

Pursue what is gain

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Preacher: Brian King

[0 : 00] Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we come before you today. We ask, Lord, that you give us much understanding and not just much understanding so that our heads will be filled with knowledge but that in turn that understanding will lead to conviction in our hearts that we might want to live for you and may that translate right out into our lives in the way we seek to follow you in 2024.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Now, whenever we plan, we plan with some goals in mind. Am I right? We plan because we want to gain something, achieve something, secure something.

A large enough retirement fund, perhaps, or an A in an exam, or the completion of a project milestone that's natural. And last week, if you were here, Reverend Wilston encouraged us to plan with God's will in mind.

God has revealed what he wants us to do in his word and he wants us to carry those things out. He wants us to love him and our neighbour.

His will is to bring all things in heaven and earth under the lordship of Christ and he wants us to live in light of that great big plan. And I trust that in our heads, many of us want to do that.

[1 : 33] Many of us this morning call ourselves Christians, which means by definition, we want to do what God wants us to do. In theory, anyway. But I wonder, have you ever felt this tug of war inside of you?

You know, for instance, that God's will is for you to go to church regularly, to one that teaches his word faithfully and seeks to obey that same word.

But sometimes it's just so hard because maybe that decision leads to some conflict with some other family members. Or maybe because when you come to church, you find it so hard just to connect with others.

There just doesn't seem to be much benefit. And you start asking yourselves, why? Why am I doing this? Or perhaps you're trying your best to love someone.

Maybe you're expending lots of energy, trying to help some depressed teenagers or some difficult people, but you're just not getting anything in return. And you ask, why?

[2 : 47] Why am I doing this? What's the benefit? Or perhaps as you've tried to make decisions that honour God, you are aware of some sacrifices you've made.

Perhaps you've given up certain relationships or you've chosen to forego a certain amount of your income. And now you're wondering, why?

Why am I doing this? Where's the benefit? And perhaps that question is beginning to bug you more and more as we enter 2024.

Because some of you are thinking, by living like this, am I actually on the right path? Or is this actually foolish?

Am I wasting my time? What if I had been on some other path that isn't so Jesus-focused? You know, maybe that might gain me more financial freedom.

[3 : 50] Or perhaps that might gain me more recognition. Perhaps that might gain me more time to seek my own gratification. So, perhaps it's time to pursue another path.

A better path. One where there is so much more to gain. Is that what I should finally do in 2024? Pursue what is gain?

And with that question ringing in our minds, we open our Bibles to 1 Timothy 6, our main passage for this morning. The context is that Paul is in Ephesus.

He's been overseeing the church there and he's aware that there are all kinds of teachers spreading their message around. And in verse 3, we discover they are teaching something other

than the teaching of Paul.

They are saying there is Paul's path, which is gospel-centered and Jesus-focused. But there is also another path that isn't as gospel-centered and Jesus-focused.

[5 : 02] And they are implying that's the better path. Now, it's important to see that they are not promoting something that looks radically different at first glance.

they are not promoting some kind of atheism or some ancient form of hedonism. They have not rejected religion at all. If you look at the end of verse 5, you will see that these teachers and those that they influence are still very much interested in godliness.

They are interested in religion. They are interested in things to do with God. But here's the difference. They are interested in God and religion in so far as it gets them some profit and benefit. Godliness is a means to gain. For them, it was most likely money they were after. Verses 9 and 10 certainly suggest so.

And somehow they were leveraging religion to do that. That's why verse 5 in your NIV says financial gain.

[6 : 24] But although that is certainly not a wrong translation based on the context, it's worth noting that the Greek word in itself doesn't necessarily have to be restricted to gain that is monetary.

It can refer to other kinds of gain as well. And I want to pause here and suggest that once we keep that in mind, we should realise verse 5 2 is our danger.

Now, I don't mean that we're at risk of becoming prosperity preachers, where we say, just give this amount and you'll be blessed and guaranteed health and wealth. That is probably not our danger. But here's our danger. It's that as we live Jesus-focused lives, we become tired because sometimes it feels demanding and unrewarding and unrelenting.

and then we begin to feel dissatisfied, we begin to feel resentful and so we slowly begin to think just like these teachers.

