

Stewardship of the Money We Don't Give

Part 6 – Biblical Financial Stewardship

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God also owns the money we don't give Him

If you received a 10% on a paper you turned into your teacher as a student, you wouldn't feel real good about it obviously. You would have seriously failed the assignment to miss 90% of the material somehow. Yet it is possible to get that grade on God's financial stewardship test – even if we gave a tithe from every paycheck! How can that be? Well, that is how far off we can actually be from living as God's stewards if we think that we can do whatever we want with whatever is left after we give.

The previous studies have taught us that we are only stewards, not owners, of our money and possessions. If God owns everything, then we declare our agreement with God that we are stewards by giving back to God a regular sacrificial percentage. But what about that part that is left? Isn't that God's as well? It really is, if we are stewards. We get to choose how to use it, but it still belongs to God.

God's word claims that He owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Psalm 50:10). Although human beings claim ownership of livestock, God is saying that He has a prior ownership claim. People simply manage God's cattle whether they acknowledge it or not.

We have only grasped stewardship if we realize that all our money must be under God's control. And that is actually the path to financial freedom. You see, if I consider all of my money to be under God's control, then I can seek and find God's help in every decision about material things. What a relief! God is not only the owner of my possessions; He's my advisor about how to manage it all!

This study addresses all those other places our money goes – spending, saving, investing, debt repayment. Not all the principles and ideas we discuss in this study are for everyone. You might not have any debt. Good for you. Likewise we are not all supposed to spend the same or have identical financial priorities. For example, today I'll make some specific suggestions for living cheaply. God might be leading one person to buy generic and stop spending money on entertainment. The next person might be God's will to buy name brands and get season tickets to the Milwaukee Brewers – and share them with me☺.

We can't judge each other, but there are some principles about stewardship wisdom that we must apply and cannot ignore. Our challenge today is to put all our money on the table before God and seek His wisdom.

The Woman who was good with Money

Let's get some financial wisdom from a woman. Guys, can we handle that? Actually it's written by a guy about a woman who's good with money. Our wives should be our closest financial advisors anyhow. And these verses tell us guys that if we find a wife like this, we are really, really lucky. In fact, a woman like this will do a lot more towards having a good marriage than a pretty face☺.

This woman seemed to be a wise steward of her financial resources – all of them. She teaches us that stewardship is far more than giving money. Stewardship touches our work ethic and all the ways that we spend and invest.

(Proverbs 31:10-12) *“A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. {11} Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. {12} She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life.”*

Two basic traits mark this excellent woman which are crucial to every Christian who wants to be a good steward financially. She works hard and she spends wisely. Note those two themes in the following description of this woman.

(Proverbs 31:13-21) *“She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands. SHE WORKS HARD {14} She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar. SHE SPENDS WISELY {15} She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls. SHE WORKS HARD {16} She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard. SHE SPENDS WISELY {17} She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks. SHE WORKS HARD {18} She sees that her trading is profitable SHE SPENDS WISELY, and her lamp does not go out at night. SHE WORKS HARD {19} In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers. SHE WORKS HARD*

And as a result of her hard work and wise spending, she is truly a wise steward in two additional ways: (Proverbs 31:20) *She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy. SHE GIVES FREELY {21} When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet.” SHE PLANS AHEADS*

A good cash flow depends on hard work first of all. We won't have any money or stuff or even food of which to be a steward unless we work hard. By working hard in fact, this woman minimized her expenses, making some things herself that she wouldn't have to buy in the market. She was also wise about spending and investing. Money doesn't grow on trees – unless you buy an orchard. This woman looked for ways to make her money grow.

And finally we learn from her example that when you work hard and spend wisely and plan ahead there is money left to give generously. Quite frankly the reason why we often feel we can't give is because we have not been faithful stewards by working hard and spending wisely.

So if God is speaking to us in these days about financial stewardship, we will need to ask Him which of these areas to address.

Finding our Financial “Sweet Spot”

How many of us would like to have a list published showing every expense we have made in the last year? Probably not. There are some purchases I'm sure that we'd like to take back. So maybe we need God's help on this. The first step to becoming a wise steward of our spending is to set a lifestyle limit financially.

