

Debt-free Living

Sterling UMC

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1 Timothy 6:6-9, Hebrews 13:8

It seemed as though the bishop was looking straight at me "Are you in debt so much as to embarrass you in your work?" What an odd question to ask of a candidate for ordination. It seemed so mundane, so inappropriate for such a hallowed occasion, even if it was one of the questions asked of ordinands ever since the day when John Wesley first posed it to all of his preachers who were candidates to be ordained. "Are you in debt so much as to embarrass you in your work?" "Of course, I'm in debt, Bishop! Who wouldn't be after four years as a full-time seminary student with a part-time salary from Sears Roebuck as a furniture salesman, with a wife who was also a full-time seminary student and a part-time church choir director, not to mention the fact that I had a two-year-old at home? All I've got to my name is a Master of Divinity diploma, a 1981 Buick that belonged to my Grandfather with 125,000 miles on it, a pocket full of credit cards, and debts! What else did you expect?"

I didn't answer the bishop that way, of course. Neither did any of the other 25 ordinands on that June day in 1992. All of us looked him straight in the eye and said, "No" - even though we all knew we were in debt up to our eyeballs. We also knew that he knew, too. After all, every year when a new class of ordinands stands before the bishop and all of the assembled clergy of our Annual Conference and that same historic question is asked, the first thing you hear from the assembly is laughter and giggles and then you see the newest group of ordinands turn and nervously smile at each other and then boldly reply, "NO!"

And ever since that day I have been fighting the battle, the battle with debt. For you see I went to work in the church, need I say more about that. No one goes to work in the church to get rich. We added two more boys to the mix along the way. And it has been a battle ever since, a battle with debt.

Now friends I don't believe that this dilemma is limited only to pastors. In fact I know that it is not. Let's realize as we start this that debt, money and possession issues are a great equalizer... from pastors to politicians, teachers to truck drivers, accountants to athletes, all of us struggle with this topic.

Maybe you can identify with Stanley Johnson. VIDEO CLIP: "Stanley Johnson" Lending Tree Commercial- :32

Maybe you have seen that clip on TV. "Somebody help me!" Ironically it is done by a company who claims they will help you by consolidating your debt. But financial experts will tell you that in reality this is a "for-profit" company who takes your debts and stretches them over a number of years actually costing you thousands of more in

interest rates over the long run. I'm not sure Stanley or we for that matter need that kind of help!

But we do need help! In my years in pastoral ministry I have seen the damage that can be done in the lives of good people from every walk of life because of this scourge of uncontrolled spending and debt. I've seen it devastate families. I've seen it destroy marriages. I've seen it bankrupt businesses.

Many people are so far in debt that they cannot imagine ever being out of debt. The Bible tells us that the borrower is servant to the lender. (Pr. 22:7) The result of this indebtedness is,

- We are unable to save for the future
- We no longer have the ability to give generously to the Lord's work
- We experience great (sometimes enormous) stress in the home
- We may experience medical problems resulting from the stress
- We get to the point where we start thinking "I'm so far in debt now, what is a little more going to hurt?" That kind of thinking is disastrous.

Why are so many people in debt? Why are we rarely satisfied with what we have and thus spend ourselves into debt? It's because we live a lie. We embrace and live our lives believing three of this world's biggest lies. What are those lies?

1. Having more things will make me more happy.

We think that. We believe that. No society has as much *stuff* as we do. We've all got lots of stuff and we fill our homes with stuff. Technology has produced more and more products and advertising comes along and tells us we've got to have it to really live! The average high school student, by the time they graduate, has seen 350,000 commercials and they are all saying, "Buy my stuff!" What is the basic message of advertising? You can buy happiness!

Greed used to be very easy to control. You run out of money, you stop spending, that's the end of greed! But now we have plastic money and so you can keep on spending even when you don't have the money, keep on going to buy things you really don't need because we believe that those things will bring us happiness.

2. Having more things will make me more important.

We get the concept that I am what I own, that my valuables determine my value, if I only have a little then I must just be worth a little. If I want to be liked, respected, looked up to, then I've got to keep in this constant acquisition of getting more and more -- "Keeping up with the Jones".

The problem is that when we think things make us important we buy things we don't need with money we don't have to impress people we don't even like. All in order to get

more. It's amazing what people will do, how much they'll pay, how deeply they will go into debt for status symbols to prop up their self worth.

3. Having more things will make me more secure.

I don't know about you but I've noticed that the more possessions I have the more I have to worry about. Proverbs 18:18 (Living Bible) "*The rich man thinks of his wealth as an impregnable defense, a high wall of safety. What a dreamer!*" How many ways can you lose everything overnight? Many. If you're going to have security you must put your security in something that ultimately cannot be taken from you. You can have it all and lose it overnight.

We believe these three lies: having more things will make me more happy; having more things will make me more important; having more things will make me more secure. None of that is true. It just isn't true.

I would like for you now to hear a testimony from one family in our congregation about how debt-free living has made a difference in their lives: Christy Hermansen

So how do we get out of this debt trap? How do we begin the journey of debt-free living? Basically it begins when we stop living a lie. How do we do that?

