

# Key #3: DISCIPLINED SAVINGS

## *FOUR KEYS TO FINANCIAL FREEDOM*

Proverbs 21:20; Galatians 5:19-26

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These last few weeks we've discussed biblical teaching that helps us achieve financial freedom. There are *Four Keys to Financial Freedom* because we do four things with money: we acquire it, we spend it, we save it, and we give it away. We've already examined earning money and spending money. Today, we'll discuss what the Bible says about debt and saving money.

Twelve years ago, a young woman told a minister, *"I don't know what to do with my husband. I'm sitting here in worn out clothes with barely enough money for groceries. We can't go out. We can't have nice things, yet my husband makes over \$100,000 a year. He is storing everything away so that he can retire by age 45."*

When I heard that, I thought of a story that Jesus told. One family came to him when they couldn't figure out how to fairly split an inheritance. They wanted Jesus to decide how the estate should be distributed. Jesus refused; instead, he told a parable about a farmer who had such wonderful crops that he decided to tear down his buildings and build bigger ones. He planned with his storehouses of grain to retire, to take life easy, to eat, drink and be merry. According to Jesus, the man thought to himself:

*"You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"*(Luke 12:19-20 NIV)

Jesus told the family, who were divided over inheritance, and the crowd that was with them that **this is how it will always be** for people who focus on wealth. Everything they work for and gain will become hollow. After all the bank accounts, stock funds and investments have accrued, they will be left empty because they are poor in what is most important and satisfying.

Many of us, however, misread what Jesus was saying. We're afraid to save money. *We're afraid to sacrifice and save because we're fearful that we'll never get to enjoy it.* We're afraid if we don't eat, drink and be merry right now, we'll never get to. Saving is difficult and frustrating because it requires sacrificing current pleasures. With saving we put off some enjoyments. With saving we sacrifice some pleasures. Because we don't want to put off those enjoyments, many not only fail to save, they borrow. Many borrow money to take a cruise. Most borrow to buy a car. Many use plastic to get a snowmobile and go in debt for a computer. Although Christ died to free us from the slavery of sin, we slip into the slavery of debt.

As the woman in worn clothing and Jesus pointed out, there is a perverse way of saving; however, many of us suffer from the other malady. Our standard of living depends on borrowing.

Bill Hybels is the pastor of Willow Creek Church in the Chicago area. Much of the material for this series is coming from him. One day Bill Hybels was approached by a parishioner who thanked him for his teaching on money. She mentioned that she had carelessly allowed her credit card balance to hit \$3000. She was not going to charge again. Bill told the woman, we'll call her Jackie, that her debt was not insurmountable. (Did you know that the average American carries a balance on their credit card of \$3,900?) Bill, who is a little more forward than me, asked Jackie about her plan to pay off the debt. She told him that she was going to make minimum payments until it was gone. Curious about what that would mean, Bill asked his accounting department to figure how long it would take to pay the credit card off. Now, the average interest rate on credit cards in 1996 was 18%, and the minimum payment amounts to 2% of the unpaid balance, so how long do you suppose it would take to pay off the balance? *Thirty-seven years and seven months.* Over that time, she would pay *\$10,931 of which \$7,931 would be interest and \$3000 principle.* Now suppose she instead of borrowing \$3000 was able to save \$3,000 and put it either in an IRA or mutual fund that averaged 10% interest a year, and she added nothing more but left it there for that same amount of time. How much money do you believe she would have at the end of that time? Her \$3000 would have grown to \$126,454.

If someone asked you to list the 10 most powerful forces at work in your life, you might think of love, hate, prayer, friends, but would you consider the power of interest in your list? Interest is so relentless. When it serves you, it brings you so much for so little effort. When it works against you, it is like a cancer. It is your constant enemy, making you work much harder and far longer than you would ever need to.

J. Reuben Clark says,

*Once you're in debt, interest becomes your companion every minute of the day and night, and it's working against you. It has no love, no sympathy. It is as hard and soulless as a granite cliff, and you cannot dismiss it. Whenever you get in its way or cross its course or fail to meet its demands, it crushes you.*

On the wrong side of the *interest equation*, you are hounded. You have a nightmarish slave-master. No wonder the Bible says in Proverbs 22:7,

***The borrower becomes the lender's slave.***

That is so true. We saw that again and again in the farming industry. The lender, the local banker, often dictated farming decisions. Occasionally, they called in loans.

