

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious Loving God, we find ourselves so surrounded by love and blessings. We recognize the tendency to see things only through a bad lens: where life falls short of what we want or expect. We find ourselves going through life negatively, focused on how things aren't going exactly as we want. But there are blessings, God, so many blessings that we overlook: the sunshine of a new morning, the coolness of a brisk wind, the taste of breakfast freshly made, the kind smile of a friend. Holy God, help us to see with new eyes, and allow us the wisdom to see each new day as a new opportunity to receive and give blessings to all around us. Hear all those things on our minds and hearts today that keep us from looking at life as a blessing, and guide us toward fullness, O Great Creator.

Gracious God, we want to learn how to be people of stewardship. It is a lesson that takes our whole lives to discern and understand. In doing so, God, may we be found faithful and learning as best as we can. Help us utilize all our strengths and energies to gain all we can in this world, recognizing we have a responsibility to ourselves and our neighbor in how we accomplish this goal. May we be mindful of the ethics and boundaries we must maintain in order to gain all that we can lovingly, shining your love in how we do this daily. We pray all these things in the righteous Lord of work and gain, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray as one people, saying...

SERMON

Today, I'm going to go out of my usual way and preach the prosperity gospel. I'm going to tell you everything that we want to hear. God wants you to be rich. God wants to give you all the things you dream of, from the shiny car to the new house to the gold and jewelry you could ever want. These are the things that we should be striving for. To be

rich shows that God truly loves you. Nevermind the people that have less than you. They just aren't being faithful enough. They are not praying when they should. They are not going to church like they should. God just doesn't like them. How does this sound?

If it sounds disturbing, then you are on the right track. "Gain all you can" is the sermon title, and it requires explanation. It's not the explanation I just gave you, like those who preach the easy prosperity gospel. "Nevermind, everything is fine around the world! Just keep accumulating your bank accounts, no matter how much people around the world are starving and dying because God loves you and everyone else shouldn't matter!" How it is phrased is a bit subtler than this, but the message is pretty much the same. I sound mad about this because I am. We cannot just say "gain all you can" without putting it into context. Otherwise, you might go plunder the local Wal-Mart in God's name. On the other hand, I could easily make this sermon a theological reasoning for a raise. "I need your help to fulfill this very important part of ministry because that's what God wants!"

I preach on this subject because, like everything else, it's a lot more than the title. At first glance, you can't help but think how selfish this sounds. "Gain all you can." Go and hoard. It's a God-approved get-rich quick scheme. Go and take every last penny that you can possibly can. Neither of those is appropriate, and, in fact biblically irresponsible. I'm sick of the prosperity theologians that tell us otherwise. God doesn't want everyone to be rich with stuff and money. There are a lot of faithful people that don't have a lot. Truly, the one who has the most toys when they die...still dies. But, let's be real: "Gain all you can" is not about getting what you want. It's about the blessedness of good work and earning from that good work. From the absolute obvious to the necessarily specific, we must guard ourselves on what it means to "gain all you can" that we may glorify God in how we gain.

In seminary, I took United Methodist History, where we got a good look at Methodism's founder John Wesley. One day, we went to the chapel and listened to the instructor give one of Wesley's sermons. He wrote many brilliant sermons, but they would not be exciting by our standards. It didn't sound like a sermon you'd expect today: no examples or stories. Wesley pounded his points long-windedly for at least fifty minutes, but he gave wisdom for every age of the church. In 1744, John Wesley wrote a sermon called "The Use of Money." Wesley saw that money and stuff had been and would continue to be a lure to sin. Love of money is the root of evil, but money is not an evil itself. This sermon was the definitive Wesleyan statement on stewardship, and it rings just as accurate today as it did then. Wesley used a three-part statement that will be the beginning of our journey into stewardship: "Gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can." On the surface, these three things might conflict, but there is wisdom that must be fostered every day of our lives. Today, let's look at Wesley's first statement: "Gain all you can" by looking at it in its overarching meaning. Whether you are working or retired, there's a lot to take from this thought. Let's look at scripture and link it to the three main points of Wesley's statement.

Our Gospel story from Matthew will be the anchor throughout this series. It's a popular parable: the parable of the talents. We'll seek to go deeper as the weeks go on. For now, the impetus is on growth and gain. For this interpretation, we can easily put God in the position of the Master, who dispenses the talents to his servants. They are given the trust to do well by their Master's property, depending on their ability. All take the talents. One grows them immensely. One grows them slowly. One doesn't grow the talent at all. Those who multiplied their talents were approved. "You have been trustworthy in a few

things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.” That servant who did not work to multiply the talents is reproved because there was no growth or desire for growth. That servant just sat around with what he had and was bitter about it. One point of the parable is for faithful servants to gain all they can with the gifts they are given. In other words, this was a lesson on good stewardship. First and foremost, stewardship is a task, not something that just happens. Like the parable, it requires time, work, and growth. When we think of “stewardship,” we commonly think of our money and bank accounts. We think it has to do with good wealth management. That’s one part but too narrow of a definition. We should naturally consider all God has entrusted to us! That ranges from our family members, to all our stuff, to our bodies and souls. Taking care of your accounts is stewardship. Learning how to work is stewardship. Time management is stewardship. Exercising and good health is stewardship. Our entire wellbeing is at hand with stewardship; it’s all about faithful management of what we have in all parts of our lives. It’s about how we gain, how we use, how we manage all of our gifts for the glory of God. It’s a balance; stewardship is about putting all things in their right place and right time in our lives for God’s love to come shining forth in us toward the other. In the coming weeks, we’ll explore it together but we start this week with how we best “gain all you can.”

