



Revival: Living the Methodist Way
“EARN ALL YOU CAN!
SAVE ALL YOU CAN!
GIVE ALL YOU CAN!”

Rev. Gary Haller
First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan
Scripture: Luke 18:18-30

A certain ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother.’” He replied, “I have kept all these since my youth.” When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” He replied, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.” Then Peter said, “Look, we have left our homes and followed you.” And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.”

On the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of their graduation, some college alumni were gathered for a class reunion. They were scattered about in little groups reminiscing about college days. In one group the conversation turned to a classmate they all remembered, named Harvey. And the thing they remembered most about Harvey was that whenever he was asked what he was going to do after graduation he always replied, “I’m going to be a millionaire.” Harvey always expected he would make his millions. But another thing they remembered about Harvey was that he was one of the slowest students in their class. He was especially poor in mathematics. Here was a man who expected to make millions, but he could hardly add up a column of figures.

As the members of the reunion were exchanging “Harvey” stories, up pulled a brand new, chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce and out stepped Harvey wearing an expensive, tailor-made, three-piece suit and everything that went with it. His classmates quickly gathered around him and began throwing questions at him. “Hey, Harvey, where did you get that car?” “Harvey! Wow!

What happened? How did you do it?” Harvey said, “Well, you see, I came upon an invention that costs me only five dollars to manufacture and I sell it for one hundred dollars. And you’d be surprised how fast that ten percent profit adds up!”

As financially successful as many people are, many of us are as confused about the workings of money as good old Harvey. We may be able to compute simple interest, yet still we suffer from several basic confusions. Is it Christ-like to store up tremendous wealth? How much should we give to the cause of Christ: should that be five percent, ten percent – or more? Am I like that rich ruler who followed all the commandments, yet was left in sorrow when Jesus revealed to him how his money was more important than God? When my pockets are crammed full of abundance, do I become like that camel trying to crawl through the needle’s eye in Christ’s comical image?

This topic is a crucial one for any person who would follow Jesus Christ. We cannot avoid it. At least 60% of Christ’s teachings touch upon money and possessions. Many of his strongest teachings have to do with wealth and our idolatry of it. And John Wesley engaged this topic of God and wealth with great enthusiasm. For two reasons. First, he realized that his very preaching was causing people to become wealthy. He soon saw that when the poor met Jesus Christ they became productive citizens. They left behind lazy habits and wasteful ways and applied themselves responsibly and gainfully. Living the life of faith meant a new industriousness, a new thriftiness, that led to the accumulation of wealth. Here was the spiritual paradox he saw: Poverty led people to see their need for God and to faith; faith led to industriousness; industriousness led to wealth; and wealth led people to the belief that they do not need God. In effect, Wesley saw his preaching created more of those rich young rulers whose wealth stood between themselves and God.

Second, Wesley realized that he was becoming rich. His father never had much, serving in a poor parish, with up to twenty mouths to feed. Yet John was startled to discover that the sale of his inexpensive religious writings, called tracts, was bringing in a tidy sum of money. More than he’d ever had. He found this wealth to be both a blessing and a temptation. So he gave this considerable thought in light of Christ’s teachings. LaVere Webster, whose Wesleyana collection we enjoy here at First Church, gave me some interesting information. Wesley, he said, earned 100 pounds per year, lived on 25 pounds, then 30 pounds in later life, and gave all the rest away. When he died he left 2 sterling teaspoons, a teapot with a broken spout, The Methodist Church with hundreds of bands and societies, a publishing company, millions of literate English speaking people (when literacy in England was only about 3%), hundreds of colleges, and more preachers than we can count. There are more Methodist churches in the U.S. than there are post offices. He left a huge heritage of giving. But apart from the two teaspoons and the broken teapot, he gave all he had earned away.

Please understand: Wesley was clear that money was a wonderful gift of God. He declared that money “is an excellent gift of God, answering the noblest ends. In the hands of God’s children, it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, clothing for the naked: It gives to the traveler and the stranger where to lay his head. By it we may supply the place of a husband to the widow, and of a father to the fatherless. We may be a defense for the oppressed, a means of health to the sick,

or 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!” Wesley believed in the blessings of wealth.

Yet, he felt that those who are rich were in great danger. “Danger” because their hearts became fixated on maintaining their wealth rather than upon God. He perceived that abundance leads us to a desire for ease, making us unwilling to take up the Cross for others, hoping, as was said, “to go to heaven on a feather-bed.” If people in Wesley’s day were in danger because their little money had caused them to forget God, then how much more precipitous is our position? For John defined riches like this: “Whoever has food to eat, and raiment to put on, and something over is rich.” If we accept that, then over 99.999% of us are tremendously well-to-do. The underlying truth is this: if whatever we have leads us to focus our lives on money and possessions rather than upon God, then our souls are in extreme danger. Therefore, Wesley concluded, “it is of the highest concern that all who love God know how to employ this valuable talent” so that we would use money for God’s glorious ends.

So here’s the teaching of the day. With his customary thoroughness, Wesley provided a clear and concise prescription for the use of money. “Gain all you can! Save all you can! Give all you can!” The first part of this lesson may be surprising: “Gain all you can!” Wesley knew that money is not evil, that it can bring great good. Our duty, he said, is this: “We ought to gain all we can gain. But this it is certain we ought not to do; we ought not to gain money at the expense of life, nor at the expense of our health.” No gain, said Wesley, should lead us to work so hard or so long as to endanger our health. Second, we are to gain all we can without damaging our souls or causing mental damage. Thus, we ought never to engage in any unlawful or unethical or sinful means of gaining wealth, for any of these would destroy our soul.

