

WISDOM AND FINANCE

*The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance,
but everyone who is hasty comes only to want. (Proverbs 21:5)*

Precious treasure remains in the house of the wise, but the fool devours it. (Proverbs 21:20)

I. Where Did All Our Money Go?

Keeping up with the Joneses is very much alive today. It's a phenomenon that crosses all socio-economic boundaries and generally results in people living beyond their means. And when we live beyond our means we are living in a false sense of reality. There is the juggling act – taking a cash advance to pay off another line of credit, making minimal payment on credit cards, opening additional lines of credit thereby increasing your consumer debt. These are warning signs of impending financial disaster. If the amount an individual or family owes to creditors is higher this year than it was last year, then they are likely headed in the wrong direction.

Perhaps you are not in that place; perhaps you are doing pretty well. For you, the question may not be “are you heading for financial crisis?” but “are you making the most of everything you have, or do you find yourself being wasteful here or there because you can afford to be?”

Either case is not an example of wisdom. In a culture of excessive consumerism, many of us are on a treadmill of consuming that keeps going faster and faster. But the day will come (or perhaps it has) when we are going to break down or the treadmill will break down, because we cannot continue to go faster and faster as we build up those altars of convenience and comfort and pleasure.

So today we will look at biblical wisdom and basic money management principles that can help us to get off that treadmill. Perhaps you are already familiar with these in theory, but

WISDOM AND FINANCE

are struggling with putting them into practice. For me this is much like eating a healthier diet and getting regular exercise – I know I should do it and I would be healthier for it, yet so often I fail to do so. So I invite you to join me in considering our relationship to money and material possessions and how to become wise stewards of these God given resources.

A. Living as Prodigals

In the 15th chapter of Luke, Jesus tells a story which many of us recognize ...

From Jesus' description in Luke 15:11-16, we see that the prodigal son had the habits of squandering and spending. The word prodigal does not mean someone who wanders away or is lost. It literally means "one who wastes money." A prodigal is one who wastes money, who is a spendthrift. Many of us struggle with that habit as well. We're not worried about tomorrow. We want it today. The problem with that kind of thinking is that, for most of us, the "famine" eventually comes. It comes when we have spent everything we have and even a little bit of next year's income. So we use the credit card and charge it, and we go a little further into debt. Finally, we come to a place where we "find ourselves." We have nothing left, not even any credit, and we can't figure out how we are we going to make it.

B. The More We Make, the More We Waste

Others of us do not find ourselves broke. We are not abusing our credit cards. There are no creditors calling and asking for payments. We simply have become wasteful and extravagant, throwing our money away. We burn money on things we neither need nor derive value from – almost recklessly, as if we just need to spend for the sake of spending.

It seems that the more financially secure we become, the less we worry about spending money here and there. We waste a dollar on this or that, and we forget where it went. Money just seems to flow through our fingers. We're not as careful with our money as we should be. There are many ways we waste money, but there are two primary money-wasters that many of us struggle with. It is not necessary to eliminate these two things all together, but we should think more carefully about how we spend our money.

1. Impulse buying

We all know that stores are set up to encourage our impulse buying, but still we buy on impulse. <<Going to the grocery store; “frogs”; SALES >>

Tips for avoiding impulse buying:

- Never go grocery shopping when you are hungry.
- Shop for what you need only.
- Make a list and stick to it; buy what you need and get out of the store!
- Wait twenty-four hours before purchasing an impulse buy.

2. Eating out

When my children were younger and I had 3 in afterschool activities, I used to pride myself in holding fast to our “rule” that we only had fast food one night per week. Now ...??

The issue is frequency. The average American eats out an average of four times a week.³ By eating out less frequently, we will have more money to save, spend on something more important, or give away.

II. What is Your Life’s Purpose?

A. Clarifying Our Relationship With Money and Possessions

A few years ago, when I was living in Central Ohio, I was driving along a major street when I saw a billboard and almost drove the car off the road: “Consume or Be Consumed!”