1. Instead of believing that having more things will make me more happy, I find my happiness in helping others.

True happiness is not in things, not in possessions, not in pleasures, bank accounts, gold cards, but in helping others. Acts 20:35 "*Jesus said, 'There's more happiness in giving than in receiving.'*" The people who don't know that verse are the people who have never tried it. That is a universal principle. We all know lots of people sitting in homes filled with beautiful possessions and they're lonely and unhappy. Things do not give lasting happiness. It's a lie.

If things buy happiness, the people who had the most things would be the most happy and that's not true. Things can bring you happiness -- for a while. But then the thrill wears off. Lasting happiness is not in things.

One of our Scripture lessons for this morning said it like this: "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law." (Romans 13:8) In other words the debt we owe is to love others as Christ loved us. And what is the result of this? Matthew 5:6 "*Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires; God will satisfy them fully.*" The key to happiness in life is not in possessions or things or material gain. Satisfaction is the result of being what God meant for you to be, an agent of His love. So I find my happiness in helping others.

2. Instead of believing that having more things will make me more important, I find my self-worth in knowing God.

Isaiah 43:4 *"God says, 'You are precious in my sight!'"* That's the basis for real self worth. When I am insecure and don't feel good about me, when I'm feeling inferior, I have to have status symbols to prop me up. I have to wear a certain kind of clothes. I have to drive a certain kind of car. I have to have the names of products on my shoes and shirt because I think that if these products are OK then I must be OK. But when you really understand how much God loves you, that you matter to God, that you are significant to Him, that you're not here on this earth by accident, that He put you here for a purpose, then all of a sudden you are released and don't have to prove yourself with products. Your self-worth is based on what God says about you, not about what you say about yourself or what other people or some product name I have on my shirt in order to make me feel cool.

Luke 12:15 *"Be on your guard against greed in any shape or form. For a man's real life in no way depends on the number of his possessions."* Don't confuse your net worth with your self worth. Your value is not based on your valuables.

You want proof? Then listen to this. Romans 5:8 *"The proof of God's amazing love is this: while we were sinners Christ died for us."* The cross shows how important you are. Jesus thought you were worth dying for. That's pretty significant. Do you know many people who would die for you? It doesn't matter what other people think.

When you get to that point you stop having to try to keep up in this rat-race and stay up and even with everybody.

3. Instead of believing that having more things will make me more secure, I find my security in trusting God.

I find my happiness in helping others, I find my self-worth in knowing God -- knowing that He loves me, and find my security in trusting God. God has made some incredible promises that are comforting.

Hebrews 13:5 (Good News) *"Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'I will never leave you nor abandon you.'"* In other words God says, "I'm with you and I have everything so I'm all you need." Which would give you a greater sense of security? Knowing that you had \$200,000 in the bank or knowing that God has promised to provide for every one of your needs? Which of those two do you think are more dependable? Which of those two do you think can never be taken away from you? Which of those two is going to be lasting even 100 years from now? Nothing can separate you from God's love. If you're going to be secure, you've got to put your security, not in your bank account, but you put your security in something that cannot ever be lost. Whether the bank account is lost or not, whether America goes into a gigantic depression or the stock market crashes -- whatever. Your security is in God.

Our Scripture from 1 Timothy 6 says it like this: "But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction."

Now you are probably wondering, "OK, this is all well and good but you haven't told me how to get out of debt. Well, friends, that is not my purpose this morning. I am not nor do I claim to be an expert in personal finance. We all know that getting out of debt involves budgeting, developing a spending plan, managing and repaying debt, saving for retirement, and things like that. And most of all it requires discipline and faithfulness. My purpose this morning is not to teach you financial principles. There are many fine resources such as Crown Financial Ministries course that we have taught here at SUMC that do an excellent job of that. These resources are available that can guide you on these things. But the fact of the matter is that none of these things will do us a bit of good until you settle these root issues in your life of, Where's happiness? Where's self-worth? Where's security? When you settle those issues all of a sudden you're set free from the destructive trap of debt and the rat race of having to spend more.

You see once again this week this is not so much a message about money as it is about spiritual things. So let me ask you this morning, what are you expecting to bring you happiness? The high will be temporary. It won't last. What are you basing your self-worth on? Clothes? Possessions? "I've got to fill my life with certain kinds of status symbols so people will think `They've got nice things so they must be OK'" What are you depending on for your security? It doesn't matter how big your bank account is. You could lose it overnight. You must put your security in something that can never be taken away from you and that is a relationship to Jesus Christ.

Would you today pray a simple three statement prayer? Would you say, "Father, help me to find my happiness in helping others. Jesus said, there is more happiness in giving than receiving. Father, help me to find my self-worth in knowing how much You love me, that You made me for a purpose, that I am valuable to You. The proof of that love is that Jesus Christ died on the cross. Father, help me find my security in trusting You and to not store up for myself treasure on earth for my own indulgence but store up some treasure in heaven. Lord, starting today, I want to be a more generous person. I want to start investing in eternity and not just in the here and now. As I do that I'm trusting You to supply all my needs like You promised."

Father, take this word as we've looked at it today and apply it to our hearts as each of us needs. Make us happy, cheerful, generous people. For we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.