

You may be interested to know that threatening letters from HMRC are nothing new.

In 1776 the English Tax Commissioners (yes, they were around in those days as well!) decided to conduct an investigation into John Wesley's financial affairs. Largely through the sale of his books Wesley is said to have earned around £30,000 in the course of his life. At one point he was bringing in £1,400 in a year – considerable riches in those days. He claimed however, seldom to have over £100 in his possession at any one time and he rarely let his expenses exceed £30 a year. The Commissioners were convinced that he must have silver plate on which he had not paid tax. In reply to their letter he wrote *"I have in my possession two silver spoons at London and two at Bristol. This is all the plate I have at present and I shall not buy any more while so many around me want bread."*

When he died in 1791 he gave no directions about money, mentioning only the coins to be found in his pockets and his bureau drawer in London. It had all been given away. Sometime earlier he had written *"I cannot help leaving my books behind me whenever God calls me hence, but in every other respect, my own hands will be my executors."* And so it proved.

For Wesley, the handling of money was one of the most important discipleship issues for any Christian. He had known poverty as a child. His father Samuel, an Anglican clergyman and father of nineteen children, was rarely out of debt and on one occasion John witnessed the unfortunate man being taken away for a spell in a debtors' prison. Perhaps that was where his concern for the poor originated.

He himself recorded a time when as a tutor at Oxford he had just splashed out on some pictures for his room. It was a very cold day and he noticed that one of the chambermaids had no coat and only a very thin dress to protect her. When he reached into his pocket to give her money to buy a coat there wasn't enough left because of what he had spent on the art work. He could not help but think that God was not pleased and might be saying to him *"You have adorned your walls with the money which might have screened this poor creature from the cold!...Are not these pictures the blood of this poor maid?"* It was after this incident that he adopted the simple lifestyle that characterised the rest of his life.

In his 1760 sermon "The Use of Money" Wesley famously urged his people to "earn all you can; save all you can; give all you can." The basic principle was that we are stewards rather than proprietors. All that we have belongs to God and we are accountable to Him for the use we make of the material goods He has entrusted to us. If we have money then we have the means of doing good and alleviating all kinds of hardship and suffering. To see need, have the resources to meet that need and do nothing about it is to bear a grave responsibility before God. Indeed, to spend money on unnecessary items that are merely desired in order to satisfy our vanity is to be drawn into a downward spiral of increasing desire and dissatisfaction.

He had it all worked out. Wesley taught that a person should make sure that he and his family were provided for in terms of food, clothing and shelter. Then he should pay anything owing to creditors and set aside sufficient to keep his business going should hardship occur (no welfare state in those days). After that he should "do good to all men, especially to those who are of the household of

faith". Wealth, he said, was *"whatever is above the plain necessities of life. Whoever has sufficient food to eat, and raiment to put on, with a place to lay his head, and something over, is rich."* Wesley wanted believers to go beyond giving a tithe (a strict tenth) of their income. He thought they should give away all their extra money after they had provided for their basic needs. He famously stated that *"What should rise is not the Christian's standard of living but standard of giving."*

So where does all this leave us as Methodist people today? How does it make us feel? It's easy to filter a lot of this out and say that life was simpler then, that Wesley was a single man without a family to provide for, that he did not face the material temptations we do now. The fact remains that here was a man whose treasure lay in a different Kingdom and who refused to be seduced or dazzled by worldly wealth and consumer goods.

What would it be like if every Methodist were to take up the challenge of aiming to increase their standard of giving before worrying about adding to their standard of living? The results in terms of releasing resources into fighting poverty, pioneering outreach opportunities, funding the support of scores of new Christian workers and sending money overseas to help in global mission are incalculable. It's got to be more glorifying to God than relying on state funding from sources that compromise our principles and trouble our conscience.

A recent hymn by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend tells the story of the widow giving her tiny offering that day in the Temple as Jesus looked on. It declares

*"Not what you give but what you keep*

*Is what the King is counting."*

True then, true in Wesley's time and every bit as true for us today. Like Wesley said – a discipleship issue.