

Lay Hold on Eternal Life

Text:

I Timothy 6

Let all who are under a yoke as slaves regard their own masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled. Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brothers; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved. Teach and urge these things. If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain. Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time--he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.

O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called "knowledge," for by professing it some have swerved from the faith. Grace be with you.

Introduction:

What is most familiar in this chapter is what Paul says about wealth. It is a theme that runs through the entire chapter which is divided into three distinct parts. It begins with instructions to slaves and ends with instructions to the rich; in between there is an exhortation to Timothy himself. In each case the essence of the command is to focus on the new life that has been communicated to them in Christ, and to not be overly concerned with the present passing life. It is in this context that he warns against greed stating: "those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs."

It would be impossible to take up all the details of the chapter in one sermon, but what I want us to focus on is Paul's exhortation to Timothy in verse 12: "lay hold on eternal life." Since he repeats the same formula in verse 19 in his words to those who are rich in this age, we may assume that this is something that all should do. But what does it mean to "lay hold of eternal life", and how do we do it? As we examine this chapter together let us try to answer these two questions.

I. What does it mean to "lay hold of eternal life"?

We may begin our answer by stating negatively that what Paul means here by laying hold of eternal life is not what Jesus meant by "entering into eternal life". It is not coming into eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. It is not being saved. In another context we could take it as such, but in both verses where it is used here believers are being addressed. Certainly, if Paul considered anyone a true believer in Christ, it was Timothy. Timothy was his most trusted companion and fellow worker; the one to whom he entrusted the most difficult tasks. Furthermore, in the text he clearly makes reference to the fact that Timothy has been called to eternal life, and he has made a "good confession" of eternal life "in the presence of many witnesses". He is, no doubt, recalling Timothy's baptism. So whatever he is exhorting Timothy to do, this is not what we would call an evangelistic appeal, an appeal to receive the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ. It is rather an appeal to those who are already believers, who have already received the gift of eternal life to position themselves in a certain fashion in

relationship to the gift to which they have already been called and to which they have already born witness by submitting to baptism.

The second clue as to what Paul means is the overall tenor of the chapter. As we stated at the beginning what stands out in this chapter is what it says about greed and wealth. The chapter's best known line is: "the love of money is the root of all evil". In the first paragraph Paul warns those teachers who turn away from the truth thinking that "godliness is a source of gain". It is here that he tells us that godliness is "great gain", a term that implies the highest thing we can achieve in this life. But godliness must be accompanied with contentment, which he clearly defines as being content with the basic necessities of life. Greed, the desire for more than God gives us will always spoil godliness. So, whatever it means to "lay hold of eternal life", it in some way stands in opposition to greed. Those who "desire to be rich" are certainly not "laying hold of eternal life."

A further indicator of what is meant by this expression is the way Paul describes those who are materially rich as "rich in this world", or in this "age". This expression echoes the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 6:19-20:

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

In fact, these words of Jesus underlie much of what Paul says in this chapter. For Jesus, preoccupation with wealth on earth was a sure way to miss out on the real purpose of life. We are not here to accumulate treasure on earth but to lay up treasures in heaven.

So when Paul tells us to "lay hold of eternal life", he is telling us not to get sidetracked by the present world. To do so leads to the result that it had with the false teachers. We begin to do what we do, not for an eternal reward, but for an immediate reward. So he says to Timothy and to us "take a firm grasp on your position in Christ and live accordingly". "Take possession of what you have been given to you in Christ, do not squander it by living a life that is focused on this world, when you have been called to something higher."

People often own things that they have not taken possession of. They do not recognize the importance or the value of what has been given to them. Believers too often treat the gift of eternal life that has been given to them in Christ as if it were some outdated object that had been left to them by their grandparents. Just as children who grow up in prosperous countries often do not recognize the marvelous advantages that they have and treat them as something due them, so believers neglect the great gift that has been bestowed on them in Jesus Christ.

To lay hold of eternal life is to have a right understand of the relative value of the present world and the world to come. It is to live our lives fully as those who have been called to eternal life and have born witness to that calling through baptism. It is to be busy laying up treasures in heaven instead of trying to accumulate acclaim and wealth on earth. This is our calling. We should all live in light of that moment when we shall give an account to Jesus Christ.

II. How do we “lay hold on eternal life”?

This being the case, how do we do it? How do we “lay hold of eternal life”? The first thing we must do is to let go of worldly ambition. We cannot serve two masters. If we want to lay hold of eternal life we must quit clinging to the present world. This is the error of the false teachers. Their unwillingness to let go of the present world caused some to “wander away from the faith and to pierce themselves through with many pangs.” Demas will forsake Paul because he “loved the present world.” Paul places Timothy in contrast with the false teacher when, in verse 12, he says: “But as for you, O man of God, flee these things.” Most likely each of us knows our temptations, the attractions of the present world that can distract us from our heavenly calling. We must flee them. We must let go of the temptations of the present world, if we hope to grasp the rewards of the coming world.

Secondly we must pursue those things that truly matter, those things of eternal consequence. Each day of our lives presents us with opportunities to pursue the wind or to pursue reality. Therefore Paul exhorts us to flee those things which lead to nowhere and obtain nothing of significance and to: “pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness.” In so doing we are laying hold of eternal life; we are seizing the opportunity that God is giving us to “redeem the time”.

Finally, we must be content with what God gives us, and put all that he has given us to godly use. It is interesting that at the beginning and end of this chapter Paul addresses the two ends of the social spectrum. To the slaves who have nothing he says: “be content with what you have; serve God where you are”. To those rich in this world he says: “Use your riches to obtain a heavenly reward.” God is not concerned about our social state. He can use a slave or he can use a person of wealth and renown. Neither our low estate in this life nor our high standing is an excuse. We can all “lay hold on eternal life” by letting go of worldly ambition, by pursuing godliness, and by using whatever God has given us to his glory.