

Wealth and Godliness in Ministry: A Biblical-Theological Analysis of 1 Timothy 6:6–21

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a biblical-theological analysis of 1 Timothy 6:6–21 with a focus on the ethical and spiritual challenges posed by wealth in the context of Christian ministry. The study investigates the apostle Paul's exhortation to Timothy concerning godliness, contentment, and the perils of materialism within the early Christian community. Through a close exegetical reading of the text, supported by historical-contextual insights and relevant Greek lexical analysis, the paper explores how the passage delineates the contrast between true spiritual wealth and the corrupting influence of greed. The research highlights Paul's call for ministers to pursue righteousness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness while maintaining a life free from the love of money. This study contributes to contemporary theological discourse on pastoral integrity, offering critical implications for ethical leadership, especially in ecclesial settings prone to commodification and spiritual compromise.

Keywords: 1 Timothy 6, biblical ethics, ministry, wealth, contentment, Pauline theology, pastoral integrity.

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INTRODUCTION

The First Letter to Timothy, together with Second Timothy and Titus, is known as the Pastoral Epistles. The term "pastoral" was first introduced by David Nicolaus Berdot in 1703 and later popularized by Paul Anton in 1726 to describe the nature of these letters, which offer guidance to individuals entrusted with pastoral responsibilities over congregations (Guthrie, 2009, p. 19). These letters were addressed to Timothy and Titus two of Paul's trusted co-workers to instruct them in ecclesiastical leadership and the handling of false teachings. Timothy, in particular, was entrusted with leading the church in Ephesus amid complex theological and ethical challenges.

Traditionally, the Pastoral Epistles have been attributed to the Apostle Paul. However, many modern scholars have questioned this attribution, pointing to notable differences in vocabulary, literary style, and the more developed ecclesiastical structure portrayed in these letters compared to Paul's undisputed writings (Brown, 1997; Harris, 1985). Some scholars propose that the letters were possibly composed by a disciple of Paul after his death in order to expand

on Pauline theology within the context of a growing church. Others, however, continue to support Pauline authorship, citing the possible use of a secretary (*amanuensis*) and differences in context and purpose as plausible explanations (Johnson, 2001).

Previous research has largely focused on the authenticity of the letters and the development of church structure but has often overlooked the specific pastoral context faced by Timothy from both historical and theological perspectives. In particular, little attention has been given to exploring how the challenges of Timothy's ministry can inform relevant leadership principles for today's church leaders. What challenges did Timothy face in his ministry in Ephesus according to 1 Timothy? How does the First Letter to Timothy shape a paradigm of pastoral leadership relevant to the modern church?

This study aims to examine the ministerial challenges faced by Timothy as recorded in 1 Timothy and to evaluate pastoral leadership principles that can be contextually applied in contemporary church ministry. The scholarly contribution of this research lies in its integrative approach, combining historical-biblical study with practical pastoral application. It seeks to bridge the gap between the interpretation of ancient texts and the present needs of the church in forming leadership rooted in integrity, faithfulness, and doctrinal vigilance, using Timothy's experience as a contextual and applicable case study.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a biblical study method to explore the concept of true wealth within the framework of Christian ministry, as taught in 1 Timothy 6:6–21. The methodology includes an examination of the historical and social context of the First Letter to Timothy, including the condition of the early church community and the specific challenges faced by Timothy as a young leader in the congregation. The study analyzes the structure of the text and key terms in the passage to uncover Paul's intended message more deeply. Furthermore, the theological meaning of the pericope is analyzed in relation to broader New Testament teachings on godliness, wealth, and the calling to ministry (Sitompul & Beyer, 1977, p. 382).

