

May 19, 2019
Rev. Jane Florence
“Rich Contentment”
1 Tim 6: 6-11, 17-19



⁶Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. ¹¹But as for you, people of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹⁷As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

John Wesley’s doctrine of money is often summarized in three phrases extracted from his sermon titled “The Use of Money.” Earn all you can, Save all you can, Give all you can.

Evy was born and grew up in Omaha, Nebraska. In the 1970’s her primary goal was to become the youngest female hospital administrator in the country. By 1980, she had acquired the educational credentials and work experience, she was well on her way to reaching her goal. She ascended the ranks of hospital administration. Her life centered on work, professional goals, money, promotions, looking good and proving herself. She bought a home, a new car, and of course better clothes. She wanted to be successful, and she wanted to look successful. Her typical day started at the hospital by 4 am where she often stayed until 8-9 pm. She was always on call ready to respond to any emergency. Certainly her 120/hr work weeks would achieve her goal wealth and prestige

Evy isn’t unique. More and more are earning all they can. According to Forbes, there are 540 billionaires in the USA. About a fourth of all the billionaires in all the world live in America.¹ Many of us may not be on that list, but we still live in a culture that teaches more is always better. Earn all you can is a quick phrase, but the rest of the story (the rest of the sermon) was clear to point out that Wesley’s emphasis was not on aggressive acquisition at all costs. He clearly spoke against destructive ways of earning. Wesley wrote:

we ought not to gain money at the expense of life, nor at the expense of our health. Therefore, no gain whatsoever should induce us to enter into, or to continue in, any employ, which is of such a kind, or is attended with so hard or so long labour, as to impair our constitution.

He continues his limitations, “to gain all we can without hurting our mind any more than our body...to gain all we can without hurting our neighbour.”

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/pictures/hdgi45edgg/the-states-with-the-most/#5281a7975bc0>

The emphasis of his sermon restricts the pursuit of wealth if by doing so it means exploiting others or gaining from the pain and suffering of others or oneself. How we earn is as important as that one earns. Sweat shops, environmental destruction, 140/hr weeks that cause destruction of our spirit, our body, our earth, and our relationships is NOT what Wesley preached.

In the summer of 1980 when Evy was well on her way to becoming the youngest hospital administrator in the country, she suddenly found herself the patient, lying in a hospital bed a thousand miles from home. Even all her years of nursing and training did not prepare her for the young physician who entered her room in an 'air of cool calmness.' He said, 'Well, You'll probably die within the year. There's no treatment so I suggest you go home, make out your will and prepare for the inevitable.' Then he turned quickly and left. A few hours later the phone rang. It was the hospital where Evy worked. After a few minutes of polite conversation, the caller reminded Evy that the hospital had to have daily leadership. Evy wasn't going to be able to be there daily, so they would have to replace her. She wrote, "the day was surreal.. I had lost the job that gave me my identity, my purpose in life and my sense of self-worth, and I had been told that I was going to die. But the day was not over yet." That evening a friend called to tell her that her house had been robbed, most of her possessions stolen. In 12 hours, she had lost almost everything, gone was her professional dream; gone were her material possessions which let others know her status; gone was her sense of success; gone was her health. What was left? She thought of God, and her sadness grew. She realized that her life had not been rooted in her faith. She went to church and sang in the choir some; she even helped with Sunday School when she could. But her priority had been her profession; God had been a sideline activity. She faced the harsh reality that the values she had professed to hold dear were not the ones she had lived. She was a young professional, and she was dying. She decided she wanted to die as a person who lived her values. It became apparent that the first place to start was with her money. She wrestled with the questions, How much is enough? What does money really mean?

Evy thought more and more about money. She thought about her earning and spending habits. She thought about those things she had purchased that had really mattered- the 1965 Mustang that she had earned and saved money for in college. She remembered the joy and excitement and fulfillment she received for her \$500. She thought of the many cars she had purchased since, cars which were much more expensive- but none as dear as that first one she had scrimped and saved for. She continued to think about her money and her spending. She discovered that she bought things when she felt sad or insecure or had a difficult week at work. A new pair of shoes could raise her spirits- for a bit. Evy writes that as she finally came to know that point of 'how much is enough' then she experienced a new sense of freedom and a growing power. "Money is something for which you trade your life energy- your time. Think about it."

Evy came to understand the second point of Wesley's often quoted doctrine of money: Save all you can. When we hear, SAVE all you can- images of IRA's, 401K's, Mutual Funds dance in our eyes. But that's not what Wesley was talking about either. "Save" is used in the older British sense of the word. Old English, "Save" as in salvation, means "keep from danger" or , "avoid destruction". Save all you can means: keep from spending as much as you possibly can- save from, means in other words simplify your purchases, simplify your life.

The scripture for today spoke of contentment in regards to finances and riches. To repeat: “those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.”

