

For the Love of Money!

You're probably wondering: Do we really have to talk about the love of money today? Well, apparently we do.

As I thought about this text during the past week, amidst my fever-induced delirium, it occurred to me: We were pretty much born with (or into) a love of money. At least in this country. It's like a virus. We could call it the "T-LOM virus" (an acronym for "the love of money"). Granted, it goes by different names, so we don't always realize it's actually a virus, and that we have it. Names like "The American Dream," or "Keeping Up with the Jones," or "Providing for Our Families." It's hard to say which of those three names is the more sneaky or insidious. Probably the latter. Because after all, what's wrong with wanting to provide for our families?

I also, in my fever-induced delirium, wondered how many television commercials we've seen in our lives. I actually Googled it. I typed in "how many television commercials has the average American adult seen by the age of 65" (I decided to put in 65 because that's what I'm going to be in a week and a half), and the answer came right up. Two million. How many of you are 65 or older? You've each seen no fewer than two million TV commercials. Each of them as contagious and deadly as a droplet of Covid 19. Here's how it works. Starting already in childhood, in the middle of watching something else—whether "Sesame Street," or "The Ed Sullivan Show" or the "NBC Nightly News," all of a sudden something completely different pops up, as if some invisible person (or evil being) changed the channel without our permission. First, you are shown something that apparently others already have but you don't. It might be the latest toy by Mattel, or the latest car by Chevrolet, or even the latest toilet bowl cleaner (because everyone wants to have a clean toilet, right?). Next, you are told that you too can have this toy or car or clean toilet. All it takes is a little, what? Money! Two million or even two thousand times later, and everything is about money. Our family's happiness and hygiene all comes down to money. Our life worth is all about money. And bam! we're hooked. Infected.

Here's the astonishing thing. In Timothy's time (whoever Timothy was; scholars really aren't sure, beyond the supposition that it was some young pastor the writer was trying to give advice to), there were no television commercials. Let me repeat that. In Timothy's time there were no television commercials. In fact, there was no such thing as "The American Dream" (not for another eighteen hundred years, give or take). And yet, there was the virus! "*The love of money . . . And guess what? "It's a root of all kinds of evil."* (For those of you who prefer the King James Version, it reads, "The love of money is the root of all evil.")

The thing is, the letter writer wasn't quoting some obscure verse from the Hebrew scriptures, some little known law from the Torah. Already by this time, this statement had become a maxim of secular common sense, including in Greco-Roman culture. Everybody by then knew that (let's say it together) "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." But knowing it to be true didn't make one bit of difference! Because they were already all infected. Just as we are today. Television or no television.

I said earlier that we are all born with the love of money. But actually, that's not quite true—in fact, it's not at all true—it's profoundly not true. What are we born with? Our writer reminds us. Nothing. No-thing. Nothing but the skin and bones and breath God gave us.

And what do we need, once we are born? Again, our writer reminds us. It's astonishingly simple. "*Food and clothing.*" And of course, a mother. (And if we're lucky, a father.)

When my grandson Neil was born exactly fifteen days ago, the first thing the nurse did was—actually the second thing; the first thing she did was wipe him off just a little. I'll spare you the details. But the second thing she did was take him, naked as a jaybird, and put him right here, on Mommy Madeline's naked skin, so that they could begin to bond. Then the third thing the nurse did was put a teeny-tiny diaper on him, wrap him up tightly in a nice, cotton baby blanket, and give him right back to Madeline, so she could start nursing him. There you go. That's all he needed. And fifteen days later, that's still all he needs.

(I'd be a terrible liar if I didn't tell you that his mommy and daddy and grandma and grandpa and this two adoring aunties and a zillion other people have all already, in fifteen short days, bought him a zillion things he doesn't need. Like a tie-die shirt from the bluegrass festival. And his first guitar. I'm of course kidding about the guitar. But it's only a matter of time. He's surrounded by the T-LOM virus. And his getting infected is only a matter of time.

I'm guessing you're all wondering what the solution is (either that or wishing I would have stayed home in bed for another week or so). The writer doesn't offer a solution (at least, not yet). But he does propose what we might call a vaccine. And like many vaccines it comes in two parts. Part 1 is "*godliness,*" and Part 2 is "*contentment.*"

Note that the word "godliness" has a small g rather than a capital G, so it really has nothing to do with God (capital G), but it does at least have to do with faith, or rather a faith. We could also say "religion" (or a religion). It has to do with having a discipline or regimen in which we do such things regularly as read scripture and sing hymns and, once a week (or every two or three; or four) go to church. Godliness, like the Covid 19 vaccine, will not keep you from getting the virus (**obviously!**), but it will hopefully keep you from getting it as bad, or better yet dying from it. Needless to say, the reason we're all in church today is because we have been vaccinated with the "godliness" portion of the T-LOM vaccine.

Part Two of the vaccine many of us skip, thinking part one is all we need. Part two is called contentment. Contentment is tricky. Very tricky. In fact, I may as well say it, impossible. But it's at least something to strive for, to attempt. To be content is to be satisfied—with what one has and is. To want and need nothing more.

The problem with contentment is it never lasts. Not when we're already infected with the virus, as we all are. All we can do is keep trying, keep trying, keep trying to be content. Grim picture? Oh yes. Completely hopeless? Oh no. Because as it turns out, there is a solution. We could even call it a cure.

You may have noticed that in the middle of this passage, starting with verse 11, there is a shift. "*But as for you, man of God, shun all this.*" We've already seen that this is far easier said than done. (But remember that phrase "man of God.") The writer continues, "*pursue righteousness, godliness* [still small g], *faith, love, endurance, gentleness* [yada, yada; next verse:]. *Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called* [again yada, yada, but hang on].

It's in verse 13 that he finally springs the solution. "*In the presence of God* [capital G, or course], *who gives life to all things, (did you get that?) and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep the commandment . . .* [Which commandment, he doesn't specify, which can only mean the commandment, to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength] *without spot or blame until the manifestation*

of our Lord Jesus Christ [here we go!], which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of Lords. It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

The solution, in other words, is to completely humble ourselves before our only Sovereign, who happens to be the King of kings and Lord of lords. Who is, by the way, so much greater than us and in one sense at least so far beyond us that we can't even see him. And then he adds an Amen. As if to say, May this Lord bless you and keep you. Go in peace.

Except the writer is not quite done. He's not quite done talking about the T-LOM Virus with which we are all infected. Verse 17: "*As for those who in the present age are rich . . .*" [Let there be no mistake. He's talking about us. We are all rich. If you don't believe me, go to Haiti, or Appalachia, or certain segments of Broadway in Wichita.] "*Command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.*" There it is. Be humble. Set your hopes not on money but on God. Worship God and God only. Because as Jesus Christ himself has said, you can't worship both.

Amen.

Benediction:

¹⁷ As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸ They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹ thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.