

## A CHRISTIAN ANTIDOTE TO "AFFLUENZA:" CONTENTMENT IN CHRIST

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### I. INTRODUCTION

On the night of June 15, 2013, Hollie Boyles and her daughter Shelby were helping a lady, Breanna Mitchell, whose vehicle had broken down and left her stranded on the side of the road in Burleson, TX. As they worked on her car another man named Brian Jennings, a local youth pastor, stopped to help them. All four of them were killed when a drunk-driver hit them with his pick-up truck, traveling between 68-70 miles per hour in a 40 miles per hour zone. Nine other people were injured in the crash. The driver was 16-year-old Ethan Couch, and at the time of the crash his blood-alcohol level was .24, three times the legal limit for someone of legal drinking age. Couch was arrested and charged with driving drunk and causing a crash that resulted in the deaths of four people. During the trial Couch admitted his guilt and testified that he had caused the crash, but his lawyers argued that he was not ultimately the one to blame for the crash. Instead, they argued that Couch's parents bore the brunt of the blame for the way they had raised him. Prior to sentencing, a psychologist for the defense, G. Dick Miller, testified that Couch was a victim of "affluenza" because his parents had never set limits for him, had bought him everything he had ever wanted, and taught him that wealth bought privilege. Therefore Couch was incapable of understanding the relationship between his behavior and the consequences of his behavior because of his wealthy upbringing. Instead of jail time or any kind of punishment for his actions, Miller recommended that Couch receive therapy and have no contact with his parents. Judge Jean Boyd subsequently followed Miller's recommendation, sentencing Couch to a long-term treatment facility, 10 years of probation, and forbidding any contact with his parents during his treatment, eschewing the prosecutor's recommendation of 20 years in prison as proper punishment for the crime.<sup>1</sup>

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1 The details of this case can be found in many places on-line. E.g., Jim Douglas and Thomas Unger, "Outrage follows probation for teen who killed four in crash," n.p. [cited 31 March 2014]. Online: <http://www.wfaa.com/news/crime/Defense-pushes-for-intensive-therapy-for-teen-in-drunken-crash-that-killed-4-235288101.html>; and Dana Ford, "'Affluenza' defense psychologist: 'I wish I hadn't used that term,'" n.p. [cited 31 March 2014]. Online: <http://www.cnn.com/2013/12/12/justice/texas-teen-dwi-wreck/index.html>.

Miller's testimony and Couch's sentencing left many outraged, including family members of the victims, but they do highlight the increasing recognition that affluence is not an unlimited good with only positive benefits, but has serious, negative consequences impacting our society, families, individuals, and churches. A combination of the words "affluence," and "influenza," the term "affluenza" has come to refer to the harmful affects and condition of having too much wealth, for both societies and individuals. These affects are psychological, cultural, and economic. John De Graaf, David Waan, and Thomas H. Naylor, in their book identifying and explaining affluenza, state, "Affluenza's costs and consequences are immense, though often concealed. Untreated, the disease can cause permanent discontent.<sup>2</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* actually added the term in 1997, defining it as "A psychological condition supposedly affecting (esp. young) wealthy people, symptoms of which include a lack of motivation, feelings of guilt, and a sense of isolation."<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the increasing acknowledgement of the negative consequences of wealth is the recognition that something needs to be done to combat and even prevent those negative consequences. Economists, psychologists, and social scientists have proposed a number of treatments or solutions to affluenza. As Ian R. Harper and Eric L. Jones indicate, these proposals either focus on external restraints that prevent people from acquiring too much wealth in the first place or internal restraints that encourage a correct understanding and use of wealth and possessions.<sup>4</sup> External restraints include institutions such as the family, the law, and the local community, and the ethical and legal restraints that these institutions put on greed.<sup>5</sup> These ethical and legal restraints are easily ignored or avoided, however, which has led to proposed solutions centered on extreme interventions in the market.<sup>6</sup> Harper and Jones term these kinds of proposed solutions the "authoritarian approach," an approach that "seems affronted by economic success and so hostile to individual rights that it seeks to suppress rather than persuade."<sup>7</sup> They rightly point out that these approaches substitute the fallible decisions of politicians for the fallible choices of consumers and will only succeed through coercion, and therefore that external restraints are not an adequate solution for affluenza.<sup>8</sup> External factors cannot make people content or give them motivation for life beyond the accumulation of wealth and whatever it can buy.

