

Taking Hold of the Life That Really Is Life

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ—the Life that really is life. Amen.

There are some things that are much easier to pick up than they are to put down. Some of us are old enough to remember the Lay's potato chip commercial with the tagline, "Bet ya can't eat just one." It was a dare! I'd tell myself, "I'll just have a few." Before long, my hand was reaching all the way to the bottom of the bag. Somebody had eaten all the chips—and somehow, that somebody was me!

(SLIDE) The same can be true of worries, grudges, fears—and possessions. We think we're holding them, but before long, if we're not careful, they begin holding us. I'm probably not the only one with a sticky heart. That's part of the concern behind Paul's words to Timothy: "There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment." Paul warns that the desire to become rich can trap people in harmful desires. Please notice: Paul does not say that money itself is evil. The verse is often misquoted—even by my beloved rock band Pink Floyd, who famously sang in their song *Money* that money is "the root of all evil today." Sorry, Pink Floyd, but Paul didn't quite say that! Paul says: "The **love of money** is a root of all kinds of evil." Money is a tool. It can support families, feed hungry neighbors, and strengthen the mission of Christ's Church. The trouble begins when money stops being something we use and becomes something we trust—when we expect it to provide the security, identity, and life that only God can give.

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(SLIDE) Money is not the Life of the World. **Jesus is the Life of the World.** And yet we sometimes begin to believe that enough money can protect us from every danger, every loss, every uncertainty. We begin to believe that if we can just accumulate enough, then maybe we can finally be secure. Here's the bad news... Wealth is uncertain. Markets rise and fall. Crops flourish and fail. Machinery breaks. Medical bills arrive. Storms come through. Circumstances change. Paul reminds us we brought nothing into this world, and we will take nothing out of it. Then he calls us away from that pursuit of false security and invites us to something better: "Take hold of the life that really is life." That is such an interesting phrase. **The life that really is life.** It suggests it is possible to be alive without truly living. We can go through our routines, pay the bills, complete our chores, check our phones, and fall asleep at night—and somehow miss the life God is giving us. We can fill our closets, garages, sheds, barns, and basements and still feel as though something is missing. I'm a pro at this. I own well over twenty-five pairs of shoes! We can spend our lives accumulating things and still miss the gifts God has already placed right in front of us.

Paul describes another way. He tells Timothy: "Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness." Notice what's absent from that list. Paul does not say to pursue more possessions, a bigger house, or the admiration of others. He says to pursue faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. Those are

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treasures that can't be stored in a bank account, but they are the treasures that make life worth living.

(SLIDE) Yet even here, we need to be careful. Christianity is not simply a program for becoming nicer, more contented, and more generous people. Paul is not giving Timothy a list of spiritual achievements by which he can earn eternal life. He tells Timothy: “Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.” Eternal life is not something Timothy manufactures. It's something to which God has called him. Eternal life is a gift and it's not merely an endless number of years added to our existence after we die. Eternal life is life in communion with God. It begins now because Jesus Christ is present now. Jesus doesn't merely teach us how to find life. Jesus **is** the Life. Jesus doesn't simply point us toward eternal life. Jesus **is** eternal life standing among us. He is the Bread of Life. The Light of the World. The Good Shepherd. The Resurrection and the Life. **Jesus is the Life of the World.** And that means the life that really is life is not found by clutching more tightly to the things we possess. It is found by being held by Jesus.

There is a difference between a clenched fist and an open hand. A clenched fist can hold tightly to money, possessions, or even a grudge. But a clenched fist cannot receive a gift. To hold another person's hand, our hand must open. To help someone who has fallen, our hand must open. And to receive the bread of Holy Communion, our hand must open. We do not take hold of eternal life by tightening

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our grip. **We take hold of eternal life because Christ first takes hold of us.** He takes hold of us in Holy Baptism and says, “You are mine.” He takes hold of us when we wander and calls us home. He takes hold of us when our plans collapse and reminds us that our future rests in his hands. He takes hold of us when death draws near and promises that nothing—not even death—can separate us from his love. Look at Jesus on the cross. His hands are not clenched around possessions. His hands are opened wide for the life of the world. He does not save himself. He gives himself. He does not store up treasure for his own protection. He pours himself out for sinners. He gives his body and sheds his blood. He enters our poverty, bears our sin, and suffers our death. And then God raises him from the grave, revealing that the life given away in love is the life that death cannot destroy.

(**SLIDE**) Paul tells Timothy to: “Fight the good fight of the faith.” This is not a fight against other people. It’s the daily struggle against everything that tries to convince us that something other than Jesus can give us life. It’s the struggle against fear that says, “There will never be enough.” Against envy that says, “I can’t be happy until I have what someone else has.” Against the temptation to believe our money, possessions, accomplishments, or reputation can save us.

The good news is that Jesus has already won the decisive victory. Christ has defeated sin. Christ has conquered death. Christ has risen. And because Christ

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lives, the life that really is life is already ours. Paul turns directly toward those who have wealth. He does not tell them they must throw everything away. He tells them not to become haughty and not to place their hope in uncertain riches. Instead, they are to place their hope: “In God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.” That little phrase matters. **For our enjoyment.** Sometimes we Lutherans can forget God actually desires us to experience real joy. God is not opposed to joy. The sin is not enjoying God’s gifts. The sin is forgetting the Giver. Contentment does not mean that we stop planning or preparing for tomorrow. It means we can receive today as God’s gift without believing our lives depend entirely upon what we accumulate. Contentment is not saying, “I have everything I have ever wanted.” Contentment is saying: **“Because Christ is with me, I have what I most deeply need.”** (SLIDE) And when we recognize everything is gift, generosity begins to grow. Paul says God’s people are to: “Do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share.” The world measures wealth by what we keep. God measures richness by the love we give. A pantry stocked with food is a blessing, but food shared with a hungry family becomes holy generosity. A church building is a blessing, but a church opened to neighbors, children, grieving families, and those who need a place of welcome becomes a living witness to Christ. A phone call to someone who is lonely. A prayer offered beside a hospital bed. A child taught that Jesus loves them. A bag

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of groceries handed to a neighbor. These may not look like riches to the world, but they are treasures of the kingdom.

(SLIDE) In a few moments, we will come to the Lord's Table. We will not come with clenched fists, trying to prove we've earned a place. We come with empty, open hands. Into those empty hands Christ places his very body and His blood. "The body of Christ, given for you." "The blood of Christ, shed for you." Here is the life that really is life. Not something purchased. Not something achieved. Not something reserved for the wealthy, powerful, or successful. Jesus, the Life of the World, gives himself freely to us. He fills our empty hands with mercy. He fills our troubled hearts with forgiveness. He fills our uncertain future with hope. And then he sends us back into the world with our hands still open—Open to serve. Open to give. Open to welcome. Open to receive each new day as a gift.

Lord God, loosen our grip on those things that promise life but cannot deliver it. Let us place our hope in the living God where we are free to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share. Above all, Lord, let us take hold of Jesus Christ—because he has already taken hold of us and filled us with His love. For Jesus Christ is the Life of the World and in him, is the life that really is life. Amen.