

What the Bible Teaches About Debt

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Mastering Your Money
Proverbs 22:7

A week ago I was down in Houston doing a conference for some assembled Vineyard churches and I got to speak on Friday and Saturday and then taught at one of the Houston area Vineyards on Sunday. I just want you to know that God was really faithful and really good. I had a wonderful time. For any of you who did think about me or prayed, I really appreciate it. God showed up in a way that I haven't seen in a very long time. We saw a real release of power. Many, many people were touched. I was really grateful, after personally feeling a spiritual drought in my own life and just calling out to the Lord asking him when he was going to come, I felt that he came.

Well, I have been doing a series here on money. And I have told you throughout that I have been concerned about the profound lack of teaching that most long time church goers have gotten regarding the use of money. At best, people hear messages on giving. I am going to talk about giving at some point in the series. But there is so much more in the Bible on money than just giving. God is good and the reason that he reveals himself through written words in the book called the Bible is because he wants us to be blessed and he wants our lives to go well. So we really need to understand all that he says in here including what he says about money.

So this morning I want to talk about borrowing money and the whole issue of debt. And we are going to sweep in using our credit cards, our MasterCard, our Visa, our Lazarus card, the other 150 cards that you may be carrying in your wallet—the use of plastic. I want to talk about loans and borrowing for houses and borrowing for cars and borrowing for furniture. And we want to talk about extending credit to someone else.

Let's start off with a very simple question. What does the Bible say about borrowing and debt? Well, the Old Testament is very clear. "Neither a borrower or a lender be..." And Paul in the New Testament says, "Owe no man anything." Therefore, biblically, all loans are wrong. See, you have two scriptures. "Neither a borrower or a lender be." And "Owe no man anything." (Romans 13:8) All borrowing is wrong. Thank you. I am done!

No, I am not really done because first of all that statement, "Neither a borrower or a lender be" is not in the Bible at all. It is not biblical, it is Ben Franklin! And if you look at what Paul is saying in Romans 13, he is not opposing taking out loans, he is simply saying to those of you who owe something, pay what you owe. In verse 6 Paul says, "This is why you pay taxes, give everyone what you owe him." If you owe taxes, pay taxes. If revenue, pay revenue. If you owe somebody respect, then show them respect. If you owe them honor, then give them honor. Pay what you owe.

So we begin in this teaching on borrowing and debt with the simple acknowledgment that it would be much easier if the Bible simply came right out and said don't borrow money. But there is no such verse in the Bible. It would

be much easier if the Bible just said, “Never borrow. Never ever use a credit card. Never incur debt.” But the Bible doesn’t say that.

What, then, does the Bible teach about debt? Let me share with you what I believe is the foundational verse in the scripture for understanding debt, credit cards, home mortgages and everything else. The foundational verse, if you wanted to pick out one verse and say, “here is our starting point for understanding the whole subject of borrowing”, it would be Proverbs 22:7: “The rich rule over the poor [and here is the key] and the borrower is the servant of the lender.” Literally, in Hebrew, the word “servant” means “slave.” The borrower is the slave of the lender. What does the Bible teach about borrowing? Never borrow? All borrowing is wrong? No, it never says that. What it says is that every time a person takes out a loan, every time a person borrows, every time you whip out your credit card and sign the little carbon, you are incurring a form of slavery. You are increasing your bondage. I want to underline this because it is foundational for understanding the biblical perspective on borrowing and debts.

Here’s a little insight in debt I got from doing a word study in Hebrew this last week. I looked up all the various words for credit, interest, loans, debt and all of that. I searched it through in Hebrew because I really want to understand what the Bible actually teaches. Not what Christian financial planners say it teaches, but I wanted to find out for myself what I think it teaches. One of the things that I discovered was that a key word for “loans” in the Old Testament is the word “habal.” Habal is used to describe binding obligations that a person has to repay a loan. When you signed your name, when you struck hands in a pledge, you were entering habal—a binding obligation to repay.

But, you know, the word habal, the same word used for an obligation to repay a loan, is used in other contexts to mean “cords” or “fetters”—chains that bind, or to be tied up with a rope. In one case it is translated “snare” or “trap.” When you see that God used the same word for loans and debt that he used for being tied with a rope or being put in chains or being ensnared or entrapped, and in another case being taken captive, then you have the basic tone biblically—the basic orientation of the Bible toward debt. The conclusion I reached is that the Bible’s basic orientation toward borrowing is that it is not a great thing. It is not forbidden, but it increases people’s slavery. Rather than liberate folks, it ties them up. This morning we’re going to talk about getting liberated from the debt trap.