<sup>2</sup> John de Graaf, David Wann, and Thomas Naylor, *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic* (San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler, 2001), 2.

<sup>3</sup> "Affluenza." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Ian R. Harper and Eric L. Jones, "Treating 'Affluenza': The Moral Challenge of Affluence," in *Christian Theology and Market Economics* (ed. Ian R. Harper and Samuel Gregg; Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2008), 158-63.

<sup>5</sup> Harper and Jones, "Treating Affluenza," 158.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Oliver James, *Affluenza* (London: Vermilion, 2007); and Avner Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Harper and Jones, "Treating Affluenza," 159.

<sup>8</sup> Harper and Jones, "Treating Affluenza," 160-61.

On the other hand, internal restraints on greed, such as one's moral code or conscience, have the potential to combat affluenza by giving direction for where true contentment is found and how we should think of and use wealth. Harper and Jones demonstrate how social science supports the need for internal restraints if affluenza is truly to be overcome, and propose that the moral antidote to affluenza is found in Christianity.<sup>9</sup> This paper agrees with their assessment and seeks to build upon their proposal by demonstrating from Scripture how Christianity combats and overcomes affluenza through the gospel of Jesus Christ, particularly by transforming our idea of what contentment is and how we find it. We will examine two passages, Philippians 4:10-13 and 1 Timothy 6:6-10, that together give us an understanding of how contentment in and through Jesus Christ is the "antidote" for affluenza. Once we have demonstrated what our passages tell us about contentment and what our attitude toward wealth should be, we will draw some practical applications regarding our contentment in Christ and our use and accumulation of wealth. In light of the importance of the gospel in responding to affluenza, Christians, particularly pastors, must lead the way in modeling contentment in this life and the right attitude to wealth to our churches and our culture if we have any hope of combatting and preventing the negative consequences of affluence.

## II. PHILIPPIANS 4:10-13: CONTENTMENT IN CHRIST ALONE

In Philippians 4:10-13 Paul makes an astounding statement, proclaiming that through Christ he can be content no matter what his circumstances, no matter what he might or might not have:

But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned before, but you lacked opportunity. Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

Paul begins this statement on contentment through Christ by referring to the Philippians' recently revived concern for him. Paul has already used the word *phroneo* eight times in the letter up to this point (1:7; 2:2, 5; 3:15, 19; 4:2) to refer to an attitude of like-mindedness, a relational concern for one another, and that is his meaning here.<sup>10</sup> The Philippians' concern for him was tangibly expressed through the financial gifts that the church sent him through Epaphroditus (Phil 4:18). Apparently the church had at one time financially supported Paul and his ministry, but for unknown reasons went through a time where they were unable to continue supporting him.<sup>11</sup> Paul is careful to note that even during this

<sup>9</sup> Harper and Jones, "Treating Affluenza," 161-63.

<sup>10</sup> BDAG, 1065.

<sup>11</sup> For speculation on what those reasons might be, see G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter*

period, they were still concerned about him, but he does want them to know how grateful he is for their renewed support. Their gifts have led him to rejoice in the Lord greatly, not only because they are evidence of the Philippians' partnership in the gospel (cf. 1:4), but because they are evidence of the Lord's faithfulness to him.

Having expressed his gratitude, Paul emphasizes that he rejoiced in the attitude of concern expressed through the gifts to him rather than the gift itself. He begins verse 11 with a strong negative expression (*ouk hoti*) that he often uses to clarify possible misconceptions of what he has just said (e.g., 2 Cor 1:24; 3:5; Phil 3:12; 4:17; 2 Thess 3:9). Paul clarifies that he is not speaking from any kind of want or need. Although Paul's circumstances of being a prisoner (Phil 1:12-18) most likely left him in great need, he in no way wanted the Philippians to think that he only cared about receiving their money, or that his great joy was due to now having more money. Instead, he takes this opportunity to stress that through his experience he has learned to be content in all circumstances, even the ones he is in presently. Receiving the Philippians' gift did not make him more content.