[7 : 44] We begin seeking out what we feel we are lacking, whether that's appreciation or recognition or pleasure or yes, even more money.

We begin seeking those things we feel we currently don't have. And we begin to make decisions not based primarily on whether it glorifies God, but on whether it gains us those things.

We make decisions based purely on whether it will gain us what we lack. It's not that we're saying to Christ, oh, I don't want you anymore, or we stop going to church or praying or anything like that. But we begin to use Christ as a means to an end, as a stepping stone to something else, something that is ultimately for our gain and profit.

Godliness has simply become a means to gain. That's our danger. But ironically, that is actually ungodly.

[9 : 07] As John Woodhouse, the former principal of Moore College, once said, to serve Christ simply to benefit oneself is in the end not serving Christ at all.

To live for him only until a better option comes along is really not to live for him at all. And here is another irony.

Pursuing this path doesn't actually gain you anything. You see, what are some of the results of this non-Jesus focused teaching?

Look at verse 3 again. Paul says that when we pursue this path, we are actually moving away from the healthy words of Jesus.

That's what the phrase sound instruction there literally means. Healthy teaching. And that is what we're throwing away.

[10 : 10] We are no longer in agreement with the true, nourishing, life-giving message of Jesus. We think nothing of his perfect life and atoning death and glorious resurrection.

And verse 4 shows us what happens when we throw away what is healthy for us. Notice the effect of pursuing this path of self-gain on community life.

In verse 4, the teacher's unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions, and constant friction.

That's not surprising, is it? If my gospel is primarily about what I can gain and how everything is there to serve me, it's no surprise to eventually see disputes and quarrels and fights because everyone is chasing what they want.

And all it gains you is a deeper discontent. again, notice the irony. What lies at the root of this false teaching in the first place is a deep discontent.

[11 : 34] You see, the teachers themselves were not satisfied with the gospel. They were eager for money, and so they taught what they taught. And the listeners themselves were also discontented.

They wanted to hear stuff that fulfilled their self-centered desires, so they gave the teachers a hearing. But at no point is their discontent ever resolved.

In fact, it's the very opposite. Their discontentment simply led to more discontentment and resentment as they kept pursuing more money, and they quarreled, and they got envious, and they talked bad about one another.

It's destructive. Pursuing this path doesn't actually gain you anything. So, what is Paul's solution then?

What is his antidote? Now, quite interestingly, he doesn't say, guys, why are you trying to gain stuff? Don't do that.

[12 : 43] It's wrong. Not at all. But he doesn't say that. Instead, he says, by all means, go for gain.

But let me redefine gain for you. Look at verse 6. But godliness with contentment is great gain.

What is actually going to bring you great gain in life, Paul says, is godliness itself. It's godliness with contentment that is actually the best option.

Because it's going to give you your biggest return on your investment. And that's what you should pursue. So, let that sink in for a moment.

Notice what Paul does not say. He doesn't say, having your stock portfolio do well with contentment is great gain. He doesn't say, having all my emotional needs met with contentment is great gain.

[13 : 53] He doesn't say, having the same experiences as my peers with contentment is great gain. He doesn't say, having my children enjoy academic or relational success with contentment is great gain.

gain. The teachers are not wrong in thinking that godliness leads to gain. The difference, however, is that the godliness itself is the gain.

Those who have recognised the great worth and value of godliness and are content with that are actually those who reap the benefits most.

No wonder Paul will say later on in verse 11, just outside our Bible reading today, to pursue godliness. But here's the challenge for us this morning.

Do we believe that? Do we really believe godliness with contentment is great gain? One obvious way to find out is to us.

[15 : 06] How many of us actually pursue godliness? After all, we only chase what we think is valuable. We only go after what we believe will satisfy us.

We will only pursue what we think will make us content. That's why some of us pursue a particular possession.

We're willing to spend that money on Shopee. That's why some of us pursue a good reputation. We make sure to choose the right photos to show on Instagram.

