

*Stewardship Sermon Series: Earn, Save, Give*  
*“The Wisdom of Giving All You Can”*  
*Salem United Methodist Church*  
*Proverbs 11:24-25; Luke 19:1-10; Luke 21:1-4; I Peter 4:7-11*  
*October 18, 2015*  
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This autumn we have been looking at the John Wesley’s wisdom on the use of money. In a sermon he preached he stated that as Christians we need to be developing a spiritual discipline of earning all we can, saving all we can, and giving all we can. Wesley lived by these three principles. Last week our seminary intern shared with us that no matter how much Wesley earned, he lived a simple life. He saved the remaining money and then found ways to use it to help the poor. In essence, this is his wisdom of giving all you can.

There was a wealthy man. He and his family had money to spend on what they wanted. In addition, the man was able to save and invested his money wisely. While he was contemplating the end of his life, he decided that he didn’t want anyone to have any of his money. After all it was his money. He worked hard for it and saved it. His plan was to take it with him. So he instructed his wife that when he died, she was to liquidate his investments and assets into cash. Then she was to bring all the cash to the funeral director and have the cash placed into the coffin with him. When this wealthy miser died, being a dutiful wife, she did what she was told. Her dead husband’s casket was lined with cash and his body was blanketed with it. Just as they were about to close the casket, the widow asked the funeral director to take all the cash out of the casket and count it. When he told her the total amount, she took the cash, got out her check book, wrote a check for the amount, and placed it in the coffin. Then the widow told the funeral director, “Hopefully he will be able to cash this wherever he goes.”

This story doesn’t tell us what this widow did with the money. We don’t know if she kept it for herself and her family to spend, or if she invested it into something that gave back to the community in her husband’s memory. That is left to our imagination. However, this story is a perfect example of what can happen when we save all we can, and *not* recognize what we have is not ours, but God’s. The Bible, both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, tells us over and over again what we are to do with our wealth. In Deuteronomy 32 Moses reminds the Israelites when they had nothing in the desert, God provided for them. He then warns not to forget God who gave them life when they become well feed and have everything they want in the Promise Land. Moses also reminded them to keep the covenant that God gave the Israelites while they are wandering in the desert. Their part of the covenant was to honor God and care for each other, especially those who had no one to care for them, such as the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant. Later in the Bible, the prophets admonish the people because their wealth has led to idolatry. Instead of giving their gifts to God, they spent the money on themselves, or gave it as gifts to other gods. Then in the New Testament Jesus talked often about what God expects us to do with what we have. In one instance, a rich young man wanted to follow Jesus, but Jesus demanded that he sell his possessions first. The rich young man could not give them up. His possessions meant more to him than following Jesus. In another passage Jesus talks about a man who builds bigger barns. He instructs us to guard against wealth as security; instead we are to trust in God for our security. He makes the point that our wealth can compete for our devotion to God. Our greed for wealth can lead to unscrupulous ways to gain all we can.

In the first Gospel lesson today we have the story of Zacchaeus, the head tax collector. He gained his wealth through deception. As the chief tax collector, he knew the amount of tax Rome expected him to collect. However, he had the authority to set the price of the tax to be collected. All the money collected minus what was owed Rome belonged to the tax collectors. So they were known for scalping from the tax payers. For Zacchaeus as the chief tax collector, he also received a percentage of what his collectors were able to seize from the Roman citizens. The tax collectors were Jews who saw a way to get rich quick off their fellow Jews. They were viewed as traitors. This is why the Jews were outraged that Jesus would have lunch with Zacchaeus, the chief cheat. The text doesn’t tell us if Jesus and Zacchaeus ever had their lunch meeting. It does state, that “Zacchaeus just stood there, a little stunned.” Was just being in the presence of Jesus enough to convict his heart? Enough for Zacchaeus to see who he was, a cheat, a thief? Apparently so, because the next line states that “he stammered apologetically” and announces that he would give half of his income to the poor. He then promises to pay back four times those he cheated. That’s quite a dramatic change of heart. Jesus has that effect on people. Only Jesus can change our hearts when it comes to our relationship with money.

