

## 'Wisdom and Finance'

'Enough: Discovering Joy through Simplicity and Generosity.' Week 2

27 September 2009 \* Rev. Jill Smith

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Precious Lord, You have brought each one of us here today, and we come with many needs and for many reasons. Some of us come because our lives are full of challenges and difficulties and we need to know that You are here and others can help us with our burdens. Some of us come because people are present that you have put in our path, You touch us through them and we need that love, affirmation and touch. Some of us have come because we are not sure You really exist. We hear a lot about You but do not know if the stories can be true. Show us, Lord, that it is not always the miraculous where you shine through, but also through the shared trials of life, when others reflect a faith that is not of this world, let Your Truth emblazon those hearts that feel so dim. Some of us come to worship, thinking that has something to do with music and prayer and preaching - show us, Creator God, that worship need be none of those things. Merely to stand in Your presence is enough. To think on our failings and Your walk to the cross offers us unspeakable joy, unfathomable grace, undeserved mercy – and yet, those are Your gift to us. Heal us, touch us, push us, empower us, humble us – show us that You are *enough*. Everything else is clutter. Clean up our lives. In Christ we pray. Amen

***Proverbs 21:5 'The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to want.'***

***Proverbs 21:20 'Precious treasure remains in the house of the wise, but the fool devours it.'***

In California, a man gets up at a gathering of Christians and shares this testimony. "Before I met Christ I had nothing. My business was in bankruptcy, my health was failing, I had almost lost my family. Then I accepted Christ as my savior and Lord. He took me out of bankruptcy in the last 3 years. My blood pressure has dropped to normal and I feel better than I have felt in years. My wife and children have come back home. God is so good! Praise the Lord."

This testimony is from a man in China. An old and disheveled university professor stands up and says, "before I met Christ I had everything. I had a nice house, I was in a respected profession. I was highly esteemed by my peers in my profession. I had a good wife and children who loved me. Then I accepted Christ as my savior and Lord and as a result I have lost my post at the university, lost my house and my car, I spent 5 yrs in prison, I work for a subsistence wage and I suffer from pain from a broken back I sustained while in prison. My wife rejected me after my conversion and I have not seen her or my children for 10 years... But God is good and I praise Him for His faithfulness."<sup>1</sup>

Which is the better story? Which is the better Christian? DON'T answer that question. Don't start putting together the pro's and con's of each story. We automatically know which story we would rather live. But both men are loved by God. Both men's sins were paid for by the

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<sup>1</sup> David Jeremiah, Stewardship is Lordship. 4<sup>th</sup> tape in series 'Doctrine of Things'

love of Jesus when he died on the cross to bring them into a right relationship with God. The same thing happened inside the hearts of each man. 2 Corinthians 5:17 **says**, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”

Each one of us, here today. If you have ever given your life to Christ, you too are a new creation. The sin that once separated us from God has been covered by the love of Christ. The question becomes, **if** we have made Him savior of our life... Have we made Him Lord of our lives? Over everything? And if we say he is Lord – is he really Lord over our finances?

Last week Pastor Mike talked to us, as did Adam Hamilton via the miracle of DVD technology. You can read Mike’s sermon on our Mt. Zion website. He spoke powerfully to the state of things in our culture as it relates to money and individuals. The American dream has become a nightmare many. Many, many Americans are in some kind of financial difficulty. And if they are not currently in financial difficulty, they are so overextended they are one paycheck away from financial hardship. The Bureau of Economic Analysis in says the United States savings rate has jumped from the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter of 2008, when it was at just over 2% to the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter of 2009 Americans have managed to push it up to 5%.<sup>2</sup> People are *only now* saving money because they are afraid of what the Global financial situation will do. What do numbers these numbers tell us?

Well, if most *Americans* are in this position... then many *Christians* are in this position also. I know that not everyone is in this situation. But today we are going to look at actual practical things a Christian can begin to do (if they are not doing this already) to gain ownership of your financial situation.

If you already follow principals like these, please bear with me and become a cheerleader for your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ that want to be free of financial bondage. Encourage those who want to change their bad financial practices because money worries keep us from joy and prevent us from being generous.

**There are 6 principles**, that if you hold to them, AND you have a willing heart, they will allow you to make Christ Lord over **all** of your life. When 2/3 of the parables that are recorded by Jesus have to do with finances, I think we do well to recