

Give Thanks: Stewardship
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Montavilla United Methodist Church
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Did you know that John Wesley, the founder of Methodism wrote a sermon on the, "Use of Money"? It's actually my favorite John Wesley sermon, because it's the only comprehensive, practical theology of stewardship I've ever seen which is compassionate towards the poor. The part of our offering statement that we read each week, where we encourage one another to, not give what we don't have, is inspired by this sermon. I thought about just reading you Wesley's sermon, but the way people spoke English in 1870 is different enough from how we speak now, that it's not easy to understand. So I'm going to read you excerpts from Wesley's introduction in his own words, then I'm going to paraphrase the main body of the sermon because I want you to hear how relevant Wesley's sermon on the Use of Money still is for us today.

So here's portions of Wesley's introduction in his own words.

(John Wesley. Sermon 50 "Use Of Money" in The Works of John Wesley, ed. Thomas Jackson via WordsOfWesley.com (Accessed May 11,2020))

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/the-use-of-money-by-john-wesley>

1. Our Lord, having finished the beautiful parable of the Prodigal Son, which he had particularly addressed to those who murmured at his receiving publicans and sinners, adds another relation of a different kind, addressed rather to the children of God. "He said unto his disciples," not so much to the scribes and Pharisees to whom he had been speaking before, -- "There was a certain rich man, who had a steward, and he was accused to him of wasting his goods. And calling him, he said, Give an account of thy stewardship, for thou canst be no longer steward." (Luke 16:1,2.) After reciting the method which the bad steward used to provide against the day of necessity, our Saviour adds, "His lord commended the unjust steward" namely, in this respect, that he used timely precaution; and subjoins this weighty reflection, "The children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light:" (Luke 16:8:)

An excellent branch of Christian wisdom is here inculcated by our Lord on all his followers, namely, the right use of money -- a subject largely spoken of, after their manner, by men of the world; but not sufficiently considered by those whom God hath chosen out of the world.

The love of money," we know, "is the root of all evil;" but not the thing itself. The fault does not lie in the money, but in them that use it. It may be used ill: and what may not? But it may likewise be used well: It is full as applicable to the best, as to the worst uses. It is of unspeakable service to all civilized nations, in all the common affairs of life: It is a most compendious instrument of transacting all manner of business, and (if we use it according to Christian wisdom) of doing all manner of good.

... in the present state of mankind, it is an excellent gift of God, answering the noblest ends. In the hands of his children, it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked: It gives to the traveller and the stranger where to lay his head. By it we may supply the place of an husband to the widow, and of a father to the fatherless. We maybe a defence for the oppressed, a means of health to the sick, of ease to them that are in pain; it may be as eyes to the blind, as feet to the lame; yea, a lifter up from the gates of death!

Did you get the gist of it?

Wesley's theme is that money, when handled with wisdom and compassion, can be used for good.

Then Wesley lays out 3 basic principles for a Christian use of money.

- 1. Gain all you can.**
- 2. Save all you can.**
- 3. Give all you can.**

Some later interpreters of Wesley have restated "gain all you can," as "earn all you can," but Wesley, as the son of an Anglican Priest and a Priest himself, lived in that curious space between social classes where he knew both people who worked for a living and people who invested for a living. So he really meant, gain all you can, rather than just earn all you can. By which Wesley meant that increasing your earning potential is a good thing.

All too often I hear people being taught that they should not ask for a raise, or seek a promotion, or get more education because they shouldn't be "greedy." And quite often I see this unbiblical advice being used to prevent low wage workers from asking for a living wage. John Wesley wholeheartedly disagreed! John Wesley himself made a fair amount of money as an author. Wesley wrote, edited or abridged some 400 publications. As well as theology he wrote about music, marriage, medicine, [abolitionism](#) and politics,^[144] and he made a pretty good income as a writer. Wesley also frequently gave micro loans, out of his own pocket, to people who were trying to start a business to improve their income. So Wesley was definitely in favor of people

improving their economic situation. Wesley would advise you to ask for that raise, take that promotion, or get that continuing education.

But ethical gain has limits. Wesley wrote, Gain all you can, but not gain all you can no matter what. Wesley felt we should gain all we can without harming yourself or harming others.

- 1. Gain all you can,**
 - a. Without harming yourself**
 - b. Without harming others**

On the topic of not harming ourselves, Wesley writes about a lot of workplace safety issues. Everything from the need for proper food and sleep, to the importance of avoiding working with toxic chemicals like arsenic and lead that were commonly used in manufacturing in 1870, to the importance of ergonomics for workers who earned their living writing at desks for long hours! Wesley also felt that it was very important for people not to do work that harmed their mental health or spiritual health. Wesley specifically mentioned his concern that doing work that is unethical - whether that work was legal or not - could do harm to your soul. So really what Wesley meant was gain all you can without harming your body, heart, mind or soul.