The results of the interpretation are then reflected upon in the context of the contemporary Christian community, so that the message of 1 Timothy 6:6–21 can be practically applied in daily life and ministry. Through this method, it is expected that the spiritual and ethical values found in the text may be meaningfully applied to face the challenges of modern-day Christian service. Thus, the implied message in the text can be better understood and implemented in everyday Christian living (Labobar, 2021, p. 5).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Wealth/Riches

For Christians, wealth is not inherently evil but rather a potential opportunity for godly service. While it is not the highest value in life, wealth can be used for good. The Bible presents many examples of wealthy individuals whose prosperity was viewed positively. For instance, Solomon's life was marked by great riches, Abraham is described as very wealthy in livestock, silver, and gold (Gen. 13:2), and Job, though he suffered greatly, was later blessed by God with twice as much wealth as before (Job 42:10).

However, Scripture consistently teaches that wealth should not take precedence over virtues such as the fear of the Lord, wisdom, knowledge, understanding, integrity, humility, righteousness, and peace (Elwell, 1984). The biblical text in 1 Timothy 6:6–21 addresses the possession of material things land, livestock, money, and precious

metals and the danger of overvaluing them. Overemphasis on material wealth can distort one's priorities and weaken one's devotion to God (Brand, Draper, & England, 2003).

In the New Testament, wealth is often presented in the context of generosity toward the poor (2 Cor. 8:8–10). Yet, wealth can also become a spiritual hindrance if it leads to pride, injustice, or detachment from God's purposes (Browning, 2009). The biblical perspective affirms that all wealth originates from God, and therefore human beings bear responsibility in managing it according to God's will. This is why Jesus emphasized the blessedness of the poor, not because poverty is inherently virtuous, but because wealth often tempts people to neglect their duty of sharing with others (Achteimeier, 1985).

Thus, Jesus taught that true wealth is ultimately spiritual marked by faith, generosity, and concern for others (Rom. 15:26–27). Material wealth should serve eternal purposes (1 Tim. 6:5–6), not become a source of pride or destruction (1 Tim. 6:17–19).

Money

In the Old Testament era, wealth was measured through land, livestock, and agricultural produce. Early economic systems relied on bartering rather than coinage (Gen. 12:16), and tribute payments were made in livestock (2 Kgs. 3:4). Worshippers brought offerings such as grain, oil, or wine as tithes (Deut. 14:22–23; Cloud, 2016).

Biblical references to money often indicate value or price. For example, after childbirth, women were instructed to bring a lamb and a bird as an offering, or two birds if unable to afford a lamb (Lev. 12:6–8). The "temple tax" was a standard part of religious and national obligations in ancient Israel (2 Kgs. 23:35). The Hebrew word for money, *kesef*, literally means silver, which was more commonly used than gold due to the latter's importation from Egypt or Anatolia (Achteimeier et al., 1996).

By the time of the New Testament, money had evolved into a more formalized medium of exchange. Roman coinage, such as the denarius (often translated as "penny" or "pence" in English Bibles), was in common use (Matt. 20:2–13; Mark 6:37; Luke 10:35). The denarius was a silver coin, considered equivalent to a day's wage for a Roman laborer (Cloud, 2016). Herod the Great even minted his own coins with Greek inscriptions such as *Herodou Basileos* ("of King Herod") and established mints in Jerusalem and Tiberias (Longman, Enns, & Strauss, 2013)

Roman procurators and other officials also issued local coinage to supplement the imperial currency, much of which came from Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch. Jewish coin production began in earnest during the Maccabean revolt in the second century BCE, when the Hasmoneans gained control of Judea.

Coins are valuable archaeological tools, used to date stratigraphic layers at excavation sites. Unlike modern coins, biblical-era coins did not bear numerical dates but featured the name of the ruling authority and religious symbols. Each coin carries its own historical context and contributes to our understanding of biblical-era Jewish and early Christian communities (Achteimeier et al., 1996).

Introduction to the Book of 1 Timothy

The First Epistle to Timothy provides guidance for church leaders and aims to teach sound doctrine while correcting those who spread false teachings in Ephesus. The letter opens with a command for Timothy to remain faithful and to rebuke those who preach different doctrines (1 Tim. 1:3–4). The literary style of 1 Timothy is instructional, resembling the form of a Hellenistic mandate letter, in which a superior issues directives to a subordinate. The letter flows in a dialogical manner, offering both positive and negative counsel. As a mandate letter,

1 Timothy serves as a guide for leading the church in Ephesus. This shows that 1 Timothy is a serious letter addressing urgent issues within the church, and it serves as a framework for Timothy to follow (Zehr, 2010, p. 28).

