tell.

- Verse 17 – to tell: to charge, entreat solemnly. To entreat can also mean to beg. I'm begging you - don't become egotistical and forget whose you are.
- Verse 18 - to tell: to charge, entreat solemnly. To entreat can also mean to plead. I'm pleading with you - do good, be rich in the good things you do. Please, be generous, share with others.

Finally, I'd like to share with you a passage from The Prophet by Kahlil Gibran. It's called, "On Giving"

"You give but little when you give of your possessions. It is when you give of yourself that you truly give. For what are your possessions but things you keep and guard for fear you may need them tomorrow? And tomorrow, what shall tomorrow bring to the over-prudent dog burying bones in the trackless sand as he follows the pilgrims to the holy city? And what is fear of need but need itself? Is not dread of thirst when your well is full, the thirst that is unquenchable? There are those who give little of the much which they have--and they give it for recognition and their hidden desire makes their gifts unwholesome.

And there are those who have little and give it all. These are the believers in life and the bounty of life, and their coffer is never empty. There are those who give with joy, and that joy is their reward. And there are those who give with pain, and that pain is their baptism."