Now let’s compare what God says about debt in the Bible to the view of debt in contemporary America. Now what could we say about our country except that we are a nation addicted to debt? You take a look at what the government is doing, our government and our leaders. In 1982 the national debt passed 1 trillion dollars for the first time. One decade later, our national debt passed 4 trillion dollars. 4 trillion dollars. I figured it out. You know what 4 trillion dollars is? If you took \$100 dollar bills and laid them end to end, \$100 dollar bills laid end to end, you could circle the globe at the equator 160 times with \$100 bills.

To get some feel for the national debt, understand that your portion of it, you owe \$200,000—each of us owes \$200,000 and it grows every year. Something like 14-15% of all the income the government takes in right now is spent for interest on the national debt. And national debt figures are actually much higher than what the government reports because the government fudges its numbers.

It fudges by borrowing from the social security trust fund and repaying that borrowed money with IOU's from the future. The debt would be much higher except that your social security is paying for it. On top of that, the number would be much higher except many items are "off budget." President Clinton wants the new health care plan to be off budget. That means that if the health care plan balloons to whatever billion dollars, it won't show up in the national debt figures.

Think about it. On top of this ridiculous amount of debt that the government has incurred and continues to incur, the figure is actually much larger except that the government has engaged in some nifty accounting manipulation. So, you have the government borrowing like crazy.

And then you have individuals in this country, every one of us, borrowing like crazy. You know, 40 years ago banks did not loan money to buy cars. Did you know that? Those of us who are 45 and under, we forget that it has not always been the case that people borrow money for cars and for furniture and for clothes. 1965, the longest auto loan term that you could get from a bank was two years, two years! By the 70's because inflation jacked up the price of cars and they wanted to sell more cars, they extended auto loans to three years. By 1980, it went up to four years. Now, you can get a 5 or 6 year term on your car. So, you have folks borrowing money for 6 years to buy a car or some other depreciating item.

Whereas, the longest term loan that folks took on for houses in the past was seven years, most of America takes out a 30-year loan. We expect to always be in debt.

So, let's pull this together for a moment in our thinking. I have been describing the hard, objective numbers regarding the ballooning debt for individuals and the government. Does the fact that we are a nation addicted to debt say anything about us, as Americans, spiritually? Remember the Bible generally has a negative view about debt and borrowing. Can we look at where we are at in America and from a biblical perspective and say something concrete about the spiritual condition of you and I as individuals and our nation as a whole? We absolutely can.

Flip over to Deuteronomy 28. Deuteronomy 28 is God's promise to the nation of Israel. And God promises to bless his people, Israel, if they would obey God. And he says that if you follow what I am telling you to do in the law, if you keep the commandments, then here is what is going to happen. And then he lays out a series of blessings that will come to the nation. And here is one that I want to note. Deuteronomy 28:12: "The Lord will open the heavens, the store-house of his bounty to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the works of your hands. [Listen to this now] You will lend to many nations, but will borrow from none."

Up until the mid 1970's, the United States was for its history always a creditor nation. It always lent to the nations, and borrowed from none. But in the last 20 years, there has been this major reversal of 200 years of American history.

Deuteronomy goes on and says that when the people are disobedient to the Lord, don't follow the commands of God, there is going to be a curse on the nation. And I realize that this applies to Israel in particular. I am not going to be culturally insensitive to the context here. This applied to Israel. But I find it interesting that when a nation is disobedient, this is the curse that falls on them.

Deuteronomy 28:43-44: “The alien who lives among you will rise above you higher and higher, but you will sink lower and lower. He will lend to you, but you will not lend to him. He will be the head, but you will be the tail.” The curse for disobedience to the commands of God is that a nation becomes a debtor nation. Always borrowing from foreigners and not having the money to lend.

You see, brothers and sisters, if you read in the newspaper that the government is borrowing more money than it has and you watch your lifestyle and you are borrowing more money than you have, and corporations are borrowing more than they have, and even most Christians you know are up to their ears in debt, that is not just an economic problem. Borrowing is a spiritual issue. It is connected up with our relationship with God. A nation whose debt is growing is a nation that, likely, is moving further and further away from God. It is a nation cursed, not blessed. You must understand the spiritual dynamics of what I am saying. Because when I offer prescriptions, unless you understand that debt is a spiritual matter in the Bible, you are going to miss the solution.

