

DIGGING OUT OF DEBT

ROMANS 13:8; HEBREWS 11:6, 13:5-6

Today I'm concluding a series of messages on money and marriage. I'd like to explore with you what the Bible says about debt. Why's that? Well, again, the number one reason why couples get divorced in our country is money problems. Most financial counselors agree that the number one money problem in most marriages involves the issue of debt. I found these statistics on the Internet just this week. Over 40% of US families spend more than they earn. Americans carry, on average, \$8400 in credit card debt. If you were to make a 2% payment every month at an annual percentage rate of 15%, it would take about 30 years to pay off and include about \$13,000 in interest. The average U.S household pays \$950 in interest each year. Here's another fascinating statistic. Someone tracked the general rise in indebtedness in our country since World War 2 and found that it pretty much matched the divorce rate over the same period of time. Makes you think, doesn't it? Unresolved money issues generally – and concerns over debt specifically – are an enormous threat to your marriage. It pumps unbelievable amounts of tension and stress into the most precious human relationship of all: the bond between a husband and a wife.

God loves you. God created marriage and He wants your marriage to succeed. Because He is a good God, He is faithful to warn you about what can and will destroy you as an individual and, also what will surely harm your marriage. Where do you find these warnings? In His Word - the Bible. So, let's make the attempt to understand what the Bible says on the subject of financial debt.

BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES CONCERNING DEBT

What's a biblical principle? A biblical principle is a clear teaching on any matter found in the Bible. When you live by a biblical principle, you invite God to bless your life in some way. When you ignore a biblical principle, you do so at your own peril. By doing so, you place an obstacle in front of God's blessing for your life. So, here's one clear biblical principle about debt. Avoid getting into debt yourself. Why? The Bible implies that debt enslaves you to other people rather than to God. Maybe you recall a popular bumper sticker some years ago that read, "I owe, I owe, so off to work I go!" That's exactly the place where all too many people live out their lives. The Bible says, "Just as the rich rule the poor, so the borrower is servant to the lender." (Pro 22:7 NLT)

God wants you to be free to serve Him and Him alone. Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." (Mat 6:24 NLT) It's a simple fact that debt creates a kind of very real bondage. It's a self-induced form of slavery. Debt dictates how you spend the money you make in the months and years to come. Debt reduces your flexibility to take advantage of various opportunities that might come your way in life. And debt puts an emotional strain on the closest relationships that you have in this life. Is being in

debt a sin? In my estimation, that's too strong a statement. The Bible has no problem calling sin what it is. We don't find indebtedness condemned in the Bible like we do stealing, lying or committing adultery. It's more accurate to say that the Bible considers indebtedness very foolish behavior – behavior that lacks wisdom because it represents something less than God's best for you.

By the same token, failure to repay debt is sin. Why? It's a form of theft. Bankruptcies continue to climb in our culture. Again, an Internet statistic estimates that almost one in every 100 households in the United States will claim bankruptcy. The last thing I want to do is beat up on anyone here today who's been through a bankruptcy. I'm sure it's one of the most painful, humiliating and difficult experiences in life. The problem is that our culture has made declaring bankruptcy a viable financial option. We need to take God's Word seriously on this matter. It says, "The wicked borrow and never repay, but the godly are generous givers." (Psa 37:21 NLT) When you assume a debt, you make an implicit promise to repay. Repaying it is a matter of integrity. The Bible says, "Vow it, then do it. Far better not to vow in the first place than to vow and not pay up." (Ecc 5:5 MSG) The Bible also says, "Owe nothing to anyone—except for your obligation to love one another...." (Rom 13:8 NLT) Followers of Jesus, of all people, ought to be the first ones to repay their debts in full and on time. Otherwise, those who don't follow Jesus have a right to question your integrity and the reality of your witness for Jesus. Avoid getting into debt yourself.

