

“Earn All You Can”

October 11, 2015

Money Matters: Earn. Save. Give – Stewardship series

I want to confess that when I read from Proverbs 31, I feel tired. This woman is someone who's lifted up, and there's a lot of buzz about being a “Proverbs 31 woman.” You can find all kinds of books and encouragement like this: “I'd rather be married to a Proverbs 31 woman than a Victoria's Secret model.” And while that's a powerful statement, we need to focus on this Scripture as a reminder to seek wisdom.

“Earn all you can” sounds good, right? Some of us would like to stop there, and so would most of the world. I was watching “Shark Tank” recently, and it doesn't take long to see that we're focused on gaining all we can - getting more and having more. Success means more and bigger and better, but to what end? I read some wise words from Pastor Jim Harnish: It isn't that we need more money; we need more wisdom in how to use what we have. We're dealing with debt, credit, estate planning, budgeting, student loans, and lots of other financial issues. Not a day goes by when we're not affected by money and finances.

I also want to be clear that when we talk about stewardship, we're not just talking about money. All we have is a gift of God to be used to build the Kingdom of God, but let's face it, we don't like talking about money very much. Just like we struggled with the “E” word, we might struggle with the “M” word. You might be thinking, “Oh, here we go. Money again. She's asking for money again.”

No, really, I'm not. I'm inviting us to consider how we view money. That begins at a young age for all of us. We're deeply affected by how our family deals with money. I know I'm a more frugal person because I had parents who were frugal and thrifty. They were careful with money, and I still remember when my dad paid off the farm. It was a celebration for him and my mom. They made my sisters and I earn our own money and save.

Giving money, time, or sharing our talents is a spiritual discipline. Jesus was clear about that, and we can't separate money out. I've heard this quote attributed to different people, but it says, “The last part of a person to be converted is their wallet.” Money isn't the issue itself; it's how we relate to money and use money that can be the problem. Again, we need God's wisdom to help and guide us - not just our own understanding.

John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, lived in England in the 1700's. It was a time when there were very wealthy and very poor. Wesley wasn't so concerned with raising money to meet a church budget; he was much more concerned with how to

help faithful people manage their money in ways that were consistent with their faith in Jesus Christ - no matter how much they had. And still we seek God's wisdom.

Wesley viewed money as a good gift of God to be used for good purposes. There is a connection between the faith we affirm on Sunday when we worship together and the financial decisions we make every day. And it isn't about comparing ourselves to each other; it's about looking at our personal relationship with God. Is it easy? No, not always. Is it important? Absolutely. All of us can be helped by Wesley's thoughtful reflections on money. He boiled it down to three rules: earn or gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can.

So, first, Wesley was clear that earning money through working hard was important, but it wasn't the end. Saving and giving were vital to a faithful, disciplined life, too. Again, we're good at the first one - earn all you can, but it's the other two - save all you can and give all you can - that we seem to struggle with so much.

Earning money isn't a bad thing. Money is a tool to do good work for God. One successful businessperson reflected on how money for him was a means to a greater end. He was a Christian and said that money always magnifies the values that we already hold. If we're seeking to be faithful and value the things of God, then money is a blessing that can help others. There's a responsibility and obligation to use the gifts we have in line with God's purposes.

When I hear about this woman in the last chapter of Proverbs, it's hard not to think about people I know. First, my mom who was an important part of the workings of our family dairy farm. My dad says he couldn't have made it work without her, and he's right. I think of my grandmothers who worked hard and loved deeply, my mother-in-law who is an excellent cook and is always doing something. I think of countless women who worked hard, dealt with incredible hardship, and got by on a whole lot less than I have.

But I'll be honest, I don't always connect these words to the larger goal that's so important in Proverbs - seeking wisdom. The thing about this woman is that she's revered not just because of what she does, but because of who she is and how she lives in the world. She's an example of wisdom lived out. After the list of everything she does - buying, selling, cooking, sewing, and all the rest - one thing we're supposed to get is that she's wise. She's creative. She understands the value and potential of using the gifts we have to earn a living. There's a connection between her work, her money, and her faith. And there should be for us, too.

God is creator, and we're created in God's image. Of course, we're not God, but we are created and given creativity as a gift. We're called to create - to make something, do something, and use the gifts we have. We hear how wise and wonderful

this woman is. In her own right, she understands the blessing of using her gifts to the glory of God.

Proverbs is attributed to King Solomon, whose legacy includes an incredible response to God. He asked God for wisdom - not for wealth or power - but God blessed him with all of it. How many of us would ask for wisdom above more money or more control?

It's the end of Proverbs where this wise woman is described - a culmination to the entire book. And it's a king's mother who has taught him these words about this "woman of valor." This is what wisdom looks like in action. It's not a task list of what all women should do or a job description of a good wife, but a celebration of what wisdom looks like. This is a praise song to a woman who is talented, artistic, creative, smart with her money, able to work with others, forward-thinking, diligent (remember the opposite of sloth?), caring and concerned for others, and kind. She loves and trusts God. She works joyfully and energetically.

This applies to all of us – no matter our employment status, age, where we work, or what we do. How do we keep living wisely? How do we earn all we can following God's call? What's our passion, and how do we use that passion to meet the needs we see in the world? That's where vocation - our calling - comes in - when our passion meets the needs of the world. God created each of us with gifts to fulfill that calling.

Proverbs is clear about the value of hard work to earn money. Jesus offered parables where he pointed out the foolishness of greed and the value of hard work. Our woman of valor is an example of working hard and being wise. So even as we answer God's call, we need to be humble and seek God's wisdom.

Even for Wesley, "earn all you can" had some important points. Our work affects our life. How does it affect our health? Do we work too much? Do we take time to rest, care for our bodies? We need balance.

And our soul is just as important. How do we take time to connect with God and with others? How do we care for ourselves spiritually - to renew? Are there parts of our work that go against our faith?

Do we earn all we can honestly without doing harm to our neighbor? If our work harms someone else's economic stability, health, or spiritual life, we must be honest and seek to change it.

How does our work affect our relationship with God? Do we make the connection between our faith and our work? God's calling on our lives is unique, and God uses us in many ways to serve and give God glory.

Earn all you can...it's where we start, but only where we start. May we seek God's wisdom and help to be faithful.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.