

Stewardship Forum

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Stewardship Tools for Leaders : Sermon Library

Title: TAKE MY PLASTIC: What's wrong with debt? (Romans 13:1-14)

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Vs 7-8 'Give everyone what you owe them. If you owe taxes, then taxes; if revenue, then revenue, if respect then respect, if honour then honour. Let no debt remain outstanding.'

How many of us have sat down at our kitchen tables and looked at our credit cards and bank statements and wondered where all the money has gone? Our theme tonight is 'What's wrong with debt?' and it's the first in a series of three sermons on money. Money of course is one of the key themes in the Bible. There are about 500 verses in the Bible about prayer; about 500 verses on faith, but over 2300 verses on money. How we as Christians handle our money is of critical importance. Although we may think going to Church is important and we spend most of our Sundays involved in this activity, money's something we deal with every single day. We work for it, we spend it, we carry it, we try to save it, and unless you are unusual, we get anxious about it. Jesus teaches us to love people and use money to help them, but we live in a society that tells us to do the opposite – to love money and use people. So how do we as Christians handle our money? What we do with it is of key importance. Our faith and our finances are closely linked.

Do you remember the words of Jesus in Luke 16? 'Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with very much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much.' So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? God, it seems, is interested in how we handle our money.

So over these next few weeks, we're going to be looking at different aspects of what the Bible teaches about money and tonight focuses on the first of our questions, 'What's wrong with debt?'

Let's begin with some facts and figures. Did you know that in this country at the moment, there are over 45m credit and store cards in circulation? In 1979 the amount of money owed on credit cards was £3.8bn; today it's over £70bn. The average person in this country, man, woman and child, has a debt of £1500 in credit and store cards alone. Currently, there are 3.5m court summonses issued for debt every year. There are more people in prison for unpaid debts than for any other reason. It's a problem. And it's not just an issue 'out there'. In his book, *Faith in the Real World*, the American pastor, Bill Hybels, speaks of the problems that face many Christians when it comes to talking about these things. He says this:

Far too many Christians have allowed their personal finances to fall into shambles. They are deep in debt, have no means of handling unexpected expenses, and have no practical plan for improving their situation, but all this is kept secret from even their most trusted friends. It's possible to talk about marriage problems, health problems and even spiritual

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problems, but not personal finances. We in the church have adopted an unofficial oath of silence on the subject: an oath which must be broken if we have any hope of alleviating the problem.

Well, let's take up Bill Hybels' advice and break the silence. Let's begin to talk about this most difficult and personal subject. What does the Bible say about debt?

To our text: Romans 13:7,8. 'Give everyone what you owe them, if you owe taxes, taxes; revenue, revenue; respect, respect; honour, then honour. Let no debt remain outstanding except the continuing debt to love one another.'

Here is the Bible's teaching on debt in a nutshell. And the message is this: avoid debt. Don't get involved in it. Do all that you can to pay off your debts, so that you can then be generous to others struggling with their debts. It's part of our witness to the State and part of our duty to God to pay off our debts. Basically the message is Don't Do Debt!

Now in a world that encourages us to spend, spend, spend, this is a tough message. It's a tough message for me and my wife as we struggle with our finances, trying to make ends meet, and it will be a tough message for many others in the same boat, but the message is clear. Don't get involved in debt. Why? I think the Scriptures give us three reasons:

Debt presumes on the future.

Listen to James 4:13. James says 'Now listen you who say, "Today or tomorrow, we'll go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make lots of 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's the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil.

James is saying this: to take out a loan, to incur a debt, involves the presumption that things will go just as we had planned. Our salary will remain the same, maybe even increase. Our health will stay just the same. Life will go on and on and we'll be able to pay back as anticipated. But as James warns us, beware of presuming too much. Pride comes before a fall.

Remember the story of the rich fool. He built up all his wealth, only to have it taken away in an instant.

Beware of presuming on the future.

2. Debt affects our relationships.

Proverbs 22:7 'The rich rule over the poor and the borrower is servant to the lender.' Debt makes us beholden to others. Whether it's the Credit Union or the bank or a friend from whom we've borrowed the money, debt puts us in a different relationship with them than before. All our energies are now spent in trying to deal with our debt rather than do what Paul tells us in Romans 13: to honour, respect and love others as we ought.

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How often have you and I found ourselves avoiding people to whom we owe money or possession, or in the case of we Christians, Christian books! All because we haven't repaid their loan to us, and we feel embarrassed about it, so we avoid them. Debt affects our relationships. All our energies, and motivation, and time, goes into trying to juggle out our debts, rather than doing what God wants us to do, love our neighbours as ourselves.