Here's a second biblical principle about debt. Avoid getting into debt on behalf of others. Did you ever realize how often the Bible discourages you from co-signing on a loan with someone else – a well-know, frequent practice in our culture? The Old Testament book of Proverbs addresses this issue several times: "There's danger in putting up security for a stranger's debt; it's safer not to guarantee another person's debt.... It's poor judgment to guarantee another person's debt or put up security for a friend.... Don't agree to guarantee another person's debt or put up security for someone else. If you can't pay it, even your bed will be snatched from under you." (Pro 11:15; 17:18; 22:26-27 NLT) Why is this a bad idea? It helps someone else get into debt which is something God wants all of us to avoid in the first place. Then, it puts you and your family's resources at risk. I read that 75% of the people who co-sign on a loan end up having to pay some portion of it off. Avoid getting into debt on behalf of others.

A third biblical principle logically follows the first two. Avoid getting other people indebted to you. In Old Testament times, Jewish people were forbidden to charge interest to other Jews. Jesus took it a step further. "Give to those who ask, and don't turn away from those who want to borrow.... Love your enemies! Do good to them. Lend to them without expecting to be repaid. Then your reward from heaven will be very great, and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High...." (Mat 5:24; Luke 6:35 NLT) God never says don't help people who are in financial need. On the contrary, you're commanded to help people in financial need – especially fellow Christians. It's how you help that matters. Instead of

loaning money, give it as a gift or not at all. How else can you interpret Jesus when He says, “Lend to them without expecting to be repaid?” That sounds like a gift to me! So if someone approaches you and says, “Look, I need some help. Can you give me a loan?” what should you do? The best response biblically is to say, “I’ll give it to you as a gift. If God enables you to pay me back, OK. That’s fine. But there’s no obligation to do so.” Many of us have been on the giving or receiving end of personal, financial loans to or from family or friends and can well attest that good intentions can easily dissolve into hurt feelings and severe damage to precious relationships. Avoid getting people indebted to you. Now, let’s look at this issue from a slightly different perspective.

GODLY PRINCIPLES CONCERNING DEBT

Godly principles are different than biblical principles. How so? I said a few minutes ago that a biblical principle is a clear teaching on any matter found in the Bible. A godly principle is a reasonable application of a biblical principle to your everyday life. A biblical principle doesn’t really allow for honest difference of opinion or interpretation. It’s pretty clear cut how God wants you to live or think about that matter. But there can be honest differences of opinion when it comes to godly principles. So, let me offer up some godly principles for your consideration that flow directly out of the biblical principles we’ve identified.

First of all, it’s important to discern between legitimate borrowing and illegitimate debt. Over the years I’ve read several Christian financial counselors on this subject and many of them hasten to distinguish between kinds of debt. Not all debt is equally dangerous or foolish. Furthermore, it’s important to observe that the Bible’s biggest problem is with debt that is not repaid. By way of reminder, the scripture we looked at earlier says, “The wicked borrow and never repay....” (Psa 37:21 NLT) It equates wickedness with failure to repay not with borrowing per se. Likewise, the Bible says, “Let no debt remain outstanding....” (Rom 13:8 NIV) The problem seems to be more with the failure to repay an obligation or renege on a promise than making an obligation in the first place.

The late Larry Burkett – one of those Christian financial counselors – said that debt refers more to the condition of being unable to fulfill the financial commitments you enter into. You borrow beyond your normal ability to repay. Or you could define debt as an amount borrowed that puts excessive strain on your budget in order to make the payments on it. Another way to define debt is when the total of your unsecured liabilities exceeds your total assets.