This epistle was written so that Timothy might instruct believers on how they should conduct themselves in the household of God. Of course, the "household of God" does not refer to a physical structure, but to the collective body of believers on earth. More specifically, Timothy is reminded that he is a "man of God," belonging to God (1 Tim. 6:11). Timothy knew this was no ordinary title, and even among believers, few would be qualified to bear it. This designation was intended to motivate Timothy further in his sacred calling (de Koning, 2016, p. 11).

The author of the letter also portrays himself both as a servant and an apostle of Jesus Christ. Despite being in prison, he acknowledges the great responsibility he still bears. His apostleship is based on a "command" and "will" of God. He also refers to himself as a "friend" and "teacher" of Timothy using more intimate language such as "my true son in the faith" and "my beloved child." The purpose of this personal tone is to ensure the Gospel ministry continues effectively. The message of Christ, which had already reached regions such as Rome, Corinth, Antioch, and Ephesus, needed to be carried further even to the most remote areas (Stott, 1996, pp. 9–10).

The letter was written more for the benefit of others than for Timothy himself, though it does not deny that the author also aimed to teach and correct Timothy. This intent arises from Timothy's background he was still relatively young and lacked authority to instruct or admonish older individuals. Timothy found himself surrounded by people of influence, stubbornness, false teachers, and those fixated on the pursuit of wealth. Therefore, this epistle served as a guide for how Timothy should deal with and minister to such individuals. Specifically, Timothy is advised to teach the proper role and purpose of wealth. This instruction aims to ensure that Timothy remains focused and that he guides the wealthy in the congregation regarding the proper use of their material possessions (Calvin & Pringle, 2006, pp. 7–8).

Both 1 and 2 Timothy address Timothy's youth. If Paul first brought Timothy into ministry when he was around 17 or 18 years old, then at the time this letter was written, Timothy would have been approximately 30. This context helps explain why Timothy was entrusted with such significant responsibilities while also being warned of the many traps, temptations, and difficulties that could undermine the ministries of many young servants. These concerns are emphasized especially in 1 Timothy 4:12, where Timothy is urged to live in a way that prevents others from looking down on him because of his youth (Stam, 1983, pp. 16–17).

Biblical Text Analysis: 1 Timothy 6:6–21

General Context of the Pericope

This pericope constitutes the concluding section of the First Epistle to Timothy. It emphasizes the dangers of the love of money and exhorts believers especially church leader to pursue genuine spiritual life. Paul offers his final exhortation to Timothy, underlining the importance of godliness, integrity, and the avoidance of worldly wealth, which can ensnare one's faith.

Greek Language and Sentence Structure Analysis

***Eusebeia* (εὐσέβεια) – Godliness**

The term *eusebeia* literally means "godliness" or "devotion to God." Within the context of the Pastoral Epistles, it does not merely refer to external religious behavior but points to a life marked by perseverance, reverence for God, and consistent practice of faith (Towner, 2006, p. 397).

In 1 Timothy 6:6, Paul writes:

“Ἔστιν δὲ πορισμὸς μέγας ἢ εὐσέβεια μετὰ αὐταρκειάς.”

"But godliness with contentment is great gain."

The construction of this sentence implies that true godliness is not limited to spiritual activities but is deeply connected to an inner disposition toward the material world namely, a life of contentment (*autarkeia*). Here, *eusebeia* becomes a spiritual value that leads one away from greed and toward disciplined devotion.

