

**Letters From A Mentor—Part 3:
“Finding Contentment”**

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OT 26C-19

Timothy 6: 6-19

Luke 16: 19-31

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Letters From A Mentor—Part 3 of 4:
“Finding Contentment”

In *How to Talk Well*, James Bender writes about “a farmer who grew award-winning corn. Each year he entered his corn in the state fair where it won first prize.”¹

One year a newspaper reporter interviewed him and learned the farmer’s strategy for growing the very best corn in the state.

What was it? The farmer shared his seed corn with all of his neighbors.

The reporter was stunned. “How can you afford to share your best corn seed with your neighbors when they are entering corn in same competition you do each year?”

“Why, don’t you know?” the farmer asked. “The wind picks up pollen from the ripening corn and swirls it from field to field. If my neighbors grow inferior corn, cross-pollination will steadily degrade the quality of my corn. If I am to grow good corn, I must... (I must) help my neighbors grow good corn, too.”

It’s a stunning strategy—sharing what you have. It’s even pretty darn charitable. But dig a little closer and you can still see the capitalistic, me-first perspective of: What’s in it for me? How do I become more successful? How do I ensure I measure up well when compared to others?

These are the questions life has taught us to ask, right? Life certainly taught me to ask them... and to pursue whatever answers I found along the way.

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At an early age, I heard the world telling me that to be happy I needed to be thinner. So in Jr. High, I started working out. And I got stronger... and thinner. And people noticed. Kids who used to tease me for being heavy suddenly wanted to be my friends. And this is what I’d wanted, right? It was supposed to make me happier... better. But that’s not what I found. I was thinner and stronger, but life didn’t change in any fundamental way.

In High School, I heard the world tell me I needed to get straight A’s and figure out how to hang with the popular crowd. So I busted my tuccus and got good grades and, in part because of all the exercise I’d been doing, I surprised even myself by finding my way into the popular crowd. But within two years, having been dumped by that popular crowd, I realized how phony

¹ James Bender, *How to Talk Well* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1994) as shared at <http://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/generosity/>.

and fickle popularity really is... offering no real happiness... zero contentment... only anxiety and confusion over who you are and what really matters.

In college, I heard the world tell me that, to be successful, I needed to do everything I could to get into a good doctoral program for psychology. So I again busted my tucuss, got good grades... and got into Columbia's graduate psychology program. Except... I never went to Columbia, but a seminary of all places.

Then, right after Melissa and I got married, like so many young couples, we barely made ends meet. Barely. We couldn't go out for dinner because we could never afford it. So our weekends were filled with dinners at our families' homes, and things like board game nights with friends. And it was wonderful. Absolutely wonderful. Yet I distinctly remember thinking, pretty frequently, "I can't wait until we can afford to just go out to eat without checking to see if we have enough money to cover a \$30 tab."

Now, please don't get me wrong. I was blessed throughout all of these times. Inordinately blessed. Blessed with the moments Paul calls the life that really is life throughout all of those periods. I know there were moments of the eternal... moments when I experienced the kingdom of God in the here and now. I know I've been blessed with an incredible family and some really good friends.

But you can never truly appreciate your blessings in the moment... you can't actually live into the life that really is life when your eyes are constantly scanning the horizon for what's next... as if some new goal... some new achievement... some new milestone is needed to make you happy.

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That's what Paul wants Timothy to understand in our first lesson this morning. "Don't look to the measures of this world to find happiness. Look to the ways of God... and trust in the blessings that are already yours," Paul tells his mentee.

But, to best appreciate Paul's encouragement here, it's probably helpful to go back and explore where we've been the past two weeks as we've been digging into this letter from a mentor... a letter that purportedly comes from Paul, intended to offer both pastoral and practical advice on growing closer to God and closer to God's kingdom.

Two weeks ago, we read as Paul made clear—you have to be yourself, Timothy. There is no room for phoniness within faithfulness. So don't try to be someone you're not. Let the world see you as you are, trusting God's grace to shine through even the cracks of your brokenness.

Then, last week we read as Paul encouraged Timothy to look for the bigger picture. To understand that the point of faith isn't simply getting into heaven when we die. Rather, Jesus calls his disciples to spread the kingdom of God in the here and now. So Paul told Timothy, "You must never forget that while the kingdom of God includes you, it isn't just about you. It's also for the ones you don't know and even the ones you don't like. For God loves them, too, and yearns that each and all might live secure in the knowledge of God's love for them."