How did we get to this place? Let me share with you something here. Again, from a biblical perspective, we need to see that there are two kingdoms constantly at war over every square inch of the universe. There are two kingdoms clashing. Two value systems, two power structures constantly at war. There is the kingdom of God and then there is the kingdom of Satan. On every single issue – doctor-assisted suicide, sexuality, child-raising, money – there is going to be an approach and a perspective, a thought process springing out of the value system of the kingdom of God and there will be almost exactly the opposite approach to those issues and concerns coming from the value system of Satan.

Let me give you a real simple way to distinguish when thoughts and approaches are coming from the kingdom of Satan and not from the kingdom of God. The kingdom of Satan follows a set of principles. It can be found in a set of rules, in a set of laws. It operates with calling cards that scream at the discerning person. This is the calling card of the kingdom of Satan. “Gratify yourself immediately with no thought of the consequences.” Gratify yourself immediately with no thought of the consequences. No up front costs—no money down. The kingdom of Satan is a kingdom that offers its servants immediate, instant, sometimes mind-blowing gratification at the front end. In the kingdom of Satan, you get to use drugs and right off the bat you go, “Wow! What a rush!” In the kingdom of Satan you can have premarital sex and you go, “Wow!” Except most people don’t go “wow”. The truth is for most folks most premarital sex is extraordinarily disappointing. But the promise is there. The lure that you could go, “Wow!”

In the kingdom of Satan you can have instant release, instant exhilaration, instant freedom. But in the kingdom of Satan there is always this fine print. Most people fail to read it. And the fine print is “for this mind-blowing experience, for this release, for this instant satisfaction, you are going to pay big time with bondage, with slavery.”

Yeah, call the Huntington today. It is easy. It is free. They sing a little jingle. “Call Mary, she is waiting for your call. No money down.” I get to have a household of furniture right now. No costs. Whose kingdom is that? Who is sending you all of the credit card applications? “You have been pre-approved.

\$5000 credit limit. \$10,000 credit limit. Who is sending you those? Don't you see the devil's calling card?

Brothers and sisters, the kingdom of God operates from the absolute opposite set of principles. The kingdom of God is always very frank, very up-front regarding the cost to be incurred. Jesus never said to anyone, "Follow me. It is easy. It is free. No problems. Become one of my followers." And then afterwards say, "Gotcha!" Jesus looked people in the eye and said, "Listen, foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head... You want to be a follower of mine? It is going to cost your whole life." High front end payments always with the kingdom of God. High front-end payments. High energy. High commitment, always with the kingdom of God. You throw your life on the line with the kingdom of God. Radical commitment. Very difficult. And initially with the kingdom, not great returns.

You say, "I want to get up in the morning and have a quiet time, a time of devotions with God. I am going to commit a half an hour a day, fifteen minutes in prayer and fifteen minutes in Bible reading. I am going to set that aside from 6:30-7:00, from 7:00-7:30 just to be alone with God." And you do it. You say, "OK. I am going to discipline myself and I am going to do it." You might initially enjoy it a great deal. But many, many people say, "Goodness, it is hard. I am not finding God all that much in my devotional life. I try, but it is hard. I am not quite breaking through and it feels dry." That is the nature of the kingdom of God. Or I am just going to commit myself to work on my marriage – for the first few weeks things get worse. It is true with diets; with praying for the sick; with trying to reconcile a broken relationship – huge front end costs and often very little initial return.

But, you know, with the kingdom of God, God always brings the blessing, the gravy later. You move into increasing amounts of freedom, and after a period of time you feel like it is no human effort and it is all the grace of God. With the kingdom of God, you increase in liberty. You start off narrow and you end up wide.

So, let's sum up this first part. How shall we think about debt? It is not forbidden. But it is generally seen in the Bible as negative. And debt is generally seen in the Bible as a form of slavery, as a way to restrict your freedom. American addiction to debt is a spiritual problem. You are working and your money is going to someone else.