That's why some of us pursue career development, where we willingly give up our time to attend some seminars, to work overtime. That's why some of us pursue our children's achievements. accomplishments. We send them for tuition, to sporting clubs, make sure they can get into those Oxbridge interviews. We think it's worth it.

[16 : 13] But how many of us pursue godliness? If God sat in the midst of our home fellowship groups, listening in to us week after week, would he find there earnest discussion and encouragement to live godly lives?

Or would he find that it's not really a big concern among us? And if it isn't, doesn't that show our unbelief?

It shows us that we don't really believe 1 Timothy 6 verse 6. Or here's another way to diagnose ourselves.

think back to the last time you faced some difficult circumstance or situation. Maybe it was finance related or health related or friend related.

And in that moment, did you think to yourself, you know what I really need at this moment is to pursue godliness with contentment? Or think back to the last moment you were anxious or disappointed about something.

[17 : 24] did you then say, okay, what I need now is godliness with contentment? I know that I think or say that far less than I should.

Paul says godliness with contentment is great gain and yet so often we pursue other things. So we need help with our unbelief.

Our hearts need to be persuaded. Okay, come on Paul, show us. Help me overcome my skepticism so that this will be what I will pursue.

Why is it that godliness with contentment is great gain? It's a fair question, isn't it? And I think there are two ways we can answer that question.

One way to answer that comes from elsewhere in 1 Timothy, especially what it says about godliness. And the other way to answer that comes right in the, you can take off the slide verse, comes right in the verses that follow on from 1 Timothy 6 verse 6 itself.

[18 : 40] That is verses 7 and 8. So you got that two ways? So let's look at both those ways. Now, here is the first way to answer that question.

Why is godliness with contentment great gain? Well, let's consider what godliness in itself is all about. You see, what is the essence of godliness?

Is godliness all about how we manage to avoid swearing when that car nearly knocked into us? Or deciding not to watch that particular movie? Is godliness all about how I manage to get up before 5am to pray for half an hour and then read my Bible for another half an hour?

Is godliness all about taking part in many church activities? These are not bad things. They can potentially be expressions of godliness.

indeed, godliness requires action. But are they the essence of godliness? Well, look back with me now at 1 Timothy 3 verse 16 and now you can flash it on the screen.

[19 : 56] Let me read it to you. Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great. He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.

Here is what lies at the core of true godliness, Paul says. It's not essentially about something you do. Its essence is not found in law keeping or good works or morality.

no. True godliness is revealed in a person. And true godliness is essentially about knowing that person.

True godliness is essentially about knowing and walking with Jesus. And who is this Jesus? Jesus. Well, 1 Timothy 3 verse 16 tells us he is God become man. He appeared in the flesh. And that means the origin of every comfort that you have ever known, the source of the most immense power you can think of, the deepest well of love that you could ever imagine has come into this world.

[21 : 28] world. And he has come into this world for you and I. And we can be so, so, so sure of that because it is the Holy Spirit himself who testifies to this.

He vindicates Jesus. How so? By raising him from the dead. And that shows Jesus is no scammer. Jesus is no con artist. When he said that he came to seek the lost, to serve, not to be served, to die for the ungodly, to pour out his blood for his enemies, he wasn't just talking big.

He did do it. It is true. And the Spirit confirms it via his resurrection. Godliness with contentment is great gain.

Because being godly means knowing this Christ. Now, godliness might not bring us financial riches. Godliness might not make us the life of the party.

[22 : 48] Godliness might not win us respect. It doesn't always lead to gain in that way. But, if godliness is knowing and walking with this Christ, that means we know that we are and will always be loved no matter the circumstance.

It means we know that we never need to be afraid of being completely alone. It means we know we have access to the one who controls and has power over everything.

Because godliness is knowing and walking with Jesus. There's Jesus. Godliness is about being in relationship with the one who is called the Good Shepherd, the Bread of Life, Emmanuel, the Rock, Cornerstone.

Godliness is about being in relationship with the one who leads and protects us, who feeds us so that we are never hungry, who is with us always, who is a secure sanctuary in every storm.

And that in itself, my friends, is clearly great gain, is it not? Because this is way better than anything the world has to offer.