We hear the words rich and contentment in this passage. To be rich, not in material wealth, but rich in contentment. What is contentment? Inner peace, calm, purpose, satisfaction. Don't get me wrong: I am not suggesting that this passage is telling people in poverty to just be content in their poverty. I'm not saying any of us should be content (passive) about systemic poverty all around us. The author of this text is speaking to people who have adequate food and clothing. It speaks of basic necessities already secured. Basic needs must be met before we can consider anything else. The text warns against believing money will solve all our problems, money will bring us happiness, money will secure our future and give us identity. It speaks of a desire to be 'rich' which leads us into being trapped not free.

I think the basis of the passage isn't about how much or how little we have in our bank accounts. It's about attitude, priority, purpose. Each of us must answer the question daily, How much is enough? How much will it take for me to be content? How hard is it for those of us who are not in poverty to find a place of contentment. Why is this so hard?

I'll tell you one factor. In 1956 the money spent in advertising was \$2.1 Billion (\$15.4 if adjusted for inflation). In 2006 there was \$149.7 Billion dollars spent. In 2019 the US ad expenditure is expected to hit \$ 240.7 billion dollars. 240.7 billions² of advertising dollars convincing us all that what we have isn't enough. All that money to say, if we really want to be happy, we would buy a new_____. \$240 Billion dollars is a lot of messages, and credit card offers, commercials and popup ads and trapping by senseless and harmful desires and a lot of ruin and destruction because of them—because how hard it is to be content with our old stuff when there is new stuff, prettier stuff, with new gadgets and buttons ... when all this new stuff is flashed across our television screen, computer screen, our phone screen, magazine, newspaper, bill boards, and stuffed in our mail boxes... \$240 BILLION dollars worth of advertising is hard to resist. And all that advertising is telling us: don't be content with what you have. You NEED something more.

New research looking at suicide rates, for example, suggests that a country's economic growth, measured by PPP-adjusted GDP per capita, is not invariably followed by a decrease in suicide rates. The amount of money in our bank account doesn't correspond to a quality of life survey. More money does not mean more happiness. In fact, lack of access to healthcare, particularly psychiatric care, appears to be a contributing factor to suicide risk in the USA, not lack of economic growth.³ Yet, we work and work and work, to earn all we can thinking it will bring us happiness.

Evy's condition continued to deteriorate as the doctor had promised until she was, as she describes herself, “a bowl of jello in a wheelchair.” She wrote, “Gradually my actions became more aligned with my values. I discovered the truth of graceful simplicity; having a few pairs of shoes, not 70; a few blouses, not a hundred; books that are read instead of lining

² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272314/advertising-spending-in-the-us/>

³ Tondo L, Albert MJ, Baldessarini RJ. Suicide rates in relation to health care access in the United States: an ecological study. *J Clin Psychiatry* 2006;67:517–23.

the shelves. Through this process I reclaimed the most precious gift God gave me- the hours of my life- and I could begin to discover how God wanted those hours used. In defining how much was enough for me I found time for serving, reading, watching sunsets, singing, going 'for a walk' with friends, enjoying a concert and listening in silent prayer. In short, life of immeasurable wealth."

Evy lived the third principal of Wesley's doctrine: Give all you can. The purpose for Wesley of earning all you can, and the purpose of not spending any more than you have to, was to then be able to give all you can to share God's care with others. Evy learned an interconnectedness of all things of the universe. She learned her consumption was connected to children's suffering in sweat shops on the other side of the world. She learned that her consumption was connected to a rain forest and small mammals. She learned that her body and her mind are not separate, but are interwoven and they too affect one another. She learned about the power of love and service. She found scientific studies that pointed out that there was a certain 'quality that counteracted feelings of hopelessness and helplessness' in people predisposed to cancer. "This quality was the selfless devotion of giving to others. Patients reported two feelings that created an internal state of contentment: pride of action and the feeling of goodness that comes when people give without regard for their own personal needs. This internal state reflects one's ability to cope with life and thus remain in a state of health." (Schmale)

Perhaps, Evy learned what the author of our scripture for today knew: there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ¹⁷As for those who in the present age are rich, command them to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

In 1980, Evy lost everything and found " a life of immeasurable wealth." She found life, literally, in simplifying her living and increasing her giving. The doctors told her ALS would kill her that year. As Evy became content to die, she worked to learn how to really live. An unexplainable thing happened, Evy did not die. Today 39 years later, the Nebraska native and Husker fan, Evy is now a Methodist pastor in Tucson, AZ celebrating life and living every moment. The scriptures say, do good, be generous and ready to share and take hold of the life that really is life. We don't have to hear a fatal diagnoses to take hold of the life that really is life. We can learn from the ancient scriptures, and we can learn from one another's stories. Do good. Be generous and share. Earn all you can (honestly and respecting of yourself, others and the world). Save from spending that which is unnecessary (determine how much is really enough). And Give all you can. And know the life that is really life. Amen.

McDonald, Evy. "Spending Money as if Life Really Mattered," Simpler Living Compassionate Life. Michael Schut ed. Denver: Morehouse Group, 1999.

McDonald, Evy, "Another Perspective of ALS" Holistic Medicine. March/April 1988.

"Wesley and Giving" Giving and the Gospel Symposium, Nashville, October 23, 1997.