And it doesn't only affect our relationships with the lender. The marriage counselling service, Relate, states that the number one cause of marriage breakdown in 70% of cases is related to debt. It puts marriages under huge strain as couples try to sort it out – and children as well. There's a slogan that goes: 'When dad's behind in the mortgage, it's the kids who end up paying.'

Debt affects relationships.

Thirdly,

3. Debt creates dissatisfaction.

Psalm 37. 'Do not fret because of evil men, or be envious of those who do wrong. For like the grass that will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away. Instead trust in the LORD and do good. Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.'

Debt often indicates an unwillingness on our part to wait for God to provide for our needs. We fret over what others have, and we're envious of what we don't have and although it's beyond our means, we borrow to get what we want now, rather than wait until we can actually afford it. That nice sofa; that trip abroad; that smart new kitchen. But even when we get them, it usually doesn't satisfy us. The more we have, the more we want, the more we get in debt. So often, we get it wrong.

The story goes that the sons of a lawyer, a surgeon and a minister were talking about how much their fathers earned. The lawyer's son said 'my father goes to the court on a case and often comes home with as much as £1000 just for a day's work.' The surgeon's son said 'My father performs an operation and often earns as much as £2000 just for a morning's work.' But not to be outdone, the minister's son said 'That's nothing, my father preaches for just 20 minutes on a Sunday morning and it takes four men just to carry out the money.'

Now I can assure you, it doesn't really work like that! But like those boys, so often in the area of money, we get it wrong. We get caught up in the game of one-upmanship. Not merely verbal, but financial. The more we want, the more we get, the more we pay, the more we earn, the more we borrow, and the debt spiral gets worse and worse. Someone's defined it as 'buying things we don't need with money we don't have to impress people we don't like.'

Debt creates dissatisfaction.

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Now at this point, let me add a qualifier. There are some debts that it may be prudent to take out. Some loans are within our range and are wise. Home mortgages are generally speaking a good debt assuming, of course, that we can afford the repayments. It's the same with student loans enabling students to get through university. Such loans are productive loans. They are investments in the future. But there's a great difference between those sorts of debts and other debts which are a response to a personal whim. And I think it's credit cards which are our greatest danger. We go to the sales and spend furiously on our cards only to discover that we've bought far more than we need and we've got a massive debt that we have to repay. We're tempted by the wonderful holiday brochure, sun, surf and sand, relaxing days, only to end up paying off the loan for the holiday long after the memories and the sun tan have faded. We're excited about the latest advertisements for a new computer and take up the special offer to begin repayments after Christmas, only to discover that the computer is redundant almost as soon as we've got it, its value is halved, but we're still paying off the original amount with interest years later. The danger of easy credit. Buy now; pay later - the motto of our society. But how difficult to get away from it.

My wife and I were recently thrilled to receive in the mail a cheque for £10,000. But we soon discovered that it was in reality a form to apply for a credit to a bank. This will be your cheque as soon as you sign up for the loan. Just imagine what you can do with the money: a new car, a house extension, an overseas trip, etc etc. It was enticing. Instant gratification. Immediate pleasure. Payback in the never-never. One author I've read on this subject makes the point that the problem with credit cards is that this is a misnomer. They are in fact debt cards. But somehow the name has an allure to it. It makes me feel as though I've achieved something. 'Someone somewhere has decided that I'm worthy to have this facility. Now I can visit shops and pay for goods on credit in the knowledge that I have status. I've proved my worth. And when I've earned enough, I can apply for a gold card, which is even further evidence that I'm a cut above the rest of the bunch. Then I'll have truly arrived.' But the same author later on gives example after example of people who've got caught up in this trap and have used their credit cards to pay off their other credit cards. And they do it until they finally realise, sadly sometimes too late, that credit despite its seeming simplicity, can all too easily become a dead end.

The danger of easy credit.

Bumper stickers on cars used to read: 'It may not be much, but at least it's paid for!' But now you'll see on a shining new sports car. 'I owe, I owe, so it's off to work I go!'

What's the antidote to all this pressure to spend and get into debt? Three things.

We need to recognise who we are. That we are stewards in charge, not of our money, but of God's money. Each week at our offering we say these words: 'All things come from you O Lord and of your own have we given you.' These are not just nice words but a recognition that all we have, our world, our lives, the skills we use day by day to earn money at work, all that we have comes from God himself, and we're called to use them responsibly for him. We're called to close our eyes and ears to the message of our all-consumerist society and make our financial decisions on the basis of God's word and give God his counsel.