The word Paul uses for "content" in v. 11 is *autarkes*, which was a common concept in Stoic and Cynic philosophy, and described a person who "becomes an independent man sufficient to himself and no one else."<sup>12</sup> In this way of thinking the content person was someone who depended on no one but himself, who had all of the resources within himself to cope with whatever circumstances came his way. For the Stoics this attitude of contentment required emotional detachment, the exercise of reason over emotion, so that no matter what happened, whether good or bad, a person could resist the force of his circumstances through an act of his will.<sup>13</sup> In designating the attitude he came to learn *autarkes*, however, Paul takes a popular philosophical concept and redefines it in light of the gospel. He doesn't advocate a contentment that comes from within himself, or through emotional detachment, but as he will soon make clear in verse 13, only through Jesus Christ, the one who gives him strength. As Gordon Fee states, Paul "uses the language—and outwardly assumes the stance—of Stoic self-sufficiency, but radically transforms it into Christ-sufficiency."<sup>14</sup> Because Paul is in Christ, he is no longer dependent upon anyone or anything else but Christ for contentment and joy in this world, including the Philippians and their gifts.

Contentment is not something that came naturally to Paul, however, but something that he had to learn. Paul describes the school of his learning in the first half of verse 12, contrasting two opposite conditions he has experienced. Before each of these conditions Paul repeats the verb "know" (*oida*), emphasizing again that his contentment in both of these kinds of circumstances is a result of his learning and experience, not

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*to the Philippians* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 308-09.

<sup>12</sup> TDNT 1:466.

<sup>13</sup> Hansen, *Philippians*, 310-11.

<sup>14</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (New International Commentary on the New Testament, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 427.

something that just came to him. The first of these conditions is being in need, or literally being humbled (*tapeinounsomai*). To be humbled in this context means to lose prestige or status or to be humiliated. In light of the discussion of the Philippians' gift, it almost certainly includes the idea of financial humiliation, or poverty.<sup>15</sup> Paul knows how to be content in poverty, when he has nothing, when external forces have conspired against him and deprived him. At the same time, Paul also knows how to be content when he prospers (*perisseuein*) or when he is rich and not in need.

Paul goes on to explain that finding contentment in these opposite sets of circumstances was possible because he had "learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need" (12b). Paul had not learned to be content just through his experience of being poor or being rich, or through having experienced both of those states. He was able to be content regardless of circumstances because he had learned the secret to being content; his experiences had allowed him to acquire and then put his knowledge into practice. The word translated "learned the secret" is *memuetai*, a word used only here in the New Testament and a technical term in the Hellenistic mystery religions of Paul's time, referring to those who had been initiated into the mysteries of a particular religion by going through the sacred rituals. It was also used metaphorically for those gaining insider knowledge.<sup>16</sup> Paul uses this term to indicate that he had gained knowledge that wasn't available to everyone, that he had insight only available to those on the inside. It was this knowledge that allowed him to be content whether he was being humbled or whether he was prospering, whether he was hungry or well-fed, whether he had a lot or a little. As Walter Hansen elaborates:

His joy in the Lord was not heightened by prosperity or diminished by poverty. His concern for the welfare of others was not distracted by living in plenty or want. His contentment in prosperity did not lead him to self-indulgence or self-aggrandizement: having material things did not become his reason for joy; acquiring material things did not make him greedy; protecting material things did not make him anxious.<sup>17</sup>

The secret that Paul had learned, the key to his contentment, was that he could do all things through Christ who strengthened him (v. 13). Paul is not saying that he can do whatever he wants because Christ gives him strength.<sup>18</sup> The "all things" he speaks of refer to all the different kinds of circumstances we can experience, as he just detailed in v. 12: poverty or prosperity, hunger or fullness. No matter what his circumstances, Paul can be content because Christ is the one who gives him strength. His sufficiency is not found in himself, and it is not found in what he has or does not have. Paul's sufficiency, knowledge, and contentment are found

<sup>15</sup> BDAG, 1087.