What is your life about? Why do you exist? Do you exist simply to consume as much as you can and get as much pleasure as you can while you are here on this earth, or do you have a higher purpose? How do you understand your life purpose – your vision and mission or calling? And are you spending your money in ways that are consistent with this purpose?

³ Statistics About Eating Dinner Out,” by Magali Rheault, *Kiplinger’s Personal Finance Magazine*, October 2000;

B. Be Clear About Your Purpose and Calling

By default, our society tells us that our life purpose is to consume—to make as much money as possible and to spend as much money as possible. But surely we know that cannot be right.

Do you remember God's call to Abram? In the 12th chapter of Genesis, God essentially tells Abram, "I've chosen you. And I'm going to bless you. I'm going to make your name great and increase your descendants so that they will be a great nation. I will bless you so that you might be a blessing to all the nations of the earth." Like Abram, we are blessed to be a blessing to others. Our purpose in life is not our own pleasure as the prodigal son thought.

Scripture is resplendent with passages that shine light on our life purpose. In Genesis we find that we were created to care for God's creation. In the gospels, Jesus tells us we were created to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We were created to care for our families and those in need. The prophet Micah reminds us that we were created to glorify God, to seek justice, and to do mercy. Presbyterian minister Fredrick Buechner describes our vocation this way: The place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger. When we pursue God's longing for our lives, it never serves just ourselves.

Our money and possessions should be devoted to helping us fulfill this calling. We are to use our resources to help care for our families and others—to serve Christ and the world through the church, missions, and everyday opportunities. We have a life purpose that is greater than our own self-interests – comfort, convenience and pleasure, and how we spend our God-given resources reflects our understanding and commitment to this life purpose or mission.

C. Set Worthy Goals

Being able to accomplish the greater purposes God has for our lives requires some measure of planning. Taking the time to set goals related to our lives and our finances is crucial if we are to become wise stewards of our God-given resources. Each of us should think about our life purpose and goals and then identify two short-term financial goals, two mid-range

financial goals, and two long-term financial goals that are aimed at helping us to accomplish our broader life goals. At least one goal in each category should relate specifically to our faith.

For example ...*(Suggestion: Use the bulletin insert "My Life and Financial Goals Worksheet.")*

III. The Discipline of Managing Your Money

A. The Necessity of a Budget/Spending Plan

Once we have set some financial goals, we need to develop a plan to meet those goals. A budget is a spending plan that enables us to accomplish our goals. Some people use an envelope system to help them manage their saving and spending and stay on budget. Others use a variety of different approaches. Many people find it helpful to seek the advice of a financial advisor. For those who find themselves in the midst of a financial crisis, a financial counselor can help to work out terms with creditors and develop a workable financial plan. Whatever approach you choose, the important thing is simply to have a plan.

B. Six Financial Planning Principles

The following financial planning principles can help us to manage our money with wisdom and faith:

1. Pay your tithe and offering first.

Put God first in your living and your giving. Give your tithe and offering from the "top" of your paycheck, and then live on whatever remains.

2. Create a budget and track your expenses.

Creating a budget is simply developing a plan in which you tell your money what you want it to do. Tracking your expenses with a budget is like getting on the scales: It allows you to see how you are doing and motivates you to be more careful with your expenditures. *(Suggestion: Use the bulletin insert "Basic Budget Worksheet.")*

3. Simplify your lifestyle (live below your means).

Simplifying your lifestyle is simply living BELOW your means. Because this discipline is critical to the success of any financial plan, next Sunday's message will be devoted to this topic.

4. Establish an emergency fund.

An emergency fund is an account separate from checking or long-term savings that is set aside specifically for emergencies. Dave Ramsey recommends beginning with \$1,000 and building that to three months' worth of income.⁴ When you have this amount, you won't need to use your credit cards anymore.