Now, there are certain principles that God speaks to us about regarding debt in the Bible and says, "If you are going to engage in this practice which incurs slavery and bondage, then do so with the utmost care and caution. Like a high voltage warning signal, the Bible says "Danger!" Particularly, I want to warn you about these matters. Don't be a co-signer." Look at Proverbs 6:1-5. If you want, you can cross reference this with Proverbs 11:15 and Proverbs 17:18. Proverbs 6:1-5: "My son, if you put up security for your neighbor, if you have struck hands and pledged for another, if you have been trapped by what you said, ensnared by the words of your mouth, then do this, my son, to free yourself. Since you have fallen into your neighbor's hands, go and humble yourself. Press your plea with your neighbor. Allow no sleep to your eyes, no slumber to your eyelids, free yourself like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter, like a bird from the snare of the fowler."

Do you see how the principle that I was trying to emphasize before about debt, the principle of bondage, the principle of slavery, is just repeated over and over again through a variety of metaphors? In verse 2, "If you have been trapped..." Verse 2 again, "If you have been ensnared..." Verse 3, "Fallen into your neighbor's hand..." Verse 5, "Free yourself like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter, like a bird from the snare of the fowler." Get yourself free.

There are particular debt situations that are a certain trap. They are guaranteed slavery. We need to apply what is being said first of all in the cultural situation in which it was first addressed. Understand that in Israelite culture, like in Middle Eastern culture today, honor and personal dignity was a very high value. So when the author of Proverbs is urging young men to throw themselves at the mercy of a creditor and to try to get out of your pledge, what they are saying is that this is so significant, this warning that I am giving you about pledges is so important, that I want you to lose personal dignity over it. This is such a crucial issue in your life, young man that I want you to run against your natural cultural bias toward your own honor. If you need to humble yourself, humble yourself.

Now what were they being warned against? We are being warned against being a surety or being a co-signer on a loan for another. Back then, and today, there are many people who cannot get credit in their own name. Because of their lack of collateral, because of their credit history, lenders will not loan them money unless someone else comes along to guarantee the debt. Proverbs has some very strong statements about this. And if I was to summarize Proverbs, I would say the warning in Proverbs is as a general rule, don't co-sign. And specifically, don't be a co-signer for a stranger, that is somebody who is not in your family. Don't be a co-signer hastily. Be very careful when you sign a pledge for someone else's debt. And third, don't co-sign if you can't afford to pay the debt if it goes into default. Don't co-sign for a stranger, someone who is not an immediate family member. In any case, never co-sign hastily. And third, don't co-sign unless you can afford to pay the money. Some words of wisdom from the book of Proverbs about co-signing.

Do you know that as a practical matter that 85% of all co-signed loans end up being paid by the guarantor, which is the person who has come along side to guarantee the debt? 85%. You see, there is a reason why banks require co-signers. It is because they have evaluated a situation and they have said that this person is not a good credit risk. We are not likely to get our money from this person. So the book of Proverbs says to those persons who are soft-hearted and soft-headed, beware! This is a bad idea. Don't co-sign.

"Rich, what if it is my son? What if it is a really important need for my child, a student loan?" I see nothing in Proverbs that says don't co-sign for an immediate family member. But in those situations, where we are dealing with immediate family members, I believe the wisdom of scripture [and I am going to talk about this], I believe the wisdom of scripture is that we, generally, with family or close friends ought to give, not loan, but give. And if we do loan, we ought to be willing to lose the money. Because broken promises to repay a loan separate people. And the Bible has a very high value on our relationships with each other, particularly family relationships. So, if a child of yours needs money and you have the money to give, give it. And if they repay you in the future, that is

wonderful, that is great. But, very often children do not repay loans and we need to be aware of that and the potential strain on our relationship before we co-sign a debt.

First principle of warning—as a general rule, don't co-sign. And the second principle of warning is do not presume on the future. Starting in verse 13, James 4 says, "Now, listen you who say, 'today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins."

Now, most borrowers get into trouble because they fail to listen to what God is saying in James 4:13. See, they get into trouble because they base their borrowing decisions on the presumption that everything is going to work out in the future according to their present plans and predictions. Everything is going to work out just perfectly. Isn't this the cause of most debt problems? People presume that they know the future and how everything is going to work out. And they say that everything is going to work out perfectly. "If I take out this loan, I'll be able to pay it back because I am going to keep my job, I won't be laid off." "I am going to keep getting raises." "There won't be any economic down-turn." "My house will continue to appreciate as it has been steadily appreciating over the last three years." "The market will keep going up and up and up." "And my health is going to be great into the future." "I am not going to have any health problems that will make me unable to continue to work or will cause a lot of bills." "No one in my family is going to have emergency medical needs." "My kids won't need braces and my car won't break down or get stolen or be destroyed in an accident."