The writer of Proverbs 30:8-9, Agur, declares, *“Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. {9} Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the LORD?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.”*

Really he was praying for the ideal financial condition. He prays that God would not give him too much or too little. Is this a prayer that God would answer? Agur asks just for “daily bread.” Interestingly, this is exactly the financial prayer Jesus taught us, “Give us today our daily bread.” (Matthew 6:11)

Maybe we are praying or at least desiring the wrong things. It is highly possible that we would become self-sufficient and superior-feeling if we had an extra million

dollars in the bank. On the other hand, would we be tempted to be dishonest if we became impoverished?

Agur clearly is teaching that there is a “just right” place to be financially. It’s kind of a Goldilocks thing – not too hot, not too cold. If God owns everything and has determined how much we should have, then there really is a sweet spot for us financially. The world says that the sweet spot is always to have more. God’s word says no.

God’s will for how much money we should have is the amount we have right now. But even when we accept that, we have a significant challenge. What does God want us to do with what we have? What lifestyle does God want us to live at spending-wise? Do we assume that if we can afford a certain lifestyle, then it’s God’s will that we live at that level? Have we ever considered that God might want us to set a lifestyle limit below our income level?

This might mean a radical change of direction in our thinking – but I’m convinced it’s what God wants us to think about. Stewardship means that we need to seek out from God what lifestyle level we should live financially.

Three Financial Lifestyle Choices

We really have three lifestyle choices financially, regardless of our income level.

1. Living above our means. This lifestyle will mean increasing debt and stress to be sure.
2. Living within our means. This is what we all assume is the right way to live. It will result in a steady, balanced cash flow and will give a person freedom from the bondage of debt and significant financial worries.
3. Living below our means. This is the lifestyle many Christians have never considered, but need to. It will also result in a steady, balanced cash flow and freedom, but it also accomplishes more. Living below our means really prepares us to experience some additional blessings.

Why should we consider living below our means? First of all, it’s the key to contentment – because we constantly realize there are things we choose not to buy. I learn daily what I can live without because I actually have the ability to get them, but I don’t.

Secondly, when we spend less than we earn, we are free to give more than we even planned. When I spend less than I have, I discover that God has allowed me more money which He wants me to manage. Then when opportunities arise, I am free to give as God leads me.

Thirdly, when I spend less than I earn, my stewardship has a good chance of outlasting my own life. For one thing, if I’m a parent, I can be an example to my children. Many young adults and families struggle financially in their early years because they are used to the lifestyle of their parents. But our adult children may or may not be able to live at the level we live. Maybe the larger problem often is that children follow the philosophy of their parents that they should spend all the money they get. But if we as parents consistently demonstrate contentment by limiting our lifestyle, that’s the principle they can learn. And we are doing them and our grandchildren a huge favor.

The other way that our stewardship can outlast the years we have on earth is by leaving money to ministries. Indeed leaving an inheritance to children is a good thing (Proverbs 13:22), but leaving some of it to serve God’s kingdom purposes might be even better. The only way to gather an inheritance is to spend consistently less than we earn.

Let's assume that God is challenging you and me to either live within or below your means. Is that a pretty safe assumption – that God is not trying to teach us how to live beyond our means? If we want to be stewards living within or below our means, we have to handle the spending issue.

How to Live Below our Means

So what do we do when we want things we can't afford? When that want or desire comes, we assume that the solution is to either increase our income or to increase our debt. Right? If we want something we can't afford right now, we think about how we can get more money either from more income or more borrowing.

But the Proverbs tell us two simple truths that can change our entire financial situation. I'm warning you, the Bible uses a strong term to describe us if we think this way. Ready? (Proverbs 17:16) *"Of what use is money in the hand of a fool, since he has no desire to get wisdom?"* If we only want money, not wisdom, God calls us a fool.

So more money is not the solution. The Proverbs further tell us that it's foolish to have what we can't afford (Proverbs 19:10) *"It is not fitting for a fool to live in luxury..."*

We might think that luxury is driving a new Mercedes or buying clothes at some elite store, but luxury is simply something we want, but can't afford. The luxury may be taking the family to MacDonal'd's as often as we do. There's nothing "wrong" with that of itself. Others do it. But it's not my "right" if I can't afford it.

If it takes away from a necessity or adds to a credit card balance we can't pay off, those expenses are luxuries beyond my means. They create sleepless nights, overwork and trouble in our marriages when we begin to play blaming games.

