

McCabe United Methodist Church

Earn. Save. Give.: John Wesley's Simple Rules for Money Series

“Earn All You Can... Money – The Excellent Gift”

Sermon on Proverbs 3:13-18 & 31:10-24 (10.8 & 10.9.16)

Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

Almighty God, send your Holy Spirit to breakthrough into our hearts and into McCabe United Methodist Church. Lead us to bold, new ways of sharing your love with one another, in our neighborhood, in Bismarck-Mandan, and beyond. May we look to you always as we build your heavenly kingdom on earth. We pray this in the powerful name of your Son, Jesus. Holy God, you give us words, you guide our thoughts, and you fill our hearts. May these words I speak be pleasing to your ears, may our thoughts be formed in your image, and may our hearts be ever tuned to you; in Jesus name we pray. Amen

I have long had a love-hate relationship with the woman exemplified in Proverbs 31. Did any of the rest of you get exhausted as those verses were read a few moments ago???

One of the primary reasons I've had a love-hate relationship with the Proverbs 31 woman is that she *seems* to reinforce the oppressive belief that women not only *can* do it all...but that women *should* do it all – and that, *when* they do it all, it all needs to be done flawlessly.

We women should be completely competent and confident in our work – and we should always be thoroughly pleasant while doing it. We women should also make sure our homes are spic-and-span clean...that our husbands are happy and content...and that our children are adorable and well-behaved. Oh, we should also make sure to be fashionably attractive while looking years younger than we really are.

Now, I realize not every woman experiences these kinds of expectations from other people who are actually in their lives. (I know I don't.) But these expectations are out there – in the media, for sure, but also in general society.

And, goodness knows we women can have these expectations internalized to such a degree that, even when we don't live by them in our *hearts*, they are still there in our *heads*, shaming us with little voices that say we're not good enough.

Men, also, have internal voices that try to shame them with their own brand of “not good enough” — not a good enough provider... not a good enough father... not the *best* employee in the *top* field... a failure at this or that.

Whoever we are — male or female... married or single... employed or unemployed — whoever we are, we can feel overwhelmed when hearing about the woman we just heard about in Proverbs 31.

But the purpose of the Proverbs 31 woman is not to make any of us feel shame or to feel like we'll never be good enough. Our God loves each of us deeply and completely. To God, we *are* good enough.

That said, hear again from Proverbs 31...try not to get too worn-out as I read:

“A truly good wife is the most precious treasure a man can find! Her husband depends on her, and she never lets him down ... She gets up before daylight to prepare food for her family and for her servants. She knows how to buy land and how to plant a vineyard ...

“She spins her own cloth, and she helps the poor and the needy. Her family has warm clothing, and so she doesn’t worry when it snows. She does her own sewing, and everything she wears is beautiful. Her husband is a well-known and respected leader in the city. She makes clothes to sell to the shop owners.”

So the Proverbs 31 woman is *amazing*. She provides so much for her family and her husband is proud of her. Yet, with all that's in this passage about this woman, I left out what is perhaps the most important verse – verse 25, that reads,

“She is strong and [gracious], as well as cheerful about the future.”

Oh, to be described using those words! “*She is strong & [gracious], as well as cheerful about the future.*” Or, for you fellows out there: “*He is strong and [gracious], as well as cheerful about the future.*”

The woman in Proverbs 31 exemplifies *faithful integrity* – something to which we should all aspire. She is strong, she is gracious...and she finds joy today in knowing that her future is secure.

As exhausted as she can make me, the Proverbs 31 woman has grown on me in recent years. I now see her as a sort of “hero of faith,” someone whose life is meant to inspire – and not *shame* – me.

What helped me the most in developing a friendly relationship with the Proverbs 31 woman was reading about her within the context of the entire book of Proverbs.

See, in the first 30 chapters of Proverbs, there are regular warnings against certain kinds of women: women who are unfaithful, women who are immoral, women who are quarrelsome and nagging...etc.

With all these negative examples of women in the first 30 chapters, when you finally get to chapter 31, the exhaustingly amazing woman described there seems like a beautiful breath of fresh air!

It’s also worth noting that, as we heard in the first of our two readings from Proverbs today, *wisdom* is personified as being female.

Hear again *these* words from Proverbs 3:

“Wisdom is more valuable than precious jewels; nothing you want compares with her. In her right hand Wisdom holds a long life, and in her left hand are wealth and honor ... Wisdom is a life-giving tree, the source of happiness for all who hold on to her.”

The writer of Proverbs certainly expects the best from women... just as he expects the best from *men*. See, the vast majority of the book of Proverbs is tidbits of wisdom being passed from fathers to their sons.

And, as we begin our financial stewardship series here at McCabe, when it comes to money, there is no better concept to consider than the concept of *wisdom*.

We all need wisdom in general, but we certainly need wisdom when it comes to our finances. We need wise, guiding principles to help us discern how to use money in the most faithful ways possible. That’s what this series is all about.

One of the founding fathers on the Methodist side of our United Methodist family tree, John Wesley, wrote often about a set of “general rules” for Christian life. In recent years, many of us have come to know them as the “*Three Simple Rules*”. And these three simple rules are: do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God.

In case you're unsure, that last one is about regularly doing the things that help you grow in your relationship with the God we know in Jesus Christ. Things like prayer, worship, Holy Communion, Bible study, fasting, giving to the poor, visiting the sick and those in prison, and meeting with other Christians for support on your Christian walk.

Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God. John Wesley's three simple rules for Christian life. Simple to remember...not always so simple to actually follow!