[24 : 19] And we don't have to earn it in any way. It has been given to us. But don't forget that link with contentment.

Let's talk about that word a little bit. This isn't merely the contented feeling you have after that amazing Christmas or New Year's Eve meal. The Greek word translated contentment here is actually a word that means something like a self-sufficiency that is independent of circumstances. It does not depend on external things. And so Paul is saying, when we not only know Christ and walk with him, but we actually find our sufficiency in him alone, it is great gain because we have all that we need, no matter what life throws at us.

To use the words of Philippians 4, verse 12 and 13, we have gained the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want, because we know the one who gives us strength.

Just imagine that. Isn't it great gain if you are serving Christ behind the scenes and you are not being acknowledged, but you are truly at peace with that because knowing and serving Christ is enough?

[26 : 08] Isn't it great gain if you are not anywhere near your peers at a similar stage of life in terms of what job or house you have or what holidays you go on or what school your kids go to, but you are truly okay with that because knowing and serving Christ is enough?

Isn't that an amazing superpower? Paul says, go all out and pray for that and pursue that.

Seek sufficiency in Christ alone. And so that's the first way to answer the question, why is godliness with contentment great gain?

But here is a second way. it is great gain compared to anything the world offers because chapter 6 verse 7, we brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of it.

Paul says, the moment you came into the world, we know two things that are true of you. You were born empty handed and you die the same way.

[27 : 38] You are born with nothing and you live with nothing. And yet, even though we all know that, how do we so often try to live?

I'm really struck by what John Woodhouse, whom I mentioned earlier as the former principal of Moore College, by what he says. He says that what people often do is to try to make sure life in between birth and death is not empty handed as much as possible.

That's what we try to do. And so that's why we have those 1,001 places we must go and see before we die. That is why we must make sure that we complete that list of achievements or experiences that some TikTok influencer told us we must have before the grave claims us.

We try to compensate. But what happens if we make the pursuit of these things our ultimate purpose in life?

Actually, we end up a little like that list in verse 4, don't we? We become envious when we can't have the kind of life that our friend displays on Instagram.

[29 : 02] Or we become conceited, boastful, proud, because we manage to take off that thing that is on everyone's bucket list. Or we end up insecure and anxious because we are always wondering, am I missing out?

Are people excluding me because I can't keep up with the gang? So there is suspicion and friction. Now, Paul is not saying that we don't need anything at all.

Verse 8 makes clear that we still need food and clothing to live. And we certainly should help others to have those things. And he is not saying that we cannot enjoy life in the here and now.

He makes that clear earlier in 1 Timothy 4 verse 1 to 5, where he says those who teach that we cannot enjoy good food or even marriage are from Satan.

At the end of 1 Timothy, he even addresses rich Christians. So clearly he thinks that some Christians will be rich materially. and there is nothing wrong with that.

[30 : 14] But he is saying what we need is the perspective of Job. Now, that's who Paul is more or less thinking of when he says verse 7.

Now, Job, of course, was someone who both had everything and lost everything. And yet, Job could say this on the screen. These are famous words. Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart.

The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. May the name of the Lord be praised. And when we can say those words of Job, then we have found great gain.

Because here is Job's secret. He knew that every good thing he had was not his by right. it was all a gift from God.

And it is up to him whether we have them or not, and how long we have them for. And the truth, which I think Job recognized, is that in the end, all those things, whether it's possessions, or appreciation, or some achievement, they all have an expiry date, a use-by date.

[31 : 42] That date is the day you die. You have no use for them after that. But a relationship and a walk with Christ, that never expires.

That we can take beyond the grave. And there is no greater treasure than that. And so today, will we pursue what is truly gain?

Will we commit to pursuing a closer walk with Christ, while loosening our grip on things that cannot make us content forever? forever? You see, this doesn't come automatically.

That's the point of the other Bible reading we had this morning, from 1 Timothy 4 7-10. Paul says to Timothy 4-7, to have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives tales, rather, train yourself to be godly.

In other words, if we want to pursue godliness, we need to get off the metaphorical couch and into the spiritual gym, so to speak.