Furthermore, we are to gain all we can without hurting our neighbor. If we love everyone as ourselves, we cannot hurt them in their substance. We are not to injure others by causing them to lose their means of living, or conspiring to deprive them of all their property, or by impoverishing them by gambling, or by charging extravagant interest on debts. We cannot, he said, think that we can “do evil” and that “good may come” of it. In this, Wesley had a particular word of warning to those physicians of his time who, for their gain, purposely lengthened their patients’ pain or disease when they could speedily remove it. To do this, he says, is to play with the lives and health of people, and that “gain” is bought with the price of your soul.

So gain all you can. But do it by honest industry. Whatever you find to do, Wesley said: “Do it as soon as possible: No delay! Never leave anything till tomorrow, which you can do today. And do it as well as possible. Do not sleep or yawn over it; put your whole strength to the work. Spare no pains. Let nothing be done by halves, or in a slight and careless manner.” Gain all you can, but do not ruin your body or your soul. Gain all you can, but do not ruin others. Gain all you can, but do it with integrity, industry and love.

Wesley’s second rule for the use of money is this: “Save all you can.” Wesley advised people not to throw their money away in “idle expenses,” which he called the same as throwing it into the sea. He meant, don’t gratify the senses by gluttony or drunkenness, or by expensive clothing, furniture, or costly pictures. He warns against allowing the approval of others to dictate what we purchase or wear. In other words, Don’t keep up with the Joneses. Do not be covetous of others.

Such motivations are unworthy of one who puts God first. But the greatest danger, Wesley observed, is that the more we indulge ourselves, the more we desire to do so in an ever deepening spiral away from God. Indulging the baser desires ensnares us in a web of deepening addiction to this world, so that we think that this life alone is our home, our comfort and all we need, and we turn again away from God. And worse: we become insensitive to the needs of others.

So once you have gained all you can and saved all you can, we are not to think we are done. Wesley said, “All of this is nothing unless one goes forward toward a higher end. To save everything without a guiding purpose, is the same as throwing it into the sea or burying it in the ground for all the good it does. Not to use what Godly efforts have brought is the same as wasting it all!” So Wesley’s final instruction is this: “Give all you can!”

This last instruction is the key. Let me tell you about Jacob Leeder. Leeder was a man who lived modestly. When he died in 1997 at age 83, he was he was driving a 1984 Oldsmobile and wore moderate clothing. His recreational outings consisted of trips to the flea market, and when he took his girlfriend out to eat, it was to the cafeteria. When he died, everyone was shocked to discover seventeen pages of stock holdings in his will, amounting to 62.3 million dollars.

Leeder’s best friend said that because he did not have cable television, he spent his final years at his girlfriend’s house watching business reports. His girlfriend, Ann Holdorf, encouraged him to take a vacation, or enjoy a good meal, and his response would be, “Not now, the market is bad!” Leeder’s life was controlled by an obsession with his holdings.

Jacob Leeder gained all he could and saved all he could – but he didn’t use it for good. What became of it? He left his girlfriend of 23 years \$150,000 and most of the rest went to estate taxes. As British essayist John W. Foster said, “The pride of dying rich raises the loudest laugh in hell, for the last suit we wear doesn’t need any pockets.” Jacob Leeder, and the rich ruler of our scripture, each were controlled by their wealth. Jesus calls such a person a fool, not because they are rich, but because they are not rich toward God.

Drawing upon examples in scripture, Wesley provided guides for giving. First, he said, provide things needful for yourself, whatever food and clothing you modestly need, and whatever will preserve your body in health and strength. Second, provide these also for your spouse and children and others for whom you are responsible. That’s good. It’s clear that in giving all we can, he does not mean for us to impoverish ourselves or our families. Third, then, Wesley said, if there is a surplus, provide for the household of God and “as you have opportunity, do good to everyone.” In so doing, you will give all you can, indeed all you have. And all that is given in this manner is really given to God.

Wesley did not criticize wealth any more than did Jesus. However, they both criticized how we elevate wealth to the highest end of our life, rather than a means to the end. Our life’s focus must always be God. That was Wesley’s great desire, and when it came to his death, although he had gained a considerable fortune, he had given all he had away. A similar person today is Robert Fulghum, who has more than 14 million copies of his books in print. Yet he lives in the same house, drives a similar car, and has the same friends he had prior to his success. One year Robert

Fulghum donated the proceeds of a book tour, \$670,000, for a number of charitable causes. Each and every day, he says, he strives to glorify God with his resources.

Each of us is concerned about our future, and the future of our family. Earning and saving are important. So is giving. Are we generous with the resources with which God has blessed us? Just as we are concerned about our bank-accounts, we also must be concerned about our God-accounts. The church is here to help us with that account. For we can only serve God's needs if we keep our lives focused on God, and not controlled by the god called "mammon."

Gain all you can, good friends! Gain it without damaging yourself or others. Use your diligence and the intelligence God has given you.

Save all you can! Cut off every expense which serves to indulge foolish desire. Waste nothing, living or dying, on sin or folly, whether for yourself or your children.

And then, Give all you can! Give all you can to God. And it's here that Wesley got radical: "Do not stint yourself," he said, "to a tenth, nor a third, nor a half, but give all that is God's, be it more or less, by taking care of the needs of your household, the needs of the household of faith, and all who are in need. Give it all, and do so in such a manner that you may give a good account of your stewardship in that Day when we can no longer be stewards, when we stand in the presence of our Lord."

May we pray?

Lord God, we thank you for how you supply for us in our need. We praise you for your generosity and for the abundance of our lives. Help us to use it all wisely, whatsoever we have. Prevent us from being so ensnared by our possessions that we are instead possessed by them. Free us to love you and others so that it becomes for us a joy to build your Kingdom and lift up those in need, here and in all your great world. For the sake of Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.