

Stewardship Sermon Series: Earn, Save, Give
“Earn All You Can”
I Kings 3:5-14; Proverbs 2:1-6; Luke 16:1-13
Salem United Methodist Church
September 27, 2015
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There are 89 days until Christmas! For some these words evoke stress and fear as they begin to think of all that needs to be done for this grand celebration while others are excited by this news. If I calculated correctly then it is only 96 days before the start of 2016. For the church that means we begin a new budget year. And this means that we, both as members and participants, in order for the church to remain vital and strong need to reexamine what we have and what God is calling us to give to the mission and ministries of this congregation. So in the fall we usually have a Stewardship Campaign with a sermon series to support it. Today we begin.

This may be the first sermon you have ever heard preached on earning all you can. However, it is not the first sermon to be preached on the subject. John Wesley preached one in 1760 called the “Use of Money.” From this sermon he offered up three imperatives for Christian disciples: “Gain all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can.” Rev. James Harnish, a UM pastor in Tampa, Florida, wrote a book based on Wesley’s statement entitled, *Earn. Save. Give.* Wesley’s stewardship principles and Harnish’s book is the foundation of this year’s Stewardship Sermon Series. Each Sunday we will focus on one of these important aspects of stewardship.

Usually stewardship sermons focus on giving, so why would Wesley begin with earning or saving all one can? For Wesley the use of money was all about wisdom. We don’t talk much about wisdom in our culture. In more ancient cultures wisdom was something to be acquired and honored. Many cultures still see older folk to be wise because of the years of experience. As I look at who we are at Salem, we have a lot of wisdom in this congregation! Biblically speaking though, what is wisdom? It can be defined as a godly understanding of reality. To quote a biblical scholar, Roland Murphy, wisdom “deals with daily human experience in the good world created by God.” Proverbs 2:6 states that God gives us this wisdom. There are books in the Bible that are called Wisdom Literature: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. All these writings are attributed to the wise King Solomon who asked God not for riches, but for discernment between good and evil. God was very pleased with Solomon’s request and granted him wisdom along with riches and honor. Why would God bless him with riches as well as wisdom?

We can find that answer in the parable Jesus told about the dishonest manager. The manager who worked for a rich man is defrauding his boss, or “cooking the books.” He is living a lavish lifestyle with his boss’ money while he makes the accounting look like these are expenses for doing business. When the boss catches him, the manager tries to secure his relationship with his boss’ customers by reducing what they owed his boss. His actions secure his status with the customers at the expense of his boss’ profit. He is a sly guy. The manager is hoping that these customers will help him when he turns to them for assistance. One is expecting Jesus to reprimand such a crooked manager. After all he has stolen from his boss in many different ways and lied about it, yet, Jesus praises him. Why? Because the manager used his head to survive. Jesus did not tell this parable to reiterate honesty. His disciples as good Jews knew the Torah, the books of the Law. They knew right from wrong. In this instance, Jesus is telling them that they are to be wise in using what they have been given. As Eugene Peterson translates Jesus’ words in this passage as, “I want you to be smart in the same way- but for what is right...If you’re honest in small things, you’ll be honest in big things; If you’re crook in small things, you’ll be a crook in big things.” This is the reason that God gave Solomon both wisdom and riches. God was hoping that with wisdom, a godly understanding of human reality, Solomon would use his riches for good. The result? Solomon did to some extent, but later he lost sight of God and used his riches for his own gain. It wasn’t his riches that led to his demise. It was the allure of what his riches could provide for him that led to his downfall. A. W. Tozer, a noted 20th century preacher and Christian writer, wrote in his book, *The Pursuit of God*, “There is within the human heart a touch, fibrous rotten of fallen life whose nature is to possess, always to possess. It covets things with a deep and fierce passion.” This is as true in 2015 as it was in 1947 when Tozer wrote it. Our consumeristic culture makes it difficult for us to be wise with our use of money. We gain or earn all we can so we can spend all we can or spend beyond what we earn. Timothy wrote in his letter, “The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some have wandered away from the faith and have impaled themselves with a lot of pain because they made money their goal” (1 Timothy 6:10 CEB). Timothy does not say that money is evil, but the love of money is. What is important is our perspective of money. Wesley wrote that “money is a gift of God, answering the noblest ends. In the hands of his children it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, [clothes] for the naked. It gives to the traveler and the stranger where to lay his head...a means of health to the sick, of ease to

them that are in pain...eyes to the blind, feet to the lame.” Wesley echoes another one of Jesus’ parables where the nations are judged by how they treated those in need (Matthew 25). Wesley then states that God cares about what we do with what we have been given as he refers to Jesus’ words in this passage of Luke. There is only one love: God or your money. We can’t serve both. For Jesus and Wesley, we are to serve God with the use of our money. How we use our money is how we show our love for God. One spouse says to the other, “Honey, don’t tell me how much you love me, show me you love me by helping around the house.” God is saying, “Don’t tell me you love me. Show me by helping me around my earthly house, making a difference in this world.”