Well, what if things don't work out the way you planned? When you go to sign that paper, what if things don't work out the way you have them structured? What if you do get laid off? What if your car does get stolen? What if your kids need braces, or breaks eight bones like my son did one year? What will you do with your debts?

Now, I love the fact that James 4:13 and following is not talking about purely spiritual things when James speaks about the sin of presumption. He specifically applies it to the doing of business and commercial transactions. And James lists three specific errors of presumption that folks fall into in business and in loans.

The first error that James 4 speaks to us about is very simply as human beings you do not know the future. James 4:13 says, "Now, listen, you who say today or tomorrow we will go to this city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money. Why you do not even know what will happen tomorrow."

You are planning to have your job next year, five years from now, ten years from now. You don't even know what is happening tomorrow. You are presuming on the future.

The second error of presumption is that you don't take account of your own frailty. James goes on and says, "What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." Anyone who has ever been rushed to the hospital or stood at the bedside of a loved one knows that profound sense of how

fragile life is. Do you understand that your health is a frail thing? That your spouse's health is a frail thing? That your children's health is a frail thing? That we are mist? That is here today and gone tomorrow. We are not going to be permanently well. Those we love will not be permanently well. Life in this world is so fragile. Viewing it as permanent is foolish presumption.

And the third and final presumption is believing that everything turns on our plans rather than the plans of God. As we plan, our ability and goals and projections are not the only issue. We must take account of God. So James goes on and says in verse 15 and says, "Instead, you ought to say 'if it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this and do that' but as it is, you boast and brag."

Brothers and sisters, here is the bottom line of what James is getting at in applying to loans. If in your taking out a loan, you don't have the current means to repay that loan, it is not in the bank, or the collateral in the item isn't sufficient to back up the loan—for example, the car being repossessed, if you got sick would pay off the loan; your house being repossessed, all things being equal, would pay off the loan. If you are presuming on future employment and you are presuming on future health, you are likely doing something that can result in financial bondage in the future.

If we were to sit down with folks here in the church or folks in society and said, "Why are you having the debt problems that you have?" We are going to find that most people got involved with the sin of presumption.

"But, Rich, if the only loans I take out for a house or a car are loans that I currently have the means to repay or are backed by the collateral in the item, right now if those are the only loans I take out, I probably wouldn't be borrowing that much." Right.

Well, there is a third foolish practice that I can warn you about by way of a practical encouragement. And that is the use of plastic. Listen, why do you think you are getting credit cards marketed to you every other day? Why do you think there are so many advertisements out there saying, "Please get our credit card?" Why do you think that when you walk into stores all across America the first thing they ask is, "Do you have a charge card from our store? Can we sign you up for one? You will get a \$10 discount." Do you think it is because the merchant is attempting to assist you other than to assist you to be loosed from your wallet? And that flattery you feel when they say, "You are a select customer; you are pre-approved."

Obviously if you are using credit cards it is a wise thing to pay them off each month. If you are not paying them off each month, you are falling into the trap of debt, borrowing that I described before and you are falling into it at the rate of 10% or 15% or, in some cases 18%. You are working for someone else. But there is a more subtle trap with a credit card that many of you may not be aware of.

Do you know that when people gamble in Las Vegas, the casinos that folks gamble in require folks to turn their money in and get plastic chips to gamble with? In many casinos, apparently, you can't gamble with cash. They make you buy plastic chips to gamble with. Do you know why that is? Because they found that when plastic is substituted for real money, people will gamble more. That, in fact, folks will gamble up to 25-30% more just because they have plastic.

Now, listen to me... listen, survey after survey has indicated that folks spend 20-25% more when they regularly use credit cards compared to when they spend cash or use a check. You are doing OK if you pay your bills off every month. You pay your credit card off every month, you are doing OK. But, I tell you, you would be doing infinitely better to not use that credit card and to pay cash. Check it out for a month. Marlene and I are going to do this. We have used credit cards for years. We have paid them off every month. We thought we were doing fine. I began to read about the use of plastic. The next several months we want to check it out. Pay cash at a restaurant or pay cash when it is a little less convenient. But the experts are uniform that we are losing about 20% of your income simply because you use plastic. It doesn't feel like money and you get a little looser with it.