This week, Paul brings it home, telling Timothy, “I want you to live into the kingdom, Timothy. I want you to know eternal life in the present. I want you to live the life that really is life... even in the here and now.

“So as you look for the bigger picture, don’t stop to measure yourself according to this world.”

And then he cuts to the chase. “Don’t fall in love with money. Don’t buy into the illusion that money measures success. Don’t connect your sense of well-being with how much you have or how much you lack. For the love of money leads to the pursuit of more, Timothy. And it is precisely this pursuit for more that stands in the way of living the eternal in the present... of uncovering that life that really is life.”

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When he’s confronted by religious leaders in our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus says something very similar... except he says it in a parable that is hard to hear. At least, I think it should be hard for you and me and every other middle or upper class American to hear.

The parable’s about a rich guy and a poor guy. The rich guy passed the poor guy, Lazarus, every day. But the rich guy had a lot on his mind. Family. Finances. A business to run. Busy, wealthy folks like him hardly had time to sleep at night, let alone time to notice the homeless man sitting on the corner.

So the rich man never paid any mind to Lazarus... but suffice it to say, neither did anyone else.

For just like today, people back then were taught it’s fine... even preferable to avoid the folks on the curb. Society taught, just as it still does, that it’s better to direct one’s attention to “healthier” priorities. Healthy priorities, I might add, that enabled this man to become quite successful in worldly terms.

But in this tantalizing tale, Jesus makes clear that, far from a true success, the rich man is the tragic figure.

Upon his death, as the leper bum Lazarus is cradled in Abraham’s gentle, loving arms, the rich man is in a place called “Hades.” He cries out for Abraham to send Lazarus to dip his finger in water and cool his tongue. But Abraham refuses, telling him “a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.”

The rich man hopes it’s not too late for his family. “Then, father, I beg you to send Lazarus to my father’s house to warm my five brothers.”

But again, Abraham says no dice. God has already broken through with God’s Word. People have already been given all they need to live full, faithful lives. According to Abraham, they’ll either listen, or they won’t. They’ll either respond, or they won’t.²

And with that, this provocative parable comes to an awkward, uncomfortable end... with Lazarus in heaven... and the rich man... not.

² Helen Montgomery Debevoise in “Pastoral Perspective” article on Luke 16: 19-31 in *Feasting on the Word: Year C Volume 4* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) p. 120.

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But to focus on who's in heaven and who's not—as tempting as that might be—is to miss the point of Jesus' story. As we shared last week, the gospel isn't as much about getting people into the kingdom of God when we die as much as it's about getting people to live and spread the kingdom of God in this world... amid this lifetime.

The rich man didn't get this. He couldn't get his mind beyond his own personal agenda... his own personal pursuits in order to see the eternal in his midst... the real life to which God was calling him.

So in the end, the rich man ultimately found himself separated from Lazarus and Abraham by what Jesus calls a great chasm.

But as scholar David Lose points out so well, that chasm was nothing new. “That chasm was fixed a long, long time ago and reinforced every time the rich man came and went into his sumptuous abode to feast at his rich table and ignored Lazarus. He obviously knew Lazarus was there and understood his plight... Yet he did nothing.”³

This... Jesus says... this is why the rich man could never uncover the life that really is life. This is why he never uncovered the beauty to be found in living simply, so that others may simply live. This is why he couldn't see the intimate way in which salvation and compassion hold hands. This is why life was never as full as it could've been... due to the chasm the rich man let stand between himself and his neighbor.

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Back to the farmer who gave the corn seeds to his neighbor... the reporter still struggled to understand the strategy behind the farmer's generosity with his neighbors. He pressed further.

“Well, if you give seeds to all your neighbors to help them grow good corn... what's to prevent them from giving their seeds to even more neighbors, to ensure they can grow great corn? Eventually, wouldn't everybody have this same great, award-winning corn?”

The farmer smiled and said, “Oh, wouldn't that wonderful? I hope they do. I hope it all gets shared and everybody's blessed.”

“I hope it all gets shared and everybody's blessed.” Amen.

³ <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/09/pentecost-19-c-eternal-life-now/>