Ploutos (πλοῦτος) – Wealth

The word *ploutos* denotes wealth or riches. It is used with both negative and cautious connotations in verses 9 and 17. Verse 9 states: “οἱ δὲ βουλόμενοι πλουτεῖν ἐμπίπτουσιν εἰς πειρασμὸν...” *"Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation..."*

Meanwhile, verse 17 warns: “τοῖς πλουσίοις ἐν τῷ νῦν αἰῶνι...” *"To those who are rich in this present age..."*

Paul's usage of this term reflects his warning against the desire to be rich, which he identifies as a potential source of spiritual downfall. Wealth itself is not portrayed as inherently sinful; the danger lies in dependence on it (cf. v. 10 – *philarguria*, the love of money).

Grammatical and Rhetorical Emphases

The text is saturated with imperative structures and rhetorical contrasts.

In verse 11: “Σὺ δέ, ὃ ἄνθρωπε Θεοῦ, ταῦτα φεῦγε...” *"But you, man of God, flee from all this..."*

The use of the direct command (*pheuge* – "flee") distinguishes Timothy from those ensnared by materialism.

In verse 12: “ἀγωνίζου τὸν καλὸν ἀγῶνα τῆς πίστεως...” *"Fight the good fight of the faith..."*

This employs the active imperative form (*agonizou*), evoking a militant tone and moral urgency.

Paul also uses repetition and parallelism, especially in verses 17–19, to emphasize the danger of placing hope in wealth and the call to "be rich in good works" (*ploutein en ergois kalois*).

The closing verses (20–21) reinforce a pastoral burden through an urgent appeal:

"Guard what has been entrusted to you" (phylaxon tēn parathēkēn), and warn against "empty chatter and the contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge."

Critical Understanding and Theological Application

This passage presents a sharp critique of prosperity theology and the consumerist lifestyle that can infiltrate church life. Paul does not condemn wealth per se but insists that it must not become the central orientation of one's life. Authentic godliness (*eusebeia*) involves living in right relationship with God, accompanied by self-mastery over material desires. This text is profoundly relevant for the modern church, which often grapples with the allure of financial success and status. Churches and their leaders must rearticulate Paul's teaching as a prophetic critique of economic idolatry and the misuse of ministry for personal gain.

The Ethical Dimension and Paul's Teachings on Wealth

In his epistles, the Apostle Paul does not develop a systematic "theology of wealth," yet he offers substantial ethical and theological counsel regarding the use of possessions and attitudes toward riches. One of the most prominent passages on this topic is found in 1 Timothy 6:6–10, 17–19. Paul teaches that wealth is not inherently evil; rather, it is the love of money that is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:10).

Paul issues a strong warning against greed and the desire to become rich. He notes that those who want to get rich fall into temptation, a trap, and many harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction (1 Tim. 6:9).

This underscores a significant ethical dimension in Paul's teachings: the stewardship of possessions must be grounded in godliness, humility, and love for others not in selfish ambition. In this context, wealth becomes a moral and spiritual test rather than the goal of life. Wealth is not judged by its quantity but by how it is used for good and for service (cf. 2 Cor. 8–9). Paul highlights communal solidarity and generosity as tangible expressions of faith working through love (Gal. 5:6; 2 Cor. 9:7–8).

“Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Tim. 6:17, NIV).

Paul's Ethical and Theological Values on Wealth and Godliness

Paul grounds ethical behavior in a theological foundation: God, as the giver of all things, demands moral responsibility in how humans manage their possessions. Among the key ethical and theological values Paul emphasizes are:

Godliness with contentment (*eusebeia meta autarkeia*): Paul asserts that “godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Tim. 6:6). In Paul's thought, godliness (*eusebeia*) refers to a life oriented toward God, one that permeates all areas of life, including the use of material resources. Dependence on God, not on wealth: In 1 Timothy 6:17, Paul advises the wealthy not to rely on their riches but on God. This demonstrates that wealth must not become the ultimate source of identity or security. Generosity and good deeds: Paul encourages the wealthy to be “rich in good works, generous, and ready to share” (1 Tim. 6:18). Such actions are not only expressions of love but also evidence of a living faith. As Witherington (2006) observes, Paul's economic ethics are rooted in the faith community and social solidarity, where wealth is understood as a means for service and the care of the body of Christ—not for personal indulgence: “Paul is not against wealth per se, but he is strongly critical of greed and the misuse of wealth, especially when it leads to the neglect of others in the Christian community” (Witherington, 2006, p. 359).