<sup>16</sup> BDAG, 660.

<sup>17</sup> Hansen, *Philippians*, 313-14.

<sup>18</sup> This is a common misunderstanding and misapplication of this verse. See Eric J. Bargerhuff, *The Most Misused Verses in the Bible: Surprising Ways God's Word is Misunderstood* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2012), 109-16.

in his being “in Christ.” Jeremiah Burroughs gives us insight into what this looks like:

A Christian finds satisfaction in every circumstance by getting strength from another, by going out of himself to Jesus Christ, by his faith acting upon Christ, and bringing the strength of Jesus Christ into his own soul, he is thereby enabled to bear whatever God lays on him, by the strength that he finds from Jesus Christ... There is strength in Christ not only to sanctify and save us, but strength to support us under all our burdens and afflictions, and Christ expects that when we are under burden, we should act our faith upon him to draw virtue and strength from him.<sup>19</sup>

Paul rejoices in the Philippians’ gift, and he makes sure to emphasize again how good it was for them to send it to him (4:14), but that gift is not Christ, and it cannot make him more or less content. Contentment is a state of life that comes through faith in Jesus Christ and the strength he gives us through that faith.

What is true for Paul is true for all who are in Christ. Paul’s intimate union with Christ is the source of his strength in any and all circumstances, and therefore it is what allows him to be content in any and all circumstances. It is what allows him to proclaim that God supplies all of our “needs according to his riches in glory in Christ” (4:19), trusting that when Christ returns in glory, the infinite wealth of the heavenly citizenship he so eagerly awaited would be his (3:20). Paul has already stated that his entire life is in Christ (1:21), that being found in Christ is worth more than anything this world can offer (3:8-9), and that life means knowing Christ in the fellowship of his sufferings and the power of his resurrection (3:10-11). These truths are true of all who are in Christ. All who are in Christ can and should learn the secret of being content in all circumstances because Christ is the one who strengthens us. We learn this secret the same way Paul did, as we come to know Christ and the fellowship of his sufferings so that we can live in the power of the resurrection, as we walk in faith and look toward the new heavens and new earth whether we are hungry or full, prosperous or poor. Our union with Christ combats affluenza and its consequences because it frees us from desperately trying to find our contentment in our wealth. Therefore it frees us from the anxiety of not having what others have, the guilt of not having as much as someone else, and the greedy justifications that drive us to do anything and everything just to get a little more.

### III. FIRST TIMOTHY 6:6-10: CONTENTMENT IN WHAT GOD PROVIDES

Philippians 4:10-13 teaches us that contentment in any circumstance is possible because contentment is found in Christ alone, through the strength he gives us, and more wealth shouldn’t add to or diminish our contentment in Christ. In 1 Timothy 6:6-10 Paul elaborates upon this

<sup>19</sup> Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (1648, Reprint Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1964), 63.



truth by explicitly relating godliness to contentment and contentment to the pursuit and accumulation of wealth.<sup>20</sup> This passages states:

But godliness actually is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

Beginning in 1 Timothy 6:3, for the third time in this letter (1:3-11; 4:1-5), Paul gives instruction to Timothy about false teachers in the church. In this passage he explains what kind of people they are and what the result of their lifestyle will be. Paul states that if anyone in the church doesn't agree with sound words, the words of Jesus Christ, and the doctrine that promotes godliness, he is conceited and without understanding, preoccupied with controversies and disputes which produce envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions, and constant bickering between men who are depraved and deprived of the truth, men who believe that godliness is a way of making a profit (6:3-6). One of the hallmarks of a false teacher was his motivation for godliness: wealth, or gain (*porismon*). Godliness in this context is not the quality of life for a believer, but a more general term meaning "religion" or "piety" (*eusebeia*), and refers to the reality of being a believer, of being "in Christ."<sup>21</sup> False teachers were those who were motivated to follow Jesus Christ by the wealth they thought they would gain from it. Paul has already warned Timothy about money being a controlling factor in the life of a pastor or deacon (3:3, 8), and in other contexts he has strongly denied that wealth is any kind of motivation for his ministry (e.g., Acts 2:33; 1 Thess 2:5). Wealth cannot be the motivation to follow Christ, because to be in Christ is to be content in Christ in any and all circumstances (Phil 4:10-13).