Let’s go back to the original sermon to further the discussion. Wesley says:

“But this it is certain we out not to do: we ought not to gain money at the expense of life; nor (which is in effect the same thing) 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.”

That’s Wesley’s style in a nutshell, but let me translate. Gaining all you can means we do not do so at the expense of our health, body and mind. Looking at today’s world, we can see

exactly what he was talking about. For example, let's talk about work. We aren't taught to have good boundaries around our work. Our work can easily consume us, before or after work hours. After office hours, we are supposed to be done. We are supposed to leave work at work and to be at home, to rest, to recharge, to prepare for the next day. That isn't always the case. In fact, some let work become their lives. They work long hours to get big paychecks, and then are not satisfied by those paychecks. We let "gain all you can" go to its extremes by putting work or the gaining of riches in the place of being at home. We can fall into the easy trap of workaholism. But there's an even more subtle danger: leaving the tangible work at work but bringing the internal work baggage home. There's a lot of things we worry and obsess over. It's easy to bring the frustrations with you everywhere. But there is a space and time to think about work, and it's not when we are away from it. We do not prepare ourselves the best for work when we are thinking endlessly about it.

What Wesley is essentially saying is that we miss the blessing and gift of work and material possessions when we sacrifice our health to get or do these things. We compromise all stewardship when we give more time and energy than we should for the gaining of money, the accomplishment of work, or the gaining of stuff. When everything else takes priority over wellbeing, the gift of life and work has gone from blessing to burden, no matter how much we may like the results. Good life and work requires balance.

It's clear that we have to do right by ourselves when we gain all we can; we can't have one foot in the grave while we work ourselves to death...but there's more. When we "gain all we can," we seek to gain not at the expense of our neighbor. Of course there's the obvious: we don't steal, we don't scheme to take from others, we don't embezzle. Easy to figure out. On the other hand, this is a subtle and dangerous piece because...well, it's next

to impossible in today's world. When we buy things at the store, that's just the final piece of the puzzle. So much happens before then. All items have to be grown, produced, manufactured, assembled, packaged, and stocked before they ever find their way to our houses, and there is a lot that goes wrong along the way. Unfortunately, so much of our world's commerce is built on the sinfulness of using other people for a profit.

I looked through my clothes, and I noticed where my garments were made. El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Mexico, Indonesia, Kenya. I'm sure there's many more. All of these places we think of as third world countries, and there's a lot of negatives that come with that. I imagine none of those people have what we think of as a living wage. I imagine none of the people who make our clothes get any kind of insurance, days off, or job security. If you miss a day, you are easily replaceable. The conditions they work in are intolerable; although sweatshops have been banned in the US, we in the US still benefit from the work in sweatshops. In other words, they are not treated like people. And this is where most of my clothing, indeed, most of the clothing on the US market comes from. We participate in the sinful world whenever we buy clothing from these countries because we are reinforcing these practices. We are bringing down others when we gain these items while interpreting we are helping others. It's just not the case, for we ourselves would never choose to work under the conditions they have to.

I say this not to bring you down but to recognize once again how we live in a world that forces sin on us. We know that we are sinners, but it goes beyond acting well to one another. We sin when we don't even realize it. It's not just about our conscious actions but the small ways we live each and every day. The structures of our world are set up so that we have no other alternative but to buy items that someone literally slaved over for a wage

we would consider pitiful. We can't escape from it, but, at the same time, we can't just be OK with it either. Within those two extremes, we have to find a place where we can best live in light of God's love, working well and honoring and the gifts and resources we have.

Living this out is difficult, but it is important. When we gain all we can, we have a God-given mandate that we do it well. Gaining has cost, and those costs must be mitigated in order to be faithful to the God that makes it all possible, the brothers and sisters throughout our world we are called to love and serve, and to our own bodies and souls. Remember: Gaining all you can is not about you. It's about you, your neighbor, and God. If it's you and your neighbor, what's the grander point? If it's about you and God, we've forgotten that God created a grander world and a grander mission than personal fulfillment. If it's only about your neighbors and God, we've forgotten we also need to be respected, loved, and fulfilled. Not one, not two...all three are needed.

The blessing of work is that we gain much for ourselves and others, but there is temptation. Our work and our gains can be either the doorway to a richer life or an unfulfilling life striving for gain. We have a calling to work for our chosen vocation as long as we can. We have the ability and the blessing to gain all that we can in all parts of our lives. Even if we don't have a paying job anymore, there are many tasks that we do all the time that are truly work. No matter what age or ability we have, we must be people of faithful stewardship for the benefit of ourselves and for our neighbors near and far. If we seek gain without conscience, then we have sinned. Let us move forward to "gain all we can," monetarily or otherwise, with a strong sense of stewardship that respects ourselves, honors our neighbors around the world, and seeks the God who makes all we do possible. Thanks be to God for the wisdom to make faithful use of our blessings. Amen and Amen.