

The letters to Timothy are among my least favorite in the whole Bible if not the least. The first letter to Timothy has this gem: ¹²I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.

None of us would be here if we believed that was meant for us. But there is a sizeable chunk of Christian denominations who do.

The household codes in the letters to Timothy are also problematic in our own time. They are used as justification for an authoritarian male head of household as the only legitimate family structure. They say that women will be saved through childbearing. And Timothy is also one of the books that was used as justification for slavery.

I've pretty much always avoided preaching on it. But it was assigned for summer and with so many of us preaching, it's simpler to go with what's on tap rather than try to make up our own.

And anyway, today's reading is something I can get behind.

So maybe a good question to start with is how do we decide what is meant for us and what is not? The best way is to not read any part of scripture in isolation. Cherry picking verses that fit what we already believe causes all sorts of problems.

So, for example, If we take this business of women being silent, we can also find plenty of places in both the gospels and Paul's letters where women are in fact leaders and teachers.

The first witness to the resurrection was Mary Magdalene. So the overall witness of scripture as a whole tells us that the decree in Timothy for women to be silent was bound to that particular time and place for reasons we're not told.

On the other hand, where the admonitions regarding wealth are concerned, virtually all of scripture from the very beginning through the New Testament is pretty clear that greed is bad...that hoarding wealth is a problem. There are as many as 2000 verses in the Bible about caring for the poor.

The accompanying gospel for today is from Jesus' parable about the rich man and Lazarus. Lazarus begged in front of the man's fine home for years but the rich man just stepped over him. Now he's in eternal torment.

And when Jesus was asked by a rich man how to inherit eternal life, Jesus told him to sell everything he owned and give the money to the poor. That one always brings us up short.

The household instructions were just that – instructions for faithful living in a first century household in Greco-Roman Ephesus. And the instructions given to Timothy for church order and structure weren't necessarily meant to be a divine decree for all time either.

So, with that we can focus on the actual reading for today. As Daryl said last week, the author of the letter – probably a disciple of Paul rather than Paul himself – is writing to encourage and teach Timothy, a young leader in the church at Ephesus.

It's a letter that begins to address how to be the church in a time after the first generation of disciples have passed, and there are no longer eyewitnesses to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It's about passing on a living faith that will continue to grow. And it's about how Jesus' followers are to live out that faith.

Today's reading deals mainly with money and wealth. The author first tells Timothy to fight the good fight of faith.

The first step in fighting the good fight of faith is to identify those things that seem to battle against us in that good fight...things that tempt us to grab hold of things that don't really lead to real, true life.

That can be a lot of things...addiction, resentment, hate, envy, lust for power, unhealthy and unfaithful sexual temptations, and so on.

But a leading contender in our society will always be our relationship with money. Especially for those of us who are not poor.

Daryl and I met with our financial advisor this past week to look at money and retirement. We are in good shape for retirement. The advisor asked us how that felt.

My feelings about money will always be conflicted – that tug is always there for me between how much is enough for the things I want to do and how much is truly more than we need.

When we read Jesus' story about the rich young man who was told to sell everything and give it to the poor, I'm pretty sure that is not something I could do. I don't know many who could.

Daryl however had a good answer – he said it feels good to know we can live well and still be generous. His response jives pretty well with the instructions in this part of the letter to Timothy.

Those instructions assume that there will be rich people, but then he tells how to be rich and still live out the gospel. The key is generosity.

So let's talk gospel for a minute. The gospel is that Jesus ushers in a whole new way to live – a whole new world ultimately.

He calls that world the kingdom of God. He calls it eternal life or abundant life in John's gospel. When the letter to Timothy talks about taking hold of life that really is life, that's what the author is talking about.

In Jesus' first sermon in Luke's gospel, he says I have come to preach good news to the poor. And it's pretty clear from there on out that the world Jesus envisions is a world where all have what they need to take hold of life that is really life.

The kingdom of God is about *our* salvation...not just my salvation. And it isn't a reward or something we can only wait for until we die. It's now and into eternity.

We have all been given gifts and abilities that we can use to contribute to building towards that world Jesus proclaimed. And for some of us, at least one of our gifts is money. Generosity and sharing then is one way to help make that kingdom of God as close to reality as we can in our own time and place.

But the other bit of good news in this passage comes from the warning for the rich to not be haughty – to not set their hopes on riches.

Because here's the thing – when our wealth becomes what determines our worth as people we are creating a living hell right here. When wealth is what determines our worth, can we ever be sure we have enough?

We have constructed an economy for the last 40 years that seems to keep shifting wealth upward. The already fabulously wealthy keep getting wealthier. And if having a billion dollar net worth isn't enough what is? A trillion? What if that's not enough?

The flip side is that then we make people who aren't wealthy...people who struggle to live from one day to the next...people of less worth. At its worst, they become people who in some eyes don't deserve to eat and have decent shelter.

The letter to Timothy tells us that God richly provides us with everything. Everything comes from God and God has given abundantly. God has given enough for all. That is good news.

There is a lot of peace when we can be content with a simpler life, especially if it means others have what they need.

Taking hold of life that really is life means that we continue to fight that good fight of faith. That we continue to pray and learn and love and fight the demons that seek to derail our faith...including an unhealthy love of money.

And we can learn to trust that a world in which everyone has enough really is good news for all of us.