In contrast to the misunderstanding of the false teachers about gain and godliness (v. 6 begins with an adversative *de*, "but"), Paul emphasizes in v. 6 that godliness is gain (*porismon*), in fact it is great gain (*porismos megas*), when it is accompanied by contentment. The word Paul uses in this verse for contentment (*autarkeia*) comes from the same root as the word he uses in Philippians 4:11 (*autarkes*) and it carries the same meaning in this context as it did in Philippians 4, the state of being completely sufficient and satisfied in Jesus Christ, as opposed to circumstances, possessions, or anything else. Being in Christ (*eusebeia*) provides the contentment that each individual must learn through their experience as they continue to draw upon the strength that being in Christ provides them. As Knight states concerning v. 6, "When the source (*eusebeia*) is combined with the

<sup>20</sup> For a defense of Paul's authorship of the Pastoral Epistles, see George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (The New International Greek Testament Commentary, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 21-52.

<sup>21</sup> BDAG, 412.

inward result (*autarkeia*), then there is ‘great’ (*megas*) gain.”<sup>22</sup> Paul has already made the basis of this contentment explicit in 1 Timothy 4:8, where he states that the profit of *eusebeia* is “all things,” both in the present and in the life to come.

In the remainder of 1 Timothy 6:6-10 Paul relates contentment to wealth. Verses 7-8 indicate the reason we should be content (v. 7 begins with *gar*, “for”). Echoing previous biblical teaching, both of the Old Testament (Job 1:21; Prov 27:24; Eccl 5:15) and of Jesus (Matt 6:19-20; Mark 8:36; Luke 12:15-21), Paul states that we didn’t bring anything into this world, and we can’t take anything out of it either (6:7). In other words, we didn’t have any wealth when we were born, and no matter how much wealth we might accumulate during this life, we can’t take anything with us when we die. Whatever the false teachers might have thought about the spiritual benefits of gaining wealth, wealth has no ultimate, eternal benefit. Instead, as long as we have food and clothing, we should be content (6:8, with the word for “we shall be content,” *arkestesometha*, coming from the same root family as the words Paul used in 6:6 and Phil 4:11). We do need certain things in this life; Paul never condemns having possessions if God graciously provides them, and he never calls Christians to take vows of poverty. As he will indicate in 6:17, “God is the one who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy,” and if God chooses to exceed those basics for his good purposes we can gratefully receive them and put them to good use (as 6:18-19 indicate, that good use means being generous and ready to share). What Paul tells us is where our expectations should be. As long as God provides us with the basics of life, we should be content, because our contentment does not rest in those things but in Christ. As Christians we shouldn’t expect or demand that God will make us wealthy or give us possessions beyond our basic needs, and even if he chooses to do so, that should not, and ultimately cannot, increase our contentment in this life.

The next two verses contrast this godly view of wealth and contentment with the desire to be rich and the negative consequences of that desire, or as our culture now calls this, affluenza. While Paul never condemns being rich, he strongly denounces the desire to be rich that arises from discontentment and prohibits contentment by describing where that desire leads. In distinction from those who are content with the basics of life in Christ, those who want to get rich expose themselves to some dangerous consequences. (6:9). The phrase “fall into” translates the verb *emiptousin*, which is in the present tense, indicating what typically or normally happens, again and again, to those who desire to be rich: they fall into (*eis*) three things. The first is temptation (*peirasmos*), or something that “can be an occasion of sin to a person.”<sup>23</sup> Those who desire to be rich open themselves up to continued enticements to sin. The second thing they fall into is a snare (*pagis*), likely the snare of the devil (cf. 3:17; 2 Tim 2:26), meaning that they not only open themselves up to opportunities to sin, but to entrapment to sin, compulsive and controlling

<sup>22</sup> Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 253.

