



A BLAZING FIRE

There are few things I enjoy more than sitting in front of a blazing fire on a snowy winter day. I often find myself almost hypnotized as I gaze at the flames dancing wildly before me. But as relaxing as this comforting winter scene is, I cannot help but be reminded of how material wealth is much like a blazing fire. Properly handled, the fire can cook and warm. Improperly handled, it can burn and destroy. The same fire, depending on what we choose to do with it, can lead to two entirely different outcomes—one very good, the other very bad.

Nowhere in Scripture is this contrast more clearly articulated than in chapter six of Paul's first letter to Timothy. Look at some of the key excerpts from this chapter:

*But those who want to get rich fall into **temptation** and a **snare** and many **foolish and harmful desires** which plunge men into **ruin** and **destruction**. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of **evil**, and some by longing for it have **wandered** away from the faith and pierced themselves with many **griefs**. But **flee** from these things, you man of God...Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be **conceited** or to **fix their hope** on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to **do good**, to be **rich in good works**, to be **generous** and **ready to share**, storing up for themselves the treasure of a **good foundation** for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is **life indeed** (1 Timothy 6:9-11, 17-19, NASB; emphasis added).*

The same material possessions that can produce a profoundly destructive outcome both now and for eternity can also produce abundant blessings in both this life and the next. Which outcome we experience is determined solely by our attitude toward them. According to Paul, if we see material possessions as an end in themselves, they will consume us (i.e. burn and destroy). To the contrary, if we see them merely as a means to an end—a way to bless others—they will actually greatly enhance our life (i.e. cook and warm).

Look at the severe words that Paul uses to warn us about what accompanies a life focused on material things. It is what I call the *Terrible Ten*:

1. *temptation* (v. 9)
2. *snare* (v. 9)
3. *foolish and harmful desires* [lusts] (v. 9)
4. *ruin* (v. 9)
5. *destruction* (v. 9)
6. *root of all sorts of evil* (v. 10)
7. *wandering from the faith* (v. 10)
8. *many griefs* (v. 10)
9. *conceited* (v. 17)
10. *fix hope on riches* [instead of God] (v. 17)

Paul is warning us with his *Terrible Ten* that riches improperly pursued and possessed will cause the pursuer to immediately and ultimately lose more than he gains. Alexander Pope seems to echo Paul's warning when he says, "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread." Paul is pulling no punches as he describes the destructive side of materialism, which we often either fail to recognize or simply choose to ignore. The fact is that the larger one builds his fire of possessions, the more dangerous the fire becomes.

Remember that Paul had been rich himself. He had personal knowledge of what he was saying here. Maybe it was the awareness of this dark side of riches that caused Agur to request of the Lord, *Give me neither poverty nor riches; Feed me with the food that is my portion, that I not be full and deny You and say, 'Who is the LORD?' Or that I not be in want and steal, and profane the name of my God.* (Proverbs 30:8b-9) He is saying, "I don't want to handle something that is as physically and spiritually dangerous as material riches."

I suspect that if you are completely honest with yourself, you have seen one or more of these *Terrible Ten* rearing their ugly heads in your life. It is almost impossible to live in such a materialistic culture and not be singed to some extent by the destructive flames of materialism.

Paul states that this out-of-control pursuit of riches is extremely dangerous. He instructs us how to avoid its destructive consequences with one simple word: *flee* (v. 11). This fire is not something that we can control or be safe around; it is not a fire that will cook and warm. When you see your house on fire, don't wait around to see if it goes out, don't gather up your most precious possessions, don't call for advice on what to do—just *flee!*

Many of us have already accumulated (to one degree or another) an abundance of material possessions, so how exactly are we to *flee*? Thankfully, Paul tells us exactly how to overcome the deadly fires of riches and how to turn certain death into abundant life that will be both an immediate and an eternal blessing. To safely handle this raging fire without getting burned up by it, he instructs us to put on "fireproof gloves" when handling it.

He tells Timothy: *Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed* (6:18-19). His "fireproof gloves" are the gloves of giving. If we handle material things with the fireproof gloves of generosity, they will never burn us.

Rather, we can use them as a source of help, comfort, and blessing to others. What a glorious way to end Paul's sobering teaching on material riches! This destructive fire can be redirected into a good, healthy, and productive purpose. And it is accomplished by sharing our riches with others! Now our material prosperity will bring life and joy to both the giver and the receiver. The fire will no longer burn and destroy; instead, it can now cook and warm—not only for us, but also for all those with whom we share.

Do you know how to put out a blazing campfire? You break up the fire by spreading out the logs. In so doing, the whole fire cools down and rather quickly dies out. Likewise, when you start spreading out the "logs" of your material possessions by giving them to others, the consuming fire of materialism is cooled and is brought under control, no longer scorching all who come near. The more "fuel" you share with others, the cooler the flame of materialism within you.

Possibly the best two words that Paul uses in all his writings are his last two words on this topic: *life indeed*. Who wouldn't want *life indeed*? And as is the case with so much of spiritual life, it is a counter-intuitive reality that *life indeed* is found not in what we *get*, but in what we *give*.

Lord, open our hearts, fit us with fireproof gloves, and compel us to spread around the material blessings You have entrusted to us. This way, may we store up for ourselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future as we take hold of that which is life indeed. Amen.

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