

Treasure on Earth or Treasure in Heaven

One day, as we were sitting with our guests at the table, the conversation turned to jobs. Without exception the question uppermost in everyone's mind was how much they would be paid. Vocation and job satisfaction were not even mentioned. The overall focus was money and the more of it, the better. When John Wesley said, "Earn all you can," in his famous sermon that we mentioned last month, it did not mean to the exclusion of all else, especially a call of God on our life. It was rather urging Christians to be conscientious and not to be idle or lazy. Money must not be gained by selfish means. The commandment still stands: to love our neighbour, which means acting with integrity. Examples of greed abound: extortionate credit on pay-day loans, store cards, ruthless competition to gain promotion, to mention only a few. Alongside these there is exploitation of the third world.



John Wesley continues, "Save all you can". "Save" is not to be interpreted as "hoard" rejoicing in a larger and larger amount in the bank, or even under the bed! At risk of quoting Gordon Brown in days of yore, the word when it comes to saving is "prudence". We need what we, as a community, call "a cushion", something put by for unexpected emergencies. What John Wesley preached was, don't waste money! Think before you spend. We hold all we possess in trust from God and in the end we are answerable to him. Does our wardrobe really have to be as large? Do we have to buy the latest gadget, especially the latest electronic device that has been dreamed up somewhere in Silicone Valley with the sole object of making us spend more? Do we have to impress with an expensive car with an insatiable thirst for petrol? What about expensive meals out? The list is endless and whether we have little or much, it is a good idea to examine our spending prayerfully in the light of eternity. It is possible to use money for status, to gain approval, to satisfy wants rather than needs and to impress. To quote from a modern version of Wesley's sermon, "In effect we (you) are using our (your) money to buy more of our (your) vices. It would be better to throw it in the sea." ⁱ

After, "Earn all you can, save all you can," comes, "Give all you can". This is the sticking point for many of us. There are those who give in order to impress, which is as wrong as not giving at all. Jesus warned us, "When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret."ⁱⁱ There are guidelines in Scripture about giving, "As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers".ⁱⁱⁱ There can be a genuine difficulty, as to where we give. There are numerous Christian organizations, all of them good worthy causes that compete for our money. Slick fundraising by professionals does not always honour God. Sometimes we are given a promise of a blessing from God in return for our gift. It is true the Lord does bless generosity but we don't give for that reason! It can be a minefield. It must have been easier for John Wesley who had the poor constantly in front of him. There are many Christian charities, including our own church, working with the utmost integrity. If we honestly seek God's will in our giving, he will guide us.

Wesley practiced what he preached. His books could have made him a rich man but he gave it all away and died with only the loose change in his pocket and bureau. But in his old age he was distressed because, "The Methodists grow more and more self-indulgent, because they grow rich."^{iv} They had taken to heart the, "Earn all you can," but disregarded the, "Give all you can". The most secretive area of our life is often our money but our finances are not a secret to God. In the end there is a choice for all of us.

We can either lay up treasure on earth or in heaven. It is impossible to do both.^v

ⁱ Sermons on Several Occasions by the Rev. John Wesley M.A. Translated into modern English by James D Holway

ⁱⁱ Matt 6:3 NIV

ⁱⁱⁱ Gal 6:10 NIV

^{iv} The Standard Sermons of John Wesley. Annotated by E.H.Sugden

^v Matt 6:21