Wesley also insisted that, "We cannot, if we love everyone as ourselves, hurt anyone in his substance."

"In his substance" was the 1870 way of saying it's wrong to harm another person economically. Wesley encourages all Christians to not charge excessive interest, or excessive prices for basic needs. Wesley encourages landlords to charge fair rents and employers to pay fair wages. Wesley also specifically criticized selling goods below market price in order to drive a competitor out of business - this is something that big box stores commonly do when they first move into a community. They sell their goods at a loss until the local businesses lose their customers and close and then they raise their profits.

Wesley also writes that Christians should not profit from selling harmful substances, such drugs and alcohol, or the ineffective and often harmful patent medicines so common in the late 1800's, and quite frankly, still common today in the form of many unregulated supplements and "natural" cures.

Wesley also wrote a section on not earning money in ways that are immoral or exploitative. He was specifically talking about sex trafficking in this sermon, but Wesley wrote elsewhere against slavery and unfair trade deals with less developed nations.

- 1. Gain all you can,**
 - a. Without harming yourself**
 - b. Without harming others**
- 2. Save all you can (live simply)**

After Wesley explains that gaining money without harming ourselves or others is a good thing, he goes on to encourage us to live simply.

In modern usage, the phrase “save all you can,” means to set money aside for later. What Wesley meant was to be thrifty, or live simply.

Wesley wrote that Christians should not spend money on frivolous things like fancy clothing, fancy furniture, or fancy food. And don't leave all your fancy stuff to your children, and I quote, “Do not leave it to them to throw away.” Instead, Wesley encouraged Christians to live simply and teach our children to live simply, so that we can put the money we save, by living simply, to work helping others.

- 1. Gain all you can,**
 - a. Without harming yourself**
 - b. Without harming others**
- 2. Save all you can (Live Simply)**
- 3. Give all you can**
 - a. Care for yourself & your family**
 - b. Care for the church**
 - c. Care for all people**

Lastly Wesley encourages all Christians to give all we can.

Wesley explains that everything we are and everything we have belongs to God. Our bodies, our souls, the earth, the universe and everything derived from it and our labor, belongs to God and is on loan to us. That's what it means to be a steward - we are caring for someone else's property. Given that even our bodies belong to God Wesley writes that the first act of stewardship is caring for ourselves.

Wesley encouraged his readers, before giving anything away to the church, or to charity, first take care of yourself and your family!

In Wesley's time and in our own time there are unethical preachers who claim that God needs our money more than we do.

Friends, anyone who tells you that God needs your money more than you do, or that God will bless you only if you give, is not preaching the gospel of Jesus, they are trying to steal from you and from God!

This third section of Wesley's sermon on the Use of Money is why I love this sermon so much!

Because Wesley, so rightly teaches that since our very selves belong to God it is good stewardship to care for ourselves and our family before we even think about giving to the church!

Wesley writes that, "*a faithful and a wise steward*," will make sure that yourself and your family have enough nutritious food, appropriate clothing and safe and adequate shelter *before* we extend our stewardship to doing good to others.

Then, after we have taken care of ourselves and our family we should give to the church. Remembering that the church is the community of believers who run the institution - we, the beloved community, have a building, the building doesn't have us!

Then, after we have taken care of ourselves, our family and our church, we should do good to all people.

I also appreciate that Wesley does not go into specifics of how much is enough to care for ourselves and our families, instead Wesley gives us a set of theological questions to help us judge for ourselves how to best steward the money God has given us.

I'm going to paraphrase this a lot, because the 1800's language is a bit florid in this section!

Wesley writes that if you're not sure if what you want to spend on yourself and your family is good stewardship or too fancy ask yourself these questions:

Good Stewardship?

- 1. Do I feel right about this?**
- 2. Does this expense align with scripture?**
- 3. Is this for God or just for me?**
- 4. Will this matter when I'm dead?**

For example: I'm planning a family trip to visit my in-laws in Arizona after Christmas. It's going to be a little expensive because we are choosing to fly instead of drive.

1. I feel right about our choice to fly because it takes 3 days to drive there, my daughter, Gwen, gets miserably car sick and our vacation time is very limited with 5 work schedules to manage.

2. Visiting my in-laws aligns with scripture because it aligns with the commandments of Moses to honor one's parents. It's important for us to stay connected, especially as they get older.
3. God also commands us to observe Sabbath - to take time off and time away from work, which is essential for stewarding my ability to continue in ministry.
4. And, will this matter after I'm dead? I've officiated enough memorials to know that the time we spend with our families has eternal value.

Gain all you can... without harming yourself or others

Live simply

Give all you can... but first take care of yourself and your family

And if you're not sure, consider Wesley's questions.