So those are some warnings about debt. Situations to be careful about. Now, let me give you some commandments. Those were situations when borrowing might be unwise, here are situations when borrowing is wrong.

It is wrong to borrow when you can't pay God first. Proverbs 3:9 lays out a principle that we could trace through the whole scripture and we will talk about this when we talk about giving. Proverbs 3:9 says, "Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops." It is wrong to borrow, if in borrowing, you get yourself in the position that you can't give a proportionate share of your income to the Lord. That you can't give on a regular basis to the Lord. That you can't give generously to the Lord. If your borrowing is cutting in to your ability to give; you are borrowing on a house and it is cutting in on your ability to really give to the Lord; you are borrowing on a car or on anything else and that slices away your ability to give to the Lord, that is wrong.

And it is also wrong to borrow when you do not repay. Psalm 37:21 shares with us a principle of borrowing money that should be bottom line for everyone of us if we claim the name of Jesus. Psalm 37:21 - "The wicked borrow and do not repay, but the righteous give generously."

"Rich, what does the Bible teach about bankruptcy?"

The idea of taking your property and having it all gathered up. Liquidating and getting to keep a portion of it yourself and then paying off your creditors at ten cents on a dollar. What does the Bible say about declaring bankruptcy?

Having been a lawyer, I realize that if you go to speak with a lawyer about your debt problem, one of the first things they are going to do is to turn you toward bankruptcy. And if you say, "No, I want to work out a plan to pay off all my bills. I would like to restructure. I can't pay what I agreed to, but I want to restructure. Because I believe that I owe the money." They will try to steer you away from that. Their mindset is to liquidate. They don't share your value system. But the Bible says, "The wicked borrow and do not repay." And that is not who we are and that is not who you are. A Christian is someone whose Yes is yes and whose No is no. There are so few of these people of integrity anymore. A Christian is a person of integrity.

Listen, not only for the sake of your word, but even more than that, brothers and sisters, for the sake of your witness, pay what you owe. Even if that means a diminished lifestyle, even if it means we have to pay it off over many years and plead with our creditors as it says in Proverbs 6, lose some honor and plead with our creditors for an extension plan; for a restructuring of the debt because we

promised what we now can't repay, if that is what it takes. Let's do it for the sake of our witness. How open will somebody be to our God if they get stiffed by us? A person with the name "Christian" stiffed me and left me holding the bag. Owed me \$5000, \$10,000, \$20,000 in business and didn't repay. Can we put a price on a human soul?

The principal of a local elementary school recently told me that someone recently at their school, who works in the school cafeteria, received a note from a former student who had been there years ago. And in the note was a check for a certain amount of money. The student wrote, with their name attached, signed, that some years ago they stole something from the cafeteria. And they had subsequently come to know Jesus. And they wanted to repay what they stole with interest. The cafeteria worker went to the school principal with that note and they were stunned. What kind of person goes to that length to repay what they owed? A Christian. A real Christian who lives a cut above. Who goes after excellence in their financial dealings? A real Christian.

So, how can we be financially liberated from the debt trap? Let me finish with some ways that we can become financially free. Now first of all, I said this a couple of weeks ago and I want to say it again. If we have gotten ourselves into problems, as many of us have in this area of credit and debt; Marlene and I have over used our credit card, we need to deal with that; and, many of us have lots of debt; if we have made mistakes, it is appropriate for us to acknowledge those things and then to press on. To not allow the guilt of past sins to so weigh us down that we don't move forward. I reminded you a few weeks ago of the verse, "Forgetting what lies behind, reaching forward to that which lies ahead, we press on to the mark of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Don't allow yourself through self-condemnation to not do now what is right. How do we get free?

Here are some practical things that you might want to consider. First of all, if you are having any kind of debt problems, and even if you are not, say to yourself today, "Starting Sunday, February 6, I am not going to borrow any more money." Particularly, if you are struggling with debt, stop borrowing now. Don't add to the problem. Don't borrow more through a debt consolidation loan and stretch out your payments. Don't borrow more through a home equity loan and stretch out your payments. Don't apply for another credit card or credit limit extension. Stop now.

Second, very practical, if credit cards are, at all, a problem for you; if you have run up credit card debt and carrying a bill each month, I challenge you to cut your cards up. If I might paraphrase Jesus, he said, "If your right hand offends you, cut it off." Well, if your credit card enslaves you, cut it up. One of the ways we can see how enmeshed we are with the kingdom of darkness in this whole debt syndrome, is how difficult it would be for us to cut up a credit card. If that is a huge issue, then that may be symptomatic of something. If you are carrying a debt each month on your credit card, then credit cards are being misused, I challenge you to cut it up.