Well, in addition to John Wesley's three simple rules for Christian life, he also had three simple rules for the use of money. Those rules are “earn all you can” ... “save all you can” ... and “give all you can.” Thus the title of this stewardship series: *Earn. Save. Give.*

Now, I'm fully aware that the financial stewardship series in church is not everyone's favorite sermon series. Not all of us enjoy thinking about and reflecting on how we use money. In fact, some of us tend to be incredibly private about money and to operate out of a belief that the Bible says “money is the root of all evil.”

Well, when people say that, they're actually misquoting a verse from the New Testament book of 1 Timothy. First Timothy chapter 6 verse 10 *actually* says,

“the *love* of money is a root of all *kinds* of evil.”

The problem comes when we give money a kind of love and devotion it should not get nor does it deserve. Like so many things, money is neither inherently good nor inherently evil.

Money, itself, is inherently neutral. How we use it is the question for people of Christian faith. John Wesley's three simple rules for money are based on his understanding of Scripture and are deeply connected to his three simple rules for Christian life:

The way we earn, save, and give our money should be a reflection of how we express doing no harm, doing good, and staying in love with God.

Let me say that again: The way we earn, save, and give our money should be a reflection of how we express doing no harm, doing good, and staying in love with God.

In the mid-1700's, John Wesley wrote a sermon called "The Use of Money." In it, he outlines his three simple rules for money. In the section of this sermon about "earning all you can", Mr. Wesley makes it clear that Christians should earn in ways that are responsible and that do not do harm to ourselves or to our neighbors.

In fact, John Wesley states precisely that "to gain money we must not lose our souls."¹

By that he means we should seek to gain money in ways that leave time for proper rest... in environments that do not cause undue harm to our bodies... and we should do work that does not harm others.

He means we should seek work that allows us to use our God-given talents and that allows us to remain people of faithful integrity — people not unlike the Proverbs 31 woman.

I once served as pastor of a church where one of our strong lay leaders was the state-level CEO of a national, non-profit insurance organization. He was excellent at his job and was well-respected in the community.

If you talked to this individual about his God-given talents, he would tell you that one of them is making money — not just through his job, but through investing. And he didn't simply use his gift of making money to acquire expensive things or to spend it all on lavish vacations or entertainment... though he and his wife are able to do such things in a way many of us cannot.

1 John Wesley. Sermon 50: "The Use of Money." Section I.2.

No, a primary reason this individual put his gift of making money to good use is so they can be incredibly generous. He and his wife have a deep love for Jesus and a deep love for their church. They also have a deep love for many other organizations.

They “earn all they can” but do not hold onto their earnings only for themselves. Their church, and countless other organizations, has been the recipients of millions upon millions of dollars. They “earn all they can” in order to “save” and “*give* all they can.”

Of course, the vast majority of us cannot fathom earning enough money that we could then give away millions upon millions of dollars. But the millions of dollars isn't the point.

The point, according to John Wesley, is putting your God-given gifts and talents to work in order to receive an income... *so that* you can not only provide for your own household, but *so that* you can shower others with generosity. And, of course, we all have different God-given gifts and talents to put to work.

Some of us choose to put our gifts and talents to work through a full- or part-time job outside the home. Others of us choose to put our gifts and talents to work supporting our household by as a “stay-at-home” parent.

Though, let's be clear that the title “stay-at-home-parent” doesn't even begin to do justice to describing all that “stay-at-home-parents” do.

One of my friends recently suggested that “stay-at-home parents” should instead be labeled “Financial Manager, Human Resource Specialist, and Director of Household Affairs.” (Isn't that perfect?!)

So, some of us work to make an income away from our households while some of us do all sorts of work to *manage* our households.

Others seek other ways to put God-given gifts and talents to work: some among us have had to cut back on working because of health issues... or they have moved into a season of retirement... or their employment ended through no choice of their own.

In a culture that places high value on “earning potential” and moving up the ladder of socio-economic status, *not* working can feel like its own kind of burden. Please know that today's “earn all you can” focus is not meant to add a burden onto anyone's shoulders.

It's not meant to turn any of us into unhealthy workaholics who burn the proverbial candle at both ends. And today's “earn all you can” focus is certainly not meant to induce guilty feelings on those who are *unable* to work. This “earn all you can” focus is meant to remind us to seek God's wisdom and guidance in all things — including how we earn and spend our money.

Because, as the title of this sermon suggests, money is *an excellent gift*. We need it to do life in this world. But money is not meant to be an idol we worship. Rather, money is something we need and are called to use with faithful integrity.

Remember, again, the Proverbs 31 woman: “She is strong and [gracious], as well as cheerful about the future.” Or, again, for you guys out there, think of it this way: “*He* is strong and [gracious], as well as cheerful about the future.”

As with anything else in this life, we are to *earn* and use money with strength, with grace, and in ways that bring joy for the future.

Now, in all of this talk about “earning all we can,” please also know this is *not* about *earning* God's love. All that we do in this life to be stretched and challenged, all that we do to give of ourselves for others – all that we do in this life is never to *earn* God's love.

God's love is not transactional: we do *this* for God, so God loves us a little bit more. No. Even though that's how many of us function in business and in our relationships with others, which is not how *God* functions with us.

The amazing good news is that we are, each of us, loved by God *just as we are*. There is nothing more and there is nothing less we can do to change God's great love for us... because God's love for us is already deeper and more complete than we could ever imagine.

And so we live our lives in response to that holy love. We live lives of wisdom... lives of strength and grace.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, send your Holy Spirit to breakthrough into our hearts and into McCabe United Methodist Church. Lead us to bold, new ways of sharing your love with one another, in our neighborhood, in Bismarck-Mandan, and beyond. May we look to you always as we build your heavenly kingdom on earth. We pray this in the powerful name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.