5. Pay off your credit cards, use cash/debit cards for purchases, and use credit wisely.

As you are building your emergency fund, begin to pay off your credit card debt and start using cash or debit cards for purchases. Some experts suggest starting with the credit card that has the highest interest rate. Others suggest paying down the smallest debt first, experiencing that victory, and applying your payments from the first card to the second, and so on, creating a snowball effect to pay off the cards as soon as possible. Cut up your cards as you pay them down so that you are not trapped or leveraged by your future for present-day pleasure, as the prodigal son was. If you must use a credit card, such as when traveling or making purchases online, be sure to pay off the debt monthly. If you are unable to do this, then it is better for you to cut up your cards and stop using them altogether.

6. Practice long-term savings and investing habits.

Saving money is the number-one wise money management principle everyone should practice. We do not save merely for the sake of saving. There is a word for that: hoarding. Hoarding is frowned upon in the Bible as the practice of fools and those who fail to understand the purpose of life. Saving, on the other hand, is meant to be purposeful. There are three types

^{4 4} *The Total Money Makeover*, by Dave Ramsey (Thomas Nelson, 2007); pp. 102–08.

of savings we should have: 1) emergency savings, 2) savings for wants and goals, and 3) retirement savings.

IV. The Text

Immediately following the parable of The Prodigal Son, Jesus tells another parable, in Luke 16 one that has often stumped believers – the parable of the Shrewd Steward. We are told of a wealthy landowner's steward who is accused of "wasting" his master's possessions. The landowner threatens to fire him, so the steward calls all his master's debtors and erases the interest portion of their debt in hopes that they'll treat him well after he's out of a job. The strange thing is that the master commends the steward for his dishonest move and Jesus tells us to be like him. At first glance it's hard to see why Jesus would tell us to be like a deceitful servant. Isn't the landowner like God, and aren't we like stewards of God? Why would Jesus encourage us to cheat God?

However, if we place ourselves in the place of a 1st century tenant farmer, like the ones Jesus was likely preaching to, suddenly it's not so clear that the landowner is the "good guy" in the story. In the Hebrew Scriptures God tends not to look kindly on absentee landlords – God's intention seems to be that people should enjoy the fruits of their own labors, not just live off the hard work of others. And the fact that this landowner seemed to be charging his own tenants interest is interesting too. Collecting interest, or usury as it is commonly known in the Old Testament, was forbidden to God's people. This landowner was breaking God's law and exploiting the people by doing this. So what the steward does in reducing the farmer's debts is less an act of injustice towards the landowner, and more an act of restoring justice to the farmers. And the moral of the story that Jesus shares with is that we should not love money for money's sake, but should instead use wealth to build relationships. He says you cannot love both God and money - which in context seems a critique more aimed at the landowner who had money, than at the steward who had none and gave away that which he had access to.

So read in this light, this parable suddenly seems to be about economic justice towards those who are being exploited - it's about the proper use of wealth, and how we should use it to help people, not exploit them further.

V. Conclusion

Back in Genesis 12, God's promise to Abraham revealed God's purpose for Abraham, God's purpose for God's people. "I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing." That was the promise made to Abraham – a covenant promise that all believers live under. God promises to bless us – and in doing so, His plan is to use us as a blessing for others.

Rev. Mike Lindstrom suggests we imagine the people of God, the followers of Jesus, as a paintbrush used by God to color a world made dull and drab by the effects of sin. What God has done for us is not simply for us. If we think that way then it's like putting paint on a brush thinking the color is for the brush. The brush is the tool used by an artist to bring color to a lifeless canvas. When it happens it is not the brush that created the beauty, but without the brush the beauty wouldn't be there.

God is about the business of painting and repainting creation, bringing to life the masterpiece entitled the Realm of God. And, God chooses to use us as the brush. When we make our relationship with God all about us, when we use our finances and resources primarily for ourselves, when our Christianity is mostly seen as the way to make our life better, then parts of this world remain drab and gray. The lives of our neighbors remain dull and lifeless.

How are we living our lives? Are we blessed? Are we allowing God to use us in amazing ways to be a blessing? Are we a paintbrush in the hands of our creative God?

Would you join me in praying ...

CONTENTMENT PRAYER

Lord, help me be grateful for what I have, to remember that I don't need most of what I want, and that joy is found in simplicity and generosity.