With all consumers, the lender is still the master. The lender dictates when you pay, how you pay and penalizes you when you don't pay. You surrender your freedom with every dollar you owe. It doesn't matter if you're sick, you owe. It doesn't matter if you have other needs, you owe. It doesn't matter if you need time, the creditor has the right to put a lien on what you own and ruin your ability to borrow from others. You must serve the creditor.

It is exactly this kind of bondage that the Bible rejects. It is why the Bible condemns debt. All throughout Scriptures the Bible counsels people to treat debt like a plague. Most Christian counselors allow debt for an appreciating asset like a modest house mortgage or a capital loan for business expansion, but rarely do they encourage consumer loans.

The Bible, instead, encourages saving. Solomon wrote in Proverbs 21:20:

***In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but a foolish man devours all he has.***

In other words, *"a wise man saves, but a foolish man spends everything he gets."*

Do you know why a wise person doesn't spend everything? A wise person prizes their freedom and realizes there are times when he or she must depend on what was saved.

When you stand up to your nostrils in a pool of debt, the least ripple of disruption to your earnings is life threatening. Several years ago a train wreck occurred in Washington D.C. Political posturing over the federal budget resulted in the government shutting down. Many government employees found themselves in terrific trouble by missing just one pay check. They found themselves scurrying to relatives and banks to get relief. That's what debt does. It doesn't care that your work or employer messed up. It demands its money now! Savings, however, allows you to move through that disruption without the great pressure.

Have you ever driven down the freeway and had a hot red sports car pass you doing 80 or 90 miles an hour? Several miles ahead you see them stopped with a trooper standing at the car, and you think, "Alright!" That's what I observe happening financially with many. They are in a rush to get that camcorder. They are in a rush to have that boat. They are in a rush to get those clothes, so out comes the plastic, and up goes the debt.

Three years ago a pastor-friend filed bankruptcy. He rushed past me in acquiring things, and I was a little envious. I thought it must be nice. However, he finally got pulled over by the accumulating interest. He was embarrassed and his character flaws were visible to all.

I love my friend. I'd never wished on him the pain and shame he experienced. His choices illustrate, however, that we can be very religious and still get ourselves into a great deal of trouble. However, God won't lead us into that kind of trouble. The Holy Spirit leads us into freedom. The very things the Holy Spirit produces in people lead to freedom.

The Bible says that *the fruit of the Spirit is joy*. Joyful people celebrate how God loves them, how God cares for them, how God provides for them, how important they are to God. Their vision allows them to be content with what they have. They are able to say "enough!" This is enough. I'm enjoying what God has provided. Contentment and joy go hand in hand, and they are produced in people by God's Spirit. If we are not content, we're resisting the Spirit.

*The fruit of the Spirit is also patience*. We go into debt when we impatiently have to have things right now. We go into debt when we can't wait. We go into debt when we don't trust God to supply. We're afraid that we'll miss out on some joy. Thus, we charge and borrow. If you struggle with that, cut up your credit cards. Make the cutting a celebration of your trust in God's timely provision.

*The fruit of the Spirit is also self-control* which basically is the power to say "No!" "No! I've got a plan. No! I'm going to stick to it. No! I can wait. No! I can trust God."

Debt makes us a slave. It puts pressure on us to earn. It reveals the gaping holes in our character where we resist God's Spirit. As believers it defames the Lord we serve, and it wounds and damages those we love and work with.

What does it take to get out of debt and start saving so that the power of interest works for you? What does it take to have the freedom to endure disruptions in earnings, to give when you desire, to have peace at night when you sleep, to feel good about what you have because you, not the bank, own it?

**First, it takes a decision.** You do only what you decide to do. You can decide today that you won't borrow to consume. You can also decide today that you'll put maybe just a dollar a day a way. One is better than none. **Second, it takes a plan.** If you fail to plan, you plan to fail. A plan for stopping debt, a plan to repay debt and a plan to put something in savings are necessary if you ever want to move into freedom. **Third, it**

**takes a partner.** Let's God's Spirit produce in you that ability to save. Make your plan with God's wisdom, and commit it to God. Furthermore, share it with another believer who will pray for you and encourage you in it. **Finally, it takes time.** We get into debt over time, and we get out of debt over time. If the woman with a \$3000 credit card balance would just double her monthly payments to 4% of the unpaid balance, *over time* she would save \$6200 in interest. That's the power of time.

Financial freedom is a work God will do in you and through you; but you must make the choices. You are given that power and that responsibility. Do you want to be free? Change isn't easy, but it is possible. Your freedom begins with your decision.