Third, and here is something that we need to think about in the Vineyard. It is not the case that God wants his children to be bound by debt until they are 75, until they die. Make a plan to become debt free. At least debt free beyond your house. It is not necessary to borrow or to have 10, 12 or 15 outstanding bills. A simple plan could be that I am going to pay off the smallest bill first. And then

whatever I save per month on that bill, I am going to take and apply it to the next bill and pay that off. And when that is paid off, I will pay off the next bill until I am debt free.

In speaking of freedom from debt, I want to finish with Leviticus 25. If you have a Bible turn there, we are going to finish with this passage. Leviticus 25, beginning in verse 8, Moses writes, "Count off seven Sabbaths of years—seven times seven years—so that the Sabbaths of years amount to a period of 49 years. Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you is to return to his own family property, and each to his own clan. The fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you. Do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the untended vines. It is a jubilee and is to be holy for you..."

If we went on and read through the chapter, we would find that every fifty years in Israel, God proclaimed liberty throughout the land and said that anyone who is in debt is now freed from their debt. And anyone who lost property, through illness, through poverty, through laziness, whatever; sold their property away, got the property back. Actually, you couldn't even sell property back then. You basically gave property on a 49 year lease. And either during that 49 years you purchased it back and if you couldn't purchase it back, in 49 years it was automatically returned to you. You also couldn't permanently be enslaved. You could buy yourself out of slavery or every 49 years, everybody was set free.

Here is what I would like to suggest from jubilee. As I read Leviticus 25, the principle that I would draw out is that you and I and this country will never become debt free without laying a spiritual foundation of a right relationship with God. Debt problems, as I said at the front end, are usually just symptoms of deeper spiritual problems. Until we are rightly related to God, we will continue to suffer debt problems.

You see, the year of Jubilee began on the tenth day of the seventh month, on the Day of Atonement. This economic freedom started with spiritual freedom, the Day of Atonement, the day when people's sins were forgiven. And throughout this chapter in verse 17 we are told to fear the Lord our God, "to fear your God. I am the Lord your God." And then, again, in verse 36 we are told to not take interest but to fear our God. And then in verse 43, we are told to not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear your God.

Here is the idea. All the practical lessons that you might learn regarding cutting up your credit cards, regarding paying off your debts, regarding not co-signing, regarding not incurring more debt, regarding everything that I said will go by the boards almost entirely unless you become rightly related to God. Now, it is truly the case that a small percentage of individuals have debt problems through absolutely no fault of their own, through catastrophic illness, through catastrophic circumstances. But if we were to work out a bell curve, the vast majority of us are suffering from debt problems because there is a deeper spiritual problem. Because we have gone with the program of the kingdom of Satan that says I must immediately gratify my desires right now with this credit card, believing that I will never have to pay the cost in the future. I have gone with the program of the kingdom of Satan that says I am going to be more

liberated through debt rather than more enslaved. I have a spiritual problem because I must acquire things—a new car, new furniture, new clothing—in order to feel good about myself. And you have regularly had to acquire new things in order to feel good about yourself rather than saying my identity is in Jesus.

See, all the skills training in the world will simply go for naught. All that I am teaching about money will go for naught. And there are many, many good books out on the market that can easily help us to put a budget together, but we won't have the discipline to follow through anymore than we would have the discipline to break a sexual habit in our life, or to change our orientation regarding our spouses or our children, unless our hearts are changed.

Brothers and sisters, if we continue as Americans to have unchecked appetites; if we will not bow the knee before God and say, "God, I need to find my contentment in you, really find it in you and not in things." If we, as Americans, don't come before the Lord and repent, then the curse of debt slavery will continue to grow in this country.

But in Christ there is hope. You see, Christ is the jubilee. When a person turns to Christ, they find someone who said, "The spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind. To release the oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Brothers and sisters, 1994 can be the year of the Lord's favor for you in the area of your money. If you build on a foundation of contentment in Christ, as we grow in the grace of self control and self-discipline, as we practice practical skills of money management, but particularly as we rightly relate to God, we can become debt free and enjoy the liberty that God intended for his children. Let's pray.