You might say, “Rick, this is just so much semantics. Quit playing word games!” Nevertheless, it is possible to make a distinction between borrowing and debt. Buying something on credit is a contract between a lender and a borrower – an agreement to pay on time. That, in and of itself, is not evil. But the wisdom of that arrangement depends on what’s being purchased. Here are a few guidelines on borrowing to think about. Is the item you’re purchasing an asset

that has the potential to appreciate in value or to produce an income? It's better if it does. For instance, a mortgage on a home typically fits into that category. Houses usually appreciate in value. So also might borrowing to start a business or even to get a college education. Those have the potential to produce an income. Nevertheless, you've got to be very careful here, because borrowing exorbitant amounts of money even for a house, a business or an education can get you into trouble very quickly. I've heard about some student loans that make my hair curl, because it's going to take decades to pay them off! But reasonable borrowing for that kind of item is different than buying a car on credit or a boat on credit. Neither item appreciates in value. Neither produces an income.

Here's another guideline. Is the value of the item equal to or does it exceed the amount owed against it? It's better if it does. Until a couple of years ago, if you defaulted on a home mortgage the bank was essentially repaid through foreclosure. Let's hope we get back to that arrangement soon! But let's say you go into debt to fund a nice \$3000 vacation or buy \$1000 worth of new clothes on your credit card and you have neither the savings to repay the loan or the regular monthly income to pay it off quickly. The dollar value of what you've bought doesn't equal the amount you owe. When the vacation's over; it's over. It has zero financial value at that point. The great new threads you purchased begin to drop in value the moment you put them on. In other words, there are a few things in life – a very, select few – that deserve to be purchased on credit. Let's call it borrowing. By the same token, most things in life do not deserve to be purchased on credit. Let's call it debt.

A second godly principle concerning debt is this one. Discern what tempts you to live beyond your means. In other words, "Know thyself." Are you just ignorant about money stuff? Is it poor planning? Are you an impulse buyer? Did you grow up in a poor home and now buying things make you feel successful? Does buying stuff meet a need to feel significant? Do you expect – probably unconsciously – that things will make you happy or give your life a sense of meaning? Are you constantly struggling to get a sense of contentment? Chronic lack of contentment is a deeply spiritual issue that you need the Holy Spirit's help on both to discern the reasons why and then, ultimately, to conquer.

I read about a farmer who had lived on the same small farm all of his life. He desperately craved change. He decided to sell the old homestead and buy another farm – a larger one and more to his liking. He listed the farm with a local realtor. Several days later, the farmer was reading an ad in the local newspaper describing the farm of his dreams. It read: "Beautiful farmhouse, ideal location, excellent barn, good pasture, fertile soil, up-to-date equipment, well-bred stock. Near town, church and school. Good neighbors." The farmer called up his realtor and said, "I've been looking for a place like that all my life! Could you arrange an appointment for me to see it?" The realtor responded, "That's the ad for your property! Are you sure you want to sell it?" The farmer already had

what he wanted and didn't even realize it. He took his farm off the market and decided that's exactly where he wanted to be from now on.

Ron Blue, another Christian financial counselor, has made an interesting observation. He says that in his experience women are more reluctant to get into debt than men. Why's that? He suggests that women value security more while men value significance more. Therefore, men often purchase things – and go into debt – in order to feed that need for personal significance while women find their need for security threatened by too many bills. You can appreciate, then, how debt might threaten a marriage relationship and fill it with stress and tension.

Here's a third godly principle concerning debt. Exercise faith in God. The Bible says, "It's impossible to please God apart from faith. And why? Because anyone who wants to approach God must believe both that he exists and that he cares enough to respond to those who seek him." (Heb 11:6 MSG) That obviously applies to every area of your life including money and debt. Following the 10-10-80 financial plan is an expression of faith. The fact is that the great majority of Jesus' followers do not exercise faith when it comes to money. Researcher George Barna estimates that 5-7% of American adults tithe. Aren't evangelical Christians more generous? Yes, a bit. He estimates that 12% of American evangelical Christians tithe. Whoopee.... God's financial plan is very simple. Pay God first – that's the tithe or 10%. Pay yourself second – 10% to savings or investments. Pay your bills third from the remaining 80%. The 10-10-80 plan!