The answer is found in seriously making spending a stewardship issue under God's control. Besides the 10 commandments, God might be personally commanding us to not buy many things we assume are our right. But God wants to give us the freedom of living within or below our means.

We might think that there's nothing we can change in our spending. There is nothing more I can cut out. I just need more money. I have to go into further debt or get more income!

Let me suggest 24 ideas for how to live within or below your means without adding to your income or debt. You can add to your own list. Take a deep breath and decide not to be defensive, OK? Every idea on here may not be God speaking to you, but we need to realize that there are choices we can make.

24 Ways to Live Below Your Means

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| 1. Doing without | 13. Accepting less convenience |
| 2. Older technology and styles | 14. Budgeting, and keeping it |
| 3. Used instead of New | 15. Waiting & shopping longer |
| 4. Sales, Coupons, Rebates | 16. Planning ahead |
| 5. Keeping the old one | 17. Buying quantity |
| 6. Giving up things that are fun to do/have | 18. Giving up what tastes best |
| 7. Buying lesser/generic brands | 19. Making instead of buying |
| 8. Fixing instead of replacing | 20. Renting instead of Owning |
| 9. Less instead of More | 21. Smaller instead of Bigger |
| 10. Combine trips | 22. Less entertainment |
| 11. Shorter showers, and other utilities | 23. Value instead of vanity |
| 12. Selling off what I don't need | 24. Don't use the credit card |

Frugality and Financial Freedom

Isn't this list above an exciting and wonderful way to live? I'm only partly joking about that because it really can be! It can free us financially. As we spend less by adopting a different, more frugal lifestyle, there will be more money left to take the pain out of the unexpected car repair or medical bill. The old adage is true that a penny saved really is a penny earned.

Take a pencil or pen and check what you could do better at or add to the above list. If we have habitually thought that that the only answer is more income or more debt we need to make an adjustment to our mindset and lifestyle. It can help our stress, our marriage and even our children and grandchildren. Or we could just keep increasing our misery in all those areas.

We can learn these skills – if we have the humility. If you are interested in learning them there are people around you in the church who are masters at these who can probably help.

When we feel forced to cut back on some area of spending we tend at first to resent it. Priscilla and I have decided that when that happens God is doing us a great favor. Not only is He teaching us self-control, wisdom and trust, but also our kids might catch some of it.

So are we learning that it is God's will that we never spend more than we absolutely need? I never said that and neither did God. He gives us all things richly to enjoy (1 Timothy 6:17). God delights to reward us with special blessings. Some might be gifts. Some we can indeed splurge on with freedom at times as God's blessings. But the tendency of our society is to consider splurges to be rights and soon splurging becomes our routine. And it's an enslaving lifestyle that we often cannot afford. We need to consider if a certain splurge really is God's blessing or not. Proverbs 10:22 tells us that, "*The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it.*" If our so-called blessing is bringing us financial debt and family stress, it's probably not God's blessing at all.

It is crucial that we distinguish between our needs, our wants and our desires. We need a vehicle for transportation. We probably want to upgrade to something newer and nicer. We might desire the new red sports car that just passed us on the highway.

Sometimes God leads and enables us to enjoy our wants and desires. But often He doesn't. Instead he wants to teach us wisdom, contentment and frugality in some way to enable us to have the financial freedom of living below our means.

That leads us to the important stewardship issue of savings.

Saving and Budgeting for a Rainy Day

As we begin to live within or below our means, there is a very good possibility that we will be able to save up money for future needs. Proverbs 6:6-8 tell us that ants have enough sense just by instinct to work hard when the weather is good so that they have enough in the winter. Proverbs 21:5 tells us, "*The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty.*"

You see, no matter how much money we bring in we can still live in poverty if we spend it all and can't meet the bills. If we don't restrain our spending so we have enough money to do what we need to do, that's poverty. So planning means some kind budgeting or plan unless there is a shared and accepted standard of thrift in the family.

Particularly if we are in trouble financially, it will take an actual budget to get us out and help us stay out. Crown Financial ministries (www.crown.org) has self-guided

materials to help or it might be wise to seek out a financial counselor to help us. A budget allows us to know if we really can afford something. Have we done the math?