In our second Gospel passage, Jesus applauds giving from the heart. He is in the Temple. Passing the offering plates was not part of their worship. Instead there were thirteen trumpet shaped brass vessels that lined the

wall of the Temple. As people walked by they put their monetary offerings into these vessels. Since there was no paper or plastic money during this time, the coins that were put in them clanged all the way to the bottom. The sound echoed throughout the Temple. Jesus observes those who are well-off, dropping their coins into the offering vessels. Then he sees a poor widow giving all she had, two small coins. They would have been so small that the coins would not have made any noise when they hit the bottom. Jesus is critical of all who gave just their spare change. They wouldn't miss what they gave. Then Jesus applauds the widow who gave her all. She gave all that she had, trusting that God would provide.

Giving our all is a struggle. We may want to, but then there are the bills to pay and college payments, saving for retirement, and we just have to have the latest gadget or dress or new car. Giving our all is a challenge. In fact, we could even call it insane! None of us would think of liquidating all of our assets and give them to the church. But Jesus asks for it all. Jesus wants to know that we see him as more valuable than anything we own. Do we love Jesus more than our possessions? God had a plan for giving which God lays out in the Hebrew Scriptures. God's plan is called the tithe. A tithe is giving just ten cents on the dollar to God. In comparison to Jesus asking for it all, God's plan seems miniscule, yet many still have issues with giving ten percent of their income to God. Then there is the question, "Are we to tithe pre-tax or after-tax?" Do not be legalistic about giving. Give from the heart and not out of obligation. Each of us knows what we give and why. Do we give out of love for what God has done, is doing, and will be doing in our lives both here on earth and in heaven? Or do you give out of obligation? Giving the spare change? We can't fool Jesus. He knows our hearts and what we give before we do.

The congregation at Salem has given to God from the heart for 182 years. Think of all the giving that has occurred in this amount of time. The first congregation built a church in the 1830s across the road. We do not have any details on how much it cost or how it was built. All we have is a picture of it. However, we do have some details about how this church was built. Rev. Dryden was the pastor here in 1910 when the church was built. He wrote a letter in 1942 telling how different members of this congregation not only gave trees to be used for lumber, but cut them down and hauled them to the site. Trees were a commodity. They were a source for heat in the winter. In addition to the trees, one member, John Parsley, gave the land for the new church. The total cost of building the church was \$4000 in 1910 money. Salem only had forty-six members at the time. Each would have given of their time and money to make this church building possible. This was a church built on faith—a faith that God would provide. And God did. These forty-six people were devoted to making sure we have a place to worship today. They didn't give from their left overs, but gave their all so they and future generations could come and worship the Living Christ, grow in faith, and share God's love to all.

This tradition of giving of our talents and money continues to this day. We have many who have spent their money and countless hours behind the scenes to make sure our grounds are well kept, that we have heat or air conditioning depending on the time of year, and that our children are safe. We have people who give of their money and time to serve those in need in a variety of ways. We have people who give generously of their money to make sure we can pay our bills so we have heat to keep us warm and light to read while we worship. We have people who give generously of their money so we can have a spiritual leader and a music leader. For the last seven years we have maintained a Legacy Fund which supplies us with the funds to pay for large maintenance items like furnaces and air conditioning units. Salem, though small, is a generous congregation. We have inherited this from those here at Salem who went before us. As I look at our beautiful stain glassed windows, I give thanks for those who gave the money for them. Our records do not indicate how much they cost, or when they were installed. No matter when they were purchased, they were not inexpensive, but that did not stop ten different families from giving, perhaps even sacrificing, giving something up so we could enjoy their beauty today as we worship. Those who went before us were good stewards of what God gave them. Stewardship, the earning all we can, saving all we can, and giving all we can, is not a part-time job, but a full-time calling for those who follow Jesus.

John Wesley in his sermon, "The Use of Money," stated that in being a wise steward we are to provide for ourselves and our families so we have what we need to keep us healthy and strong. Then he states if there is a surplus "do good to them of the household of faith," which is the church. After that, if there is "an overplus still ... do good unto all.... For all you give is given to God."

**Reflection Questions:** What do you give to God? How do you give to God? And why do you give to God?

**Resources:** *Earn. Save. Give. Wesley's Simple Rules For Money* by James Harnish; "The Use of Money" by John Wesley; *Wealth as Peril and Obligation* by Sondra Wheeler