

Money and the love of it (1 Timothy 6:6-19)

Money isn't always bad. But the lust for riches is like an official invitation for evil.

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When we think of scripture's oral traditions, we often think of ancient history, the verbal stories passed from person to person, generation to generation, town to town—stories that would one day be written down and included in what we call the Bible. But I'm also fascinated by our ongoing oral traditions, the games of telephone we play that ever so subtly shift the translations and meanings of these ancient speeches turned text (turned speech).

And so it came to pass that when I was a child, I most often heard 1 Timothy 6:10a paraphrased as “Money is the root of all evil,” which is a substantive if slight truncation of the NRSVUE's statement that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.” Why does it matter? Well, there may also be wisdom to glean from pondering the difference between something being “the root of all evil” and being “a root of all kinds of evil,” but I am more interested now in the location of evil's root: Is it money itself, or the love of (“lust for” in Eugene Peterson's *The Message* paraphrase) money?

I think things go a little haywire when we say that money itself is the corrupted root. I have witnessed countless times when a person with a surplus of money uses it to meet an urgent need for another who is struggling financially; I've also experienced each end of this a few times myself. I have seen, and benefited from, generous donations that fund and make possible important, at times life-saving, ministries. Even taxes, perhaps the most despised money transactions, allow societies to care for their sick, poor, and disabled.

It seems like it won't do to vilify money itself. We should attend to what the verse is really saying: the love of money, the lust for riches, the desire to be wealthy—these things are like official invitations for evil. They invite greed, envy, and theft to the pool party, and 1 Timothy warns us that these evils will RSVP yes and go on to “plunge people into ruin and destruction.”

There are two levels at which we can and must address evil. There is the fruit, the visible practices that cause harm, break relationship, or enforce injustice. When it comes to loving money, these visible symptoms might include hoarding wealth, underpaying employees, or voting for politicians who will reify and reinforce income inequality. Sometimes other people's fruit is not so easy to evaluate; an employee agitating for better pay, working conditions, or transparency could be seen as loving money, or she might just love justice.

Hopefully, though, the roots in our own heart are more available for our scrutiny. If I am doing something with my money, or speaking about my money, or looking at my bank account statements, I alone have access to the

feelings and desires that move within me. Do I yearn for riches, for the status or security that a mountain of gold coins might bring me? Or when I look inside do I see “godliness combined with contentment”?

Ideally, our visible fruit and inner desires will align with clarity in this life-giving direction. Just as the lust for wealth is like a root of evil deeds, so a deep-seated contentment moves us to be “rich in good works, generous, and ready to share.” This play on words—be rich in good deeds, not money—may not be the Bible’s cleverest moment, but it is interesting. What does a richness in generosity have in common with a richness in wealth?

One possible answer is plentitude and security. Money, when concentrated in one place, leads to more money. Due to the nature of investments and returns, the rich get richer. It is the same way with compassion: the experience of helping another in the context of a relationship buoys us to do the same again. The generous get generouser.