Maybe you aren't at a stage in life where saving and investing is high priority. You might be living paycheck to paycheck. But saving is part of planning. Proverbs 21:20 tells us, "*In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but a foolish man devours all he has.*" Saving is part of living within or below our means. We simply can't use up all the money we have now if we are going to have it when we need it.

Why do they take out taxes from every paycheck at most jobs? And why do they require the self-employed to pay quarterly? Because the government doesn't trust us to take it out and pay it at the end of the year, right?

Pastors are considered self-employed tax-wise (a unique category) and we pay quarterly. I've found that the best thing for me is to set up an automatic transfer every paycheck into a savings account because for so many years I struggled to get that quarterly payment together. Now I feel the pinch of that money being taken out every paycheck, but I'm not worried about quarterly taxes anymore.

For most people there will sometimes be needs that we could never have anticipated and for which we must trust God. That's normal Christian living even when we are good stewards. But there are so many regular expenses like taxes and other bills that require us to save. Beyond that there is a likelihood that cars must be repaired or replace and appliances give out etc. A wise steward will seek to set aside some portion as savings in anticipation of those needs.

Investing isn't just for the Wealthy

Businesses require investment. The wise woman of Proverbs 31:16 considered and bought a field and then she planted a vineyard. Every farmer knows that you have to have fields to farm. And you have to have tractors and buy fertilizer. Every businessman invests. That's what this woman did. Many people start their own business of some kind. To do so requires some kind of investment, even if it's just gas to put in dad's mower when a teen mows lawns for the neighbors.

For many today investing means putting some money someplace where it can grow for retirement. It's not that everyone can or must do this at every point in their life. But the earlier a person starts, the more the investment grows. We should plan for a time later in life when we won't be able to earn what we did earlier in life.

Finally a part of wise investing leads to the opportunity to leave an inheritance (Proverbs 13:22) "*A good man leaves an inheritance for his children's children.*) He was good because he wasn't just thinking about himself. He was thinking about the future. And if he saved and invested well, there was something to help his children when he was gone.

One warning on investments is that being stewards of God's money always means that wisdom is found in balance. There is such a thing as excessive saving and investing. The rich man in Luke 12:16-21 built bigger barns and said, *There, I have plenty laid up for years. Eat, Drink and be merry.* But then the guy died. Jesus said that his problem was that he was not rich toward God. His investing was all selfish and excluded God.

We need to make sure that our saving and investing is not really part of a paranoia we have about the future. Saving excessively for retirement can indicate a failure to trust God or it can reveal that our real goal is to live lavishly throughout life. Does our saving and investing reflect that we are "rich toward God?"

Now we come to what is probably the most difficult stewardship issue – debt.

Debt is Slavery not Stewardship

Probably more than a few of us have sensed God speaking to us about stewardship. We really want to give God true ownership of our finances. But many people feel powerless to change because they are in a mess because of debt.

There are two basic kinds of debt. Some debt might be acceptable. A home mortgage, for example, provides us with a necessity that we might reasonably expect to appreciate in value. Other investments in business might also involve reasonable debt with minimal risk after factoring in our investment of hard work. In either case however, wisdom still demands that we get good advice to see if we have over-borrowed on what is otherwise a reasonable area of debt.

The subprime mortgage crisis of 2007 is an example of so-called “good debt” going bad. Many home buyers borrowed more than they could afford and then when interest rates escalated on their adjustable rate mortgages, they defaulted.

The real culprit of most debt problems is consumer debt – paying finance charges on credit cards or any loan that we really can’t afford buying things that depreciate in value.

According to MSN Money (Liz Pulliam Weston, *The Truth about Credit Card Debt*, www.moneycentral.msn.com/content/banking, 11-15- 2007) a little more than ¼ of households don’t use credit cards at all. Another ¼ pay them off each month. That’s the good news. But that leaves about ½ with outstanding balances that are increasing at 10-20% interest. In 2005 the average balance was almost \$5000! This is the reason why many Christian families are in financial and sometimes marital crisis. It’s also why some feel that can’t even begin to give to God’s kingdom purposes financially.

Someone recently sent me their personal list called, Ways to Know if you’re in too much debt. Included were these statements.