Here's something else I believe with all of my heart. The best way to get out of debt is to tithe. You might say, "Rick, that's just ridiculous! How can giving away more money – even to the Lord's work – help me get out of debt?" Because there's such a thing as divine logic. God owns everything ultimately. He has the power to bless financially and to curse financially. Does it make sense to ask God for his help and His blessing financially when you are clearly disobeying the clear teaching of His word on giving the tithe? Is it reasonable to expect God will help and bless you if you step out in faith and obey His Word? Obedience invites God's blessing. At the end of the day, putting your faith in God for every area of life – including your money – is the most reasonable thing you could ever do.

One Christian was having a hard time getting his brain and heart around this issue of tithing. One day he said to his pastor, "I just don't see how I can give 10% of my income to the church when I can't even keep on top of our bills." The pastor said, "John, if I promise to make up the difference in your bills if you should fall short, do you think you could try tithing for just one month?" John shrugged and said, "Sure, if you promise to make up any shortage, I guess I could try tithing for one month." The pastor offered a gentle rebuke, "Now what do you think about that! You say you'd be willing to put your trust in a mere man like me who possesses so little materially, but you can't trust your Heavenly Father who owns the whole universe!" The next Sunday John gave his tithe.

Godly principle number four: commit yourself to the task of living within your means. Establish a written budget and stick to it. Figure out what you owe and establish a reasonable repayment plan. Get in touch with the attitudes and behavior that got you into debt and kill them off in the name of Jesus. If you get an unexpected additional amount of money, pay off existing debt before indulging in a new purchase. Invite someone to be a financial accountability partner with you. Refuse to accumulate new debt. Buy only with cash. Whatever you do, don't give up and slip back into foolish, harmful habits. Keep your eyes on the future rewards of living life debt free. What are some of those? How about a stronger, more peaceful marriage... a financial life with some margins... greater flexibility and freedom in living out your life... and best of all, how about that sense that you're just living in a way that honors and pleases the Lord?

Here's a final godly principle. Make contentment your goal. The Bible says, "Don't fall in love with money. Be satisfied with what you have. The Lord has promised that he will not leave us or desert us. That should make you feel like saying, 'The Lord helps me! Why should I be afraid of what people can do to me?'" (Heb 13:5-6 CEV) Contentment begins when you acknowledge that God owns it all anyway. Contentment is reinforced when you accept that you're a steward or manager of what belongs to God ultimately. You don't really possess financial, material stuff. You do possess, however what only God can give you: forgiveness, peace, purpose and eternal life with God forever and ever.

Years ago now, an African-American congregation was getting ready for some special meetings with great expectation because of the outstanding evangelist that was coming to speak. Finally the big day came. The pastor of the church gave a flowery introduction of their guest. The choir sang with great enthusiasm. Prayers were offered up with great fervency. When the evangelist rose to speak, everyone was anticipating a home run message. But instead of beginning his message, the evangelist went over to the piano and sat down. He began to play a quiet melody simply and softly. As they listened, the congregation heard him beginning to sing quietly. Every person leaned forward to hear his words. Finally, they could hear what he was singing because he slowly grew louder. Over and over again, he sang the words, "I will. I will." After awhile the congregation joined in and the evangelist sang and played more loudly. Before long the entire building was virtually shaking with the hearty singing of that congregation as they sang over and over again, "I will. I will." Then, abruptly, the evangelist stopped playing and singing. The congregation was silent now. That evangelist closed his eyes and raised his hand toward the sky. Loudly, he prayed: "Lord, You've heard our answer. Now ask us Your question!" What question is God asking you? Maybe it's, "Will you trust in Jesus for salvation?" Maybe it's, "Will you rededicate your life to Me?" Maybe it's, "Will you get baptized?" Maybe it's, "Will you commit yourself to this local church and become a member?" Maybe it's "Will you make Me the Lord of your money?" I will. I will. I will. Lord, You've heard our answer. Now ask us Your question!