

YOU CAN BE FREE FINANCIALLY

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Many people today see debt as a natural part of life. They wouldn't think of living without a house mortgage, or a car payment, or a credit card debt. Is that the American dream?

\$3 trillion. That's not the national debt; that's the total debt of United States individual consumers.

Before 1950, there were no credit cards. In less than 65 years, we, the people, have accumulated almost \$900 billion in credit card debt.

The average American adult carries \$4,878 in credit card debt. 43% of families spend more than they earn. 39% of those who have credit cards don't pay the balance at the end of the month. And the average credit card interest rate in the US ranges from 13.02% (fixed) to 15.38% (variable). Would you agree that this is a problem?

There is a debt monkey on the back of the American people. And a debt monkey is a slave driver.

So much so, that 85% of respondents to a 2013 poll indicated that discussing credit card debt was more taboo than religion, politics, salary, or love life details.

Yet, God has so much to say about money in the Bible, because He knows about our dependence on money and He knows what it can do *to us* or what it can do *for us*. Over 2,000 verses in the Bible address the subject of money—more verses than about faith, or heaven and hell combined.

Here's the gist of what the Bible says about debt:

The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is servant (the slave) to the lender. (Proverbs 22:7)

Money creates relationships between people, and they're not all good, for *"the love of money is the root of all evil"* (1 Timothy 6:10).

Yet, God wants us to be free (John 8:36). Jesus Christ came to loosen the chains of bondage and set captives free. God wants you to be the head and not the tail; to be above and not beneath. He wants you to be free.

Many people imagine that money will make them free—that it will buy their dreams and secure their hopes. That's why it's so important to learn what the Bible has to say about money, because it's actually an area where people can easily *lose* their freedom.

Here's the reason I need to address this topic today: if the statistics are true nationally, then they are likely true of our church, too. So we need to learn how to move from financial bondage to freedom. And if this issue doesn't apply to you, doubtless it does apply to someone in your family or someone where you work, so listen up—you can find help for yourself and you can bring help to others.

Financial debt is bondage. It holds you back from some of the things God wants you to do and some of the places God wants you to go.

So, here are five practical steps (borrowed from Bob Franquiz) for getting out of debt and going free financially. You can do this!

#1 – Know How Much You Owe

This may be the most difficult thing I tell you today. Because most of us don't want to know. When we decide to start a diet because our pants are tight, we don't want to know exactly how much we weigh. Can't we just round it off and say, "I'm twenty or thirty pounds more than I should weigh"? We're afraid of the truth.

Well, if you use a GPS system in your car to navigate from your starting point to your destination, you know that you must identify exactly where you are at the start of the route. If you don't know where you are at the beginning, you can't find out how far you must travel or what route to take.

The same is true financially. You've got to know exactly how much you owe in order to develop a plan to get out of debt. I know this because I've done this. And everyone who has done this has started in the same way.

Once you see where you really are—and feel like you've been socked in the stomach ("We owe how much?!?")—once you know that feeling, you will be able to say, "I never want to be here again!" It will produce the resolve you need to make the journey.

By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established; through knowledge its rooms are filled with rare and wonderful treasures. (Proverbs 24:3-4)

This is what we'll discover today. We can't really build our future, until we know what paying off the past will cost us.

#2 – Set Up a Repayment Plan

Good planning and hard work lead to prosperity, but hasty shortcuts lead to poverty.
(Proverbs 21:5)

You will never pay off your credit card debt by making the minimum required payments each month. The great bulk of that amount is interest on the loan; very little is applied to the principal. This is how banks earn their money.

Many people think, if they have some extra money to use, “I’ll pay a little more on each of my cards, so they’ll all go down.” Bob Franquiz says, “That is a recipe for being out of debt the day after never!”

Instead, here’s what you want to do. Identify the card with the smallest debt (perhaps a Macy’s card) and throw everything extra you have—let’s say you can manage an extra \$300 a month—at that one card until it is paid off. Then, you celebrate your success by destroying the card—cut it up, shred it, burn it, use it for target practice—whatever satisfies your primal urge.

Then you call Macy’s and cancel the account. Be determined to end the relationship, because the account representative will be determined to win you back with perks and increased credit limits.