<sup>23</sup> BDAG, 793.



sin. The third thing they fall into is desire (*epithumias*), specifically foolish (*anoetous*) and harmful (*blaberas*) desires. The one who desires to be rich opens himself up to temptation to sin, entrapment to sin, and then enslavement to desires to sin, desires which plunge (*buthizo*) men into ruin (*olethros*) and destruction (*apoleia*). These last two terms are closely related and most likely highlight two different aspects of the sinner's outcome: perhaps bodily and spiritual destruction or present and eternal destruction.<sup>24</sup> Either way, the Bible states what social science has come to confirm: unrestrained greed that comes from a lack of contentment has devastating consequences.

Paul substantiates what he has just said in v. 9 with what he says in v. 10 (again beginning this verse with *gar*, "for"). The "love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." Like Philippians 4:13, the first part of this verse is often misquoted and misapplied at two key points.<sup>25</sup> First Timothy 6:10 does not say that money is the root of all evil, but that "the love of money" is "a root of all kinds of evil." George Knight explains why the love of money is so dangerous:

*Philarguria*, "love of money," is what characterizes one who places his or her heart on possessing money, so violating the first commandment of the Decalogue, the commandment to love God (cf. Mt. 6:24 par Lk. 16:13). Because this is an expression of sinful self-love in opposition to the love of God (cf. "lovers of self" and "lovers of money" in 2 Tim. 3:2-4, a list concluding with the contrast "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God"; cf. also Jas. 4:4; 1 Jn. 2:15), it also violates the inherently related second great commandment (Mt. 22:39) to love one's neighbor.<sup>26</sup>

This attitude leads to all kinds of moral evils (*kakon*), such as injustice, overindulgence, taking advantage of the poor, cheating, stealing, and murder, among many others.

Paul finishes this passage by referring once again to the false teachers who think that godliness is a means of gain and who desire to be rich instead of content with what God provides. By longing after money they have "wandered away from the faith" and "pierced themselves with many griefs." First, they have separated themselves (*apeplanethesan*) from "the faith" (*tes pisteos*), or become apostate, straying from the Christian faith and thereby forsaking Christ himself. They supposed that godliness was a means of material gain, and therefore lost everything eternally. Second, by piercing themselves (*periepeiran*) with "many griefs" (*odunais pollais*) they have brought many self-inflicted wounds upon themselves in this life, which produce sorrow but no repentance (cf. 2 Cor 7:10).<sup>27</sup> This is the outcome of discontent and greed, the current and future experience of

<sup>24</sup> Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 256.

<sup>25</sup> Bargerhuff, *The Most Misused Verses in the Bible*, 87-92; and Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (New Studies in Biblical Theology, Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1999), 210-11.

<sup>26</sup> Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 257.

<sup>27</sup> TDNT, 5:115.

those who suffer from affluenza. This is the outcome that being found in Christ rescues us from by helping us to find contentment in the only place that it can be found: in Christ alone.

#### IV. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

As Christians we are called to find our contentment not in what we have, but in who we are in Christ. Philippians 4:10-13 helps us understand how in Christ we can be content in any circumstance; no matter how much we have or don't have. Contentment is not natural to us. We learn it through being strengthened by Christ as we go through life with him, in times of great blessing and in times of want and suffering. First Timothy 6:6-10 builds upon this truth by teaching us that contentment in Christ is the great gain that we seek after, and is found in Christ when God provides us with our basic needs. Wealth cannot bring us contentment, and the discontent that drives us to accumulate wealth, even when we can't spend or use it, drives us away from Christ and toward the terrible consequences of sin and its cycle of entrapment and destruction. God may bless us with wealth beyond our basic necessities, but this cannot be the basis of contentment in this life.

We live in a culture that is desperate for contentment, and often looks for it in affluence, in the accumulation of wealth and possessions. By doing so people are searching for contentment in something that can never offer contentment, and are suffering the consequences. As Harper and Jones say, "Affluence tends to affluenza when the accumulation of material wealth becomes an end in itself and especially when people begin to measure their own worth and that of others in purely material terms."<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, not even the church in America is immune from this, but suffers right along with the rest of our culture.<sup>29</sup> Yet if we are going to combat affluenza with an effective internal restraint, that internal restraint must be our relationship to Jesus Christ, and that means Christians and churches must lead the way in demonstrating contentment in Christ and not in what we own. Two practical implications of Philippians 4 and 1 Timothy 6 can help us do this: embracing a lifestyle of the cross (especially in contrast to the so-called "prosperity" gospel), and learning to store up our treasures in heaven through sacrificial giving.