1. You are paying for necessities with credit cards.
2. You are transferring balances between credit cards.
3. You think by taking a consolidation loan to pay off the credit cards everything will work out, but you don’t get rid of the credit cards.
4. You think because you have a high credit limit, you can afford it.
5. You get an uneasy feeling when you are doing monthly bills.
6. You get nervous every time the phone rings.
7. When someone else says “they can’t afford something” you think they need to manage their money better – when it’s really you that needs to.

What does the Bible say about debt? It says that debt is slavery and obligation. (Proverbs 22:7) *“The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender.”* The term, servant is really, slave. Debt is bondage. The Bible doesn’t say that it’s always wrong to borrow; it just tells us that debt is bondage. How much bondage do we want – because debt is an obligation to repay?

Debt is also a major cause of conflict. Jeremiah 15:10 complains, *“Alas... I have neither lent nor borrowed, yet everyone curses me.”* This makes the interesting observation that 2500 years ago debt was already causing conflict.

People often borrow money from relatives who then can’t or don’t pay it back. So they avoid each other and whole families suffer. Husbands or wives hide debt on credit cards, but some day it all comes out and the trust in the marriage is seriously damaged. Unpaid bills due to pressure from debt bring letters from creditors and collection agencies

and eventually lawsuits. Businessmen overextend on debt and then the business goes bankrupt. The creditors who go unpaid may be family-owned businesses who need to be paid to make their own payroll and pay their bills. And people who used to be friends live out their lives in conflict because of money.

If we are sensing God working in our lives about stewardship, what do we do about our debt problems? There is hope, but it starts with spiritual decisions to realign our finances with God's principles. It starts with making significant changes in our mindset and financial management. It starts with deciding to put God in the driver's seat where He has belonged all the time.

So if you have troubling debt, don't despair. Hang on. But like an EMT at an accident scene, the first thing that must be done is to identify the bleeding and stop it. There is a Turkish Proverb that says, *No matter how far down the wrong road you've gone, turn back.* The key to overcoming debt problems is to stop borrowing more, start living on less and begin paying back what we owe.

Crawling out of Debt into Financial Freedom

How are we actually going to get out of debt? Crown Financial Ministries (www.crown.org, 11-15-2007) tells the encouraging testimony of a man who at age 26 had debts of \$135,000 – including his house, two car payments and 8 credit cards. The strain led to a divorce. He had creditors calling and his stomach was in knots every time the phone rang.

He began to act on the biblical advice of Crown Ministries. First he sold his house. It only netted \$2700 after paying off his mortgage, but that enabled him to move into a one-bedroom apartment. He stopped all his subscriptions, cancelled his cable TV and discontinued all entertainment that he had to pay for. He then spent the extra time running or biking or at the library reading – much about financial wisdom.

With every purchase he asked, Do I really need it or do I just want it? Am I paying too much? He greatly reduced his grocery bill and made water his beverage of choice for most meals.

He earned \$400 a week, but by making these changes he freed up \$400 a month which he then applied towards his debts. He first paid off the credit card with the smallest balance. When that was paid off, he applied the same amount plus what he now didn't have to pay on the previous card and paid off the next. In 4 years he became debt-free. Then he began saving money at the same rate he had been paying off debts.

He writes, *Life-style changes are the most difficult changes you can make... but until the changes are ingrained in your soul, there's always that temptation to fall back to your old ways. My financial problems didn't disappear when I became debt-free. There are still financial decisions to make and goals to meet. The difference for me now is that...my finances...no longer control me.*

There are many books and resources to help you. Please ask someone in the leadership of the church to steer you if you need help. But if we are in financial bondage – at any level of the issues we talked about today, the solution boils down to a series of decisions.

1. Do I want to be a steward and acknowledge God's full control?
2. Will I confess my mismanagement and pray for God's help?
3. Will I seek godly advice? Will I consult with my spouse and other Christians and Christian resources that can help me?

4. Will I make the lifestyle and other changes needed?

If we humble ourselves and commit ourselves to stewardship and getting wisdom from others, God goes to work. There is hope.

Lord of All

So is the money we give more holy than the money we spend or save? If our “tithes” could talk to the rest of our money could it claim to be “holier than thou?” Actually, No, not at all. If indeed God owns all that we have, then the way that we spend, save and invest is just as much a spiritual matter as any money we give to the Lord. If He is lord of all, then we must be stewards of all the money or other possessions God entrusts to us.