[33 : 01] I know that in our congregation, we have lots of talented people. Some of you are talented athletes, some of you are talented musicians, some of you are talented artists and bakers, but the one thing I'm sure all of you did to hone your skills was to practice.

you trained, you saw its value, and so you invested time and energy. And when you finished that marathon, or completed that particularly challenging musical piece, or you put the finishing touches on your artwork, or on that tiramisu, you were so glad you did.

Paul says that's what training for godliness is like. It's just that it's even more valuable. It's good for the future.

In fact, it's good for eternity. But don't miss this, it is good for the present as well. For it shows that your hope is in the living God, and that will bring you meaning, purpose, focus.

So today, pursue godliness, pursue Christ, pursue what is truly gain. And just like how keeping up your fitness is an ongoing thing, so it is with godliness, it is a continual process.

[34 : 45] Now, what might that look like for you? It wouldn't look exactly the same from person to person, just like in personal training. You know, some people need to work on their cardio, some people need to work on their balance, some people need to work on their core strength, and it's the same spiritually.

And so it's good to prayerfully figure out what you need to work on, and to ask your brothers and sisters in Christ what they think too. But as we end, let me briefly offer a few possible areas for your training to focus on.

For some of you, knowing Christ and walking with Christ might simply mean being serious about knowing his word better. There is no way we can know Jesus more without deepening our grasp of the Bible.

It is impossible. people. So what does pursuing what is gain look like for you? It might mean thinking intentionally through your Bible reading habits.

It might mean signing up for a Bible overview class. It might mean joining a Bible study group where you can benefit from the wisdom of others.

[36 : 05] It might mean borrowing a good book from the library. it might mean listening to a podcast from a reliable faithful teacher on your way to work. Now for some of you, that is not so much the issue.

Your Bible knowledge is decent. And instead, knowing Christ and walking with Christ for you in 2024, it's actually more about being serious about simply obeying the word.

So for example, if Reverend Wilston encouraged us last week to plan with God in mind, will we actually do that? Or have we forgotten what he encouraged us to do already?

This year, there is going to be quite a lot of long weekends with many public holidays falling on Mondays. Will we see all those weekends as just an opportunity to go off to makan angin?

Or will we put more thought into how those weekends can be used for the Lord? Now I'm not saying that we cannot have holidays, but I am encouraging us not to simply go on autopilot.

[37 : 26] Or next week, we will consider the use of our money. And perhaps what I say next week is not new for you. You've already heard similar teaching. But for you to pursue gain this year means actually surrendering your use of your money to the Lord and using it in the way he asked you to.

Or it could be some other area, learning to grow in self-control in your use of digital technologies, showing kindness to others. Now the Lord knows best.

So ask him to show you. God will and perhaps for some of you, knowing Christ and walking with Christ might mean stepping up to serve his body.

It's to give up some opportunities in the wider world so that you can be freed up to serve your brothers and sisters in Christ instead and to be content with that.

could be in some official capacity. There's always our AV team, ushering, social concerns team, etc. Or it could be informally.

[38 : 37] As you check in on someone who is unwell, you're quietly tidying up some corner of the church that needs tidying. Lots of things we could do. Now that is not an exhaustive list, I'm sure.

But don't leave today without considering how you might pursue godliness without deliberating on how you want to walk with Christ.

And if you are someone who has been thinking of leaving the gospel-centered and Jesus-focused path, then hear God's word today. Godliness with contentment is great gain.

greater than any alternative. So, go ahead, pursue what is gain.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, I pray that we will hear your word today.

[39 : 47] We will truly hear it. We will take it to heart. God, please soften our hearts today so that we would take on board what you have just said to us.

And we pray, Lord, that we would really wrestle with 1 Timothy 6 verse 6, that by your Holy Spirit, you will bring conviction to our hearts that godliness with contentment is truly great gain.

God, and so Father, help us to keep looking to Jesus. Help us to dwell on his beauty, on his excellencies, on how good he is, so that we can be ever more convinced, and that we will continue to take this path.

We will pursue this with all our hearts. So, give us what we need, strengthen us for the year ahead. May we pursue what you tell us is gain.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.