Now you take that same \$300, plus the \$50 you were paying against the first card as a minimum payment, and now you have \$350 each month to start paying down the next highest card, your Discover card. And when that’s paid off and destroyed, you’ll have that \$350 plus the \$105 that was the minimum on the Discover card (or, \$455) to use each month against the third card, your Chase MasterCard. And when the Chase card is paid off and the account cancelled, you’ll have the \$300, plus the \$50, plus the \$105, plus the \$125 (a total of \$580 each month) to put against your BankAmericard VISA Platinum.

Do you see how it works? And in a year’s time, you can make a significant dent in your debt. At this rate, by the time two years have passed you can totally eliminate \$10,000 in credit card debt!

Tackle the smallest debt first so you can score multiple wins early on—it’s highly motivating!

#3 – Debt-Proof Your Future

People who don’t get out of debt fail to do so because they sabotage themselves by not changing their spending habits. Your slogan, with credit card in hand, used to be, “I can afford it!” Your new slogan must be, “No new debt!”

For the time it takes you to get out of debt, you will have to make some sacrifices. You may have to say, “No” to some new clothes, or new shoes, or a new gadget, in order to complete this task. But it will be worth it! Why? Because once you’re out of debt you’re no longer paying the banks \$750 or a \$1,000 every month. What could you enjoy with an extra \$750 or \$1,000 every month? It’s like paying yourself instead!

You can’t move into the future God has for you if you’re always paying off your past.

When Christmas comes around again this year, set a budget and stick to it. Sure, it may not be such a blast as in the past, but you won’t feel such a headache in January as you used to, either. You might just rediscover the real meaning of Christmas.

If you think you just can’t do this, you may have a bigger problem than your debt, and there is help for that, too. I heard of one group that suggests dropping your credit card in a container of water and freezing it. Then if there’s something that you really think you must buy, pull the container out of the freezer and set it on the counter until it thaws, and if you still think you simply must spend on credit, then do it. Then return the card to the jar and return the jar to the freezer.

Now, some of you are thinking, I could just microwave that jar... you really do have a problem! Seek help.

One system for going all cash is to use envelopes for each category of expenses that you anticipate—like utilities, gasoline, groceries, etc.—and when you cash your paycheck, divide it appropriately among the envelopes; that’s your budget for the month.

When you have to hand over cash, instead of just signing your name, you think about it differently. I found a coffee kiosk near our home that makes really tasty coffee. I started dropping by there on my way to the office for a tall latte. \$4-\$5 a pop. But something happened to me. When I know I’ll have to hand over a \$5 bill from my wallet, I think, “I can make a tall latte at home for less than \$1. Why would I pay them five times that much?”

May God help every one of us to make up our minds that we will live free of debt (except, perhaps, for your mortgage or your car payment). Here’s God’s advice:

Don’t run up debts, except for the huge debt of love you owe each other. When you love others, you complete what the law has been after all along. (Romans 13:8)

I can tell you from personal experience, that when you live in debt you will feel something of what it is to be a slave. After years of living debt-free, I can also attest to the sense of freedom it secures. Try it; you’ll like it! And when you bring God into the equa-

tion, you can get out of debt even faster than you imagine, because it's His will for you and He'll work with you.

#4 – Start Honoring God

This is the only area in the Bible about which God invites us to test Him: with our finances. He wants to be so involved in our income and our spending, because both are an expression of our trust in Him—our trust that He will provide what we need when we need it.

The Israelites didn't always trust the Lord for their daily needs—like many of us. Sometimes they went ahead and took care of themselves, because they doubted if God would do it for them. At one point, God sent a prophet to scold them for this behavior.

“Should people cheat God? Yet you have cheated Me! But you ask, ‘What do You mean? When did we ever cheat You?’ ‘You have cheated Me of the tithes and offerings due to Me. You are under a curse, for your whole nation has been cheating Me. Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food in My Temple. If you do,’” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies, “I will open the windows of Heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won’t have room enough to take it in! Try it! Put Me to the test!” (Malachi 3:10)

Tithing is a way of honoring God as your Provider. It means taking the first dime of every dollar that you receive and returning it to God as a sign of your trust and thanks for His provision in your life. If you receive \$10, you return \$1; if you receive \$100, you return \$10, and so on.