The Concept of “True Gain” in the Life of Faith

Paul's concept of “true gain” (Greek: *κέρδος*) does not lie in material accumulation but in godliness that yields contentment (1 Tim. 6:6). This is a direct critique of materialistic values and highlights a spirituality that profoundly shapes one's attitude toward life. In Philippians 3:7–8, Paul declares that all things he once regarded as gain, he now considers loss because of his relationship with Christ. For Paul, true profit is found in fellowship with Christ, not in worldly accomplishments: “But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ” (Phil. 3:7, NIV). In this light, true wealth cannot be measured in earthly terms but in eternal value. Paul integrates Jesus' teaching on “storing up treasures in heaven” (Matt. 6:19–21) with the practical life of the Christian community, where mutual support is paramount. Spiritual assets faith, hope, and love are of greater worth than material possessions.

As Hays (1996) explains, Paul's ethics are not legalistic but focus on heart transformation and concrete action, with Christ as the ultimate model of sacrificial generosity: “For Paul, the values of the kingdom overturn conventional assessments of gain and loss; the ultimate ‘profit’ is Christ himself” (Hays, 1996, p. 203).

Critical Analysis

Paul rejects the notion that wealth is a sign of divine favor or piety a view common in Roman culture and echoed in some strands of contemporary theology. He strongly criticizes teachings that blend godliness with financial motives (1 Tim. 6:5), a critique that remains relevant in addressing modern “prosperity theology.”

Paul’s ethics challenge modern capitalist and consumerist societies by offering a paradigm that views wealth through the lens of service, empowerment of the poor, and self-control. He affirms that a life oriented toward Christ and love for neighbor is more important than the accumulation of possessions.

CONCLUSION

In a Wealth and the possession of wealth are not inherently negative or morally wrong, as long as they are framed within a proper theological and ethical understanding. The critical issue lies not in the material existence of wealth, but in the human attitude toward it and the purpose for which it is sought and used. If wealth is perceived merely as material possession an end in itself it easily becomes a source of idolatry, fostering greed, pride, and spiritual blindness. This instrumental view of wealth, detached from divine purpose, aligns with Paul’s warning in 1 Timothy 6:9–10, where the pursuit of riches leads to spiritual ruin.

However, a different paradigm emerges when wealth is viewed theologically as a blessing entrusted by God. In this framework, wealth is not a possession to be hoarded, but a resource to be stewarded. It becomes a means of glorifying God, enabling acts of generosity, justice, and mercy. Paul’s exhortations to the wealthy in 1 Timothy 6:17–19 do not command them to abandon their wealth but to use it responsibly: to do good, to be rich in good works, and to be generous and willing to share. This implies that wealth, when rightly oriented, serves a redemptive function within the Christian community.

Such a view challenges simplistic dichotomies between wealth and piety. Possessing wealth even pursuing it through honest labor or enterprise is not intrinsically sinful. The decisive factor is whether wealth is subordinated to the kingdom of God or elevated above it. For Paul, wealth is never an end, but always a means: it must be placed under the lordship of Christ and integrated into a life of faith, love, and service.

This insight has practical implications, particularly for those in positions of spiritual leadership. Ministers and church workers are not categorically excluded from the economic realities of life, nor are they forbidden from possessing wealth. What is essential is that they, like all believers, maintain a critical and disciplined approach to wealth rejecting its idolatrous allure while embracing its potential for ministry and mutual care.

Therefore, the ethical problem is not in having wealth, but in how it is acquired, perceived, and deployed. A theological view that recognizes wealth as a divine entrustment reframes the conversation: it affirms that believers including pastors and leaders—can seek economic well-being, provided that their hearts remain anchored in contentment, humility, and the mission of God.

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