##### A. Embracing a Lifestyle of the Cross

Once we have embraced Christ's sacrificial death on the cross and life-giving resurrection through faith, we are called to live out his death and resurrection as we live lives of faith. Jesus tells us that, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt 16:24). To be in Christ, or to live a life of godliness, means that we must deny ourselves and take up our crosses. This means

<sup>28</sup> Harper and Jones, "Treating 'Affluenza,'" 161.

<sup>29</sup> As Blomberg demonstrates in *Christians in an Age of Wealth*, 23-32.

a continuing death to sin and self so that we can experience new life in Christ. This gospel lifestyle is at the heart of Martin Luther's theology of the cross. He states, "The remedy for curing desire does not lie in satisfying it, but extinguishing it."<sup>30</sup> When Paul says that he can be content in any and all circumstances because Christ is the one who strengthens him, it is because he is in Christ and has fellowshiped with him in his sufferings in order to experience the glories of his resurrection power (Phil 3:9-10). When he warns us of the desire to be rich, of being discontent with God's provision, it is because that desire is the opposite of taking up your cross; it leads us away from godliness and toward destruction. Followers of Christ must be wary of anything that keeps us from putting sin to death, including our wealth, which has great potential to enflame sin instead of kill it.

Unfortunately, far from embracing Jesus's call to live a gospel lifestyle, 46% of American Christians have instead embraced the opposing lifestyle of the prosperity gospel, or the idea that God wants us to be substantially wealthier, healthier, and happier than we are right now.<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove describes this way of thinking: "According to this new gospel, if believers repeat positive confessions, focus their thoughts, and generate enough faith, God will release blessings upon their lives. This new gospel claims that God desires and even promises that believers will live a wealthy and financially prosperous life."<sup>32</sup> If this is the case in the church, how can we be surprised that our culture has embraced the pursuit of more no matter what it costs? When so many self-confessed Christians seek to be wealthier so that they might be happier, when they seek godliness for gain, they are only Christianizing affluenza, not embracing the biblical gospel or the life it calls us to lead.

The church must be at the forefront not only of proclaiming the biblical gospel of the cross and resurrection, of death to sin and life in Christ, but also of living the biblical gospel, and demonstrating what contentment in Christ looks like. This does not mean looking for suffering, or searching out crosses to bear, by divesting ourselves of all wealth (though this might be the calling of some as Mark 10:21 indicates), but it does mean purposely living life so that our wealth does not become our idol and affluenza our end. This will require churches and pastors to preach and teach what contentment in Christ is and what is not, to denounce the prosperity gospel as a false gospel, to lead the way in giving away their wealth and possessions and not keeping their money all for themselves. It will require Christian businesspeople to purposely practice Christian virtue in their businesses.<sup>33</sup> It will require Christian families to prioritize life before God instead of bigger homes, nicer cars, better vacations, and more lavish retirement accounts. How we handle our finances affects

<sup>30</sup> *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958-72), 31:54.

<sup>31</sup> Pew Forum, *Spirit and Power: A 10-Country Survey of Pentecostals* (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2006), 147.

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *God's Economy: Redefining the Health and Wealth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 15.

<sup>33</sup> Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, 131-32.

every other area of our lives, as Matthew 6:24 indicates.<sup>34</sup> Embracing a lifestyle of the cross will require intentionally and incessantly choosing to serve God instead of wealth, to put our sinful attitudes toward wealth to death instead of tolerating or enflaming them, so that we can model satisfaction in Christ instead of our affluence.