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We need to recognise what we have. 1 Tim 6 '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'll be content with that.'

So often we think that if only we had just that one more thing, that slightly bigger house, that newer car, that extra outfit, then we'll be happy. But the reality of course is that more is never enough. We need to learn contentment. Have you ever thought how crazy it is that we spend £20 or more to have Reebok on our chests, or Nike on our shoes? We're actually paying more to advertise other people's products for them.

We need to learn contentment.

Recognise what we're called to do. We'll deal more with this next week. But the sure antidote, the Bible tells us, to the desire to spend more and more upon ourselves and get ourselves into debt, is to discover the joy of giving. Remember Jesus' words in Acts 20: it's more blessed to give than to receive. Have you discovered that yet? In my time in parish ministry, I've seen it time and time again. I remember my years of ministry in a poor suburb of Melbourne, and over that time, despite the lack of an income, we were able in that church to do some amazing projects of faith requiring for those people impossible sums of money. And it was intriguing to see that as the projects developed, it was those who gave who were joyful and the non-givers who were most miserable. One of our most generous givers was a lady who we called Auntie Al, a lady in her seventies on a war widow's pension. She was the most cheerful person in the church and at the end of a service, she'd often slip me a \$20 bill into my hand and say 'for the Lord's work, dearie' and go off joyfully singing the Lord's praises to her tiny one room flat. As Bill Hybels says on this topic, 'As we give, the money monster suffers a huge hit. Nothing makes him shriek with agony more than the smile on our faces as we write our cheques for God's work. In writing them, we break the grip of his leash and enjoy the taste of freedom.'

And the only way we can do that is to have a big picture of God's purposes. Did you see the big picture in our chapter today? Paul tells us at the end of Romans 13: 'Do all these things' that is, giving what you owe to people, paying off your debts, 'do them understanding the present time. The night is nearly over, the day is almost here. The Lord is coming.' That's the reality. We don't have to try and build heaven on earth with nothing left for the Lord for the Lord is coming to set up a new creation for us. And so that's the big picture. And so for our friend Auntie Al who died last year, we know that she left a very small amount of possessions in this earth but we do know that she now has a glorious heavenly inheritance. The inheritance which is ours in Christ - she had the big picture. She had the joy of giving.

Let me conclude. How can we respond practically to this whole issue of debt? Let me make some suggestions. Firstly, pray about it. Examine your own situation before God. Be honest with him about whether you're out of control in the matter of debt. And one sure way is simply to ask yourself if any of your loans are causing you anxiety or stress. And if so, it's a good sign that action needs to be taken. But nothing can be done until you're honest with yourself and honest with God. Ask God to help you take control and be a good steward of his resources.

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Secondly, begin to budget. All Christians should budget. If we're not budgeting, the reality is we're wasting money: God's money. The issue is not how much we earn, but how we manage what we earn. Friends, living on a budget is not easy. My wife and I find it really hard to do. We hate sticking to it, as much as anyone else does, and often we fail, but it's the only way to responsible financial freedom. It's hard, but it really helps. Now practically speaking, look at an article called 'Getting your money sorted'. It's a helpful article written from a Christian financial expert which will help you in these matters.

- 0. Pray
- 0. Begin to budget
- 0. Take control of your credit and store cards.

It's not just a case of getting rid of just one or two, but being ruthless about them. Statistically it's been shown that people who use credit cards spend one third more than people who use cash. One third more! Credit cards are a trap. Get rid of them, or if you can't bear to do that, put them in a place where you can't easily reach them! We used to lock them in a filing cabinet. Someone else suggested you freeze them in an ice block! Having them there avoids the trap of making hasty decisions to buy things that we'll later regret.

Pray, begin to budget, take control of your credit and store cards, and lastly seek advice from someone about your situation. There are trusted Christian people who would be most willing to help you work out your financial affairs and help you get back on track....

Alternatively, if you're someone with financial skills, perhaps an accountant or bank manager, and you want to use your skills in God's service by offering to help others take control of their financial affairs, drop a line to your church office to say you'd like to help. We actually need to help each other in these matters.

So let me encourage you to take action on debt. The challenge is, don't do debt. Take control in your finances, so that you and I can invest in the things that will really last, the eternal things. God wants our money to be our servant, and not our master. And he says this:

"Do not worry, saying what shall we eat or what shall we drink, or what shall we wear. For the pagans run after all these things and your heavenly father knows that you need them, but seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. (That is, live according to kingdom principles.) And all these things will be given to you as well.