Wesley continues then, we should earn all we can. Some of us are saying, “Yes! That’s me. I want to earn all I can!” Our culture has indoctrinated us into being upwardly mobile, high-achieving, success driven, and consumer-orientated. We want to earn as much as we possibly can so we can live a lavish lifestyle. But this is not what Wesley was thinking about when he made this statement. For Wesley we are to earn all that we can so that we can serve God to the greatest of our ability. And he lists several ways we can do this. One way is through honest work. We are to use the abilities and talents God gives us in our vocations so that we can accomplish God’s purpose for our lives and to help fulfill God’s life-giving purpose in the world. Wesley names this our “calling.” Work is to be a living prayer. We are to earn all we can for a higher purpose, making a difference for God. Wesley challenged the people who were the emerging middle class of the Industrial Revolution in the 1700s to “use all possible diligence in your calling.” He encouraged them that whatever work they could find to do, they were to do it to the best of their ability. They were not to put off for tomorrow what they could do today. They were to work as well as possible and make the best of all that is in their hands. For Wesley this was common sense. His instructions for these industrial workers are still a good work ethic for us today. Work is a gift from God. We are to work with due diligence as we honor God with our work and the money we earn doing it.

Second, we are to gain all we can without hurting ourselves. There is no price tag one can put on one’s health. If we work without proper food, sleep, or exercise we are no good to ourselves, to our family, or at our job. Self-care is vital to doing good work and gaining all you can. Taking Sabbath time to rejuvenate one’s self and reconnect with God is so important in keeping work in perspective. Then we will be in control of our work and not our work controlling us. Many a relationship has disintegrated because one member of that relationship spent too much time working and not enough time to the relationship. Another way we can hurt ourselves is if we are working in what Wesley called “a sinful trade.” He defines this as anything that is contrary to the law of God or the law of the country. He cautions about working in a job where there is cheating or lying. To gain money we must not lose our souls. In the 21st century, what type of jobs would Wesley call “a sinful trade?”

Third, we are to gain all we can without hurting our neighbors. We cannot do this if we are to love our neighbors as Christ instructs us. Wesley uses examples such as ruining our neighbor’s trade in order to advance our own, or enticing a neighbor’s workers to work for us. In the 1700s, the world wasn’t as connected as it is today. When one part of our world over consumes it is usually at the expense of some of the poorest in the world. We who are rich don’t want to hear this. We don’t want to be held accountable for the poor in some country we have never visited. Former President Dwight Eisenhower understood the responsibility of those who have much. He stated, “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed....Under a cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.” In other words, we are to gain money but not at the expense of hurting neighbors at home or around the world.

Fourth, Wesley instructed that we are to earn all we can in ways that honor God. We are not to use our work to please ourselves, but work in a way that pleases God. Wesley asked this question in another sermon called, “The Most Excellent Way,” “For what end do you undertake and follow your worldly business? ‘To provide things necessary for myself and my family.’ It is a good answer as far as it goes; but it does not go far enough...But a Christian may go abundantly farther: His end in all his labour is, to please God; to do, not his own will, but the will of him that sent him into the world, -- for this very purpose, to do the will of God on earth as angels do in heaven. He works for eternity. He ‘labours not for the meat that perisheth,’ (this is the smallest part of his motive) ‘but for that which endureth to everlasting life.’ And is not this ‘a more excellent way?’”

Gaining all that we can is not a sin. How we gain all we can and what we do with what we gain can be according to the Bible and John Wesley. These are words of wisdom- words that deal with our daily human experiences in our good world created by God. So how do you gain all that you can? What do you do with it?

Resources: *Earn. Save. Give. Wesley’s Simple Rules For Money* by James Harnish; “The Use of Money” and “The More Excellent Way” by John Wesley; *The Tree of Life* by Roland Murphy; *God and Your Stuff* by Wesley Willmer; *The Pursuit of God* by A. W. Tozer