And then you ask God to bless the 90% and make it stretch farther than the 100% used to. And He will.

You might think that applying that 10% toward getting out of debt would help you get out of debt faster, but here's the Biblical reality: you'll get farther with 90% that is blessed than with 100% that is cursed.

You see, that 's what this passage is saying. If you trust God by returning your tithe, He will bless the 90% that remains. But if you refuse to honor Him with the tithe, then 100% of your income will be under a curse. Which would you prefer?

And what kind of curse might that be? Look at the rest of the passage (verses 11-12):

“Your crops will be abundant, for I will guard them from insects and disease. Your grapes will not fall from the vine before they are ripe,” says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies. “Then all nations will call you blessed, for your land will be such a delight,” says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies.

In an agricultural economy, the curse was revealed in the attacks of insects and disease, and early fruit drop. In a consumer economy, the curse may be revealed in attacks of unexpected or unnecessary expenses—like a mechanical breakdown or unanticipated dental or medical issue—or unfruitful investments. In other words, unexpected financial expenses or losses.

Many versions express verse 11 as *“I will rebuke the devourer for you.”* The “devourer” may be the devil himself or simply a figure of speech for all that hastily devours our hard-earned living. God promises protection from that, if you honor Him with the tithe.

Every tither, having put God to the test, has found Him faithful and will say, “I am blessed!” Every non-tither will say, “I just can’t afford to tithe.” Yet, every tither was once a person who said, “I can’t do that.” God has changed their minds! My conclusion has been, “I can’t afford *not* to tithe.” I cannot afford to have 100% cursed. It’s like putting my money in a sack with holes.

“Is it right for you to live in richly paneled houses while my temple is in ruins? Here then is what the LORD who rules over all says: ‘Think carefully about what you are doing. You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but are never filled. You drink, but are still thirsty. You put on clothes, but are not warm. Those who earn wages end up with holes in their money bags.’ ” (Haggai 1:4-6)

Getting out of debt is more than just having zero balances on your credit cards. It’s about having the right perspective on money—that wisdom and knowledge that I spoke of earlier—and using it to honor God our Provider and watching Him do exceedingly abundantly above all that we could ask or imagine.

#5 – Don’t Give Up!

Let us not become weary in doing what is right, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest, if we do not give up. (Galatians 6:9)

We all know that it’s a lot easier to get into debt than to get out of it. You can get into debt in an afternoon, but it takes a lot longer than an afternoon to get out of debt. Most people, of course, have accumulated an oppressive debt over a long period of time, and its going to take some time to undo what has been done.

What I have laid out for you is possible, and the reputable finance gurus offer the same advice. I know it is possible because I have lived it, and other people I know, who were deeper in debt than I was, have also lived it. It’s a plan that simply works!

Make your plan and stick to it. It may pinch for awhile in the short term, but the long term freedom to come will be more than worth it. Keep the goal in your sights, and break that chain, one link at a time.

This Spring, we plan to offer a small group class about personal finances that will teach you more about how to break the yoke of debt, how to make a budget, and how to plan your financial future. Keep your ears open for the specific date. You can be financially free and cheerful about giving!

In conclusion, I want to remind you that credit card debt is not the greatest debt we have owed. Our spiritual debt was greater, and its repercussions were eternal. We all owed a spiritual debt because we violated God's laws, and ignored or rejected His Son, Jesus, who fulfilled God's laws and paid for our freedom with His own life. God canceled your spiritual debt through Jesus Christ's death.

He canceled the debt, which listed all the rules we failed to follow. He took away that record with its rules and nailed it to the cross. (Colossians 2:14)

And God raised from the dead this same Jesus as evidence that the debt-payment was accepted as complete. Today, Jesus is praying for you, that you will learn of His grace and receive His free gift of salvation. Have you trusted in Christ to eliminate your spiritual debt for you? (If not, trust Him now!)

Simply invite Him into your heart as Savior and the new Leader of your life.

Then trust Him to help you eliminate the financial debt you have accumulated, by asking for His help and applying these simple principles. Your future freedom lies ahead. Set your sail now and catch the wind of God's Spirit.