### *B. Laying up Treasures in Heaven through Sacrificial Giving*

When it comes to our wealth and possessions, the primary way to ensure that we have embraced a lifestyle of the cross and are seeking our contentment in Christ alone is through sacrificial giving. Contentment in Christ is not passivity, and it does not mean less economic involvement, but instead calls for careful stewardship and investment. Again, this is an area where the church in America is currently not meeting a biblical standard. In his book *Christians in an Age of Wealth*, Craig Blomberg surveys the church's giving and presents some startling facts. The per capita giving of American church members as a percentage of their annual income has mostly declined over the past century. Figures for 2009 were barely above two percent, the lowest they have been since the 1940's. Giving is also highly unequally distributed among Christians, with 15 percent of all Christians giving 80 percent of all dollars given to charitable causes, and 20 percent of Christians giving nothing in a given year.<sup>35</sup> Multiple factors contribute to this state of affairs, including the popularity of the prosperity gospel, debt, fear of mismanagement, and a misunderstanding of what the Bible teaches about giving, but whatever the cause the church's giving patterns demonstrate that many Christians are not embracing a lifestyle of the cross or suffer from affluenza themselves.

Jesus states in Matthew 6:19-21, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Jesus here describes misplaced values, telling his disciples not to store up treasure for themselves, but to use their treasure for eternal purposes.<sup>36</sup> We must store up treasures in heaven instead of merely accumulating them on earth if we are going to experience the reality of Paul's words in Philippians 4:10-13 and 1 Timothy 6:10. It may seem paradoxical, but the way to gain contentment in Christ and free ourselves from the besetting sin of trying to find our contentment in wealth is to sacrificially give. The way to overcome the restlessness, discontent, and skewed worldview that affluence can bring is to purposely divest ourselves of some of our discretionary income, for the good of others and for the glory of God.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Peter S. Heslam, "The Role of Business in the Fight Against Poverty," in *Christian Theology and Market Economics* (ed. Ian R. Harper and Samuel Gregg; Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2008), 166.

<sup>35</sup> Blomberg, *Christians in an Age of Wealth*, 23-24.

<sup>36</sup> D. A. Carson, *Matthew* (Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 8, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 177.

<sup>37</sup> What sacrificial giving looks like in relation to discretionary income will look

The church should not only be at the forefront of our culture in teaching and preaching this, but in modeling it as well. Sacrificial giving requires giving up lifestyles that require debt and possessions that we do not need. It requires running our businesses and doing our jobs for more than just profit. It means that our churches should be more concerned with the spread of the gospel and the welfare of the poor than with their own comfort. It means being more concerned with what God is doing in us than what material blessings he is bestowing upon us. As Craig Blomberg states, biblical salvation is always holistic, and involves a “transformation in the way God’s people utilize ‘mammon’—material possessions. To the extent the kingdom has been inaugurated from the cross of Christ onward, Christians individually and corporately are called to model that transformation, however imperfectly, as a foretaste of the perfect redemption that must ultimately await the age to come.”<sup>38</sup> Those who model that transformation and give sacrificially, just as Christ did (2 Cor 8:9), don’t have to worry about the negative effects of wealth, but can enjoy its benefits, knowing that giving in Christ is of eternal value.

### CONCLUSION

The gospel allows us to find our contentment in Jesus Christ himself, and thereby frees us from futilely trying to find our contentment in our circumstances or possessions. By freeing us to find true and lasting contentment in Christ himself, the gospel then helps us to understand how the accumulation of wealth and possessions fits with our contentment in Christ, and therefore gives us clear direction on how we should use and think of our wealth. The root of affluenza is not merely discontent, but trying to overcome that discontent through more; more possessions, more money, more of whatever it takes to become satisfied. Christians are those who are supposed to know that this way of life is empty, that wealth was never designed to do this. The only internal restraint that will ever truly work, because it changes things at the fundamental level of the human heart, is the gospel commitment that drives us to endure all things through Christ who strengthens us and helps us know that godliness with contentment is great gain.

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different for every individual and family, depending on a number of variables such as income, cost of living, location, family responsibilities, and seasons of life, among many others. Realizing what we should give and what we should keep for ourselves requires spiritual discernment, prayer, Christian maturity, and a willingness to reassess continually what we are giving, how much we are giving, and why.

<sup>38</sup> Blomberg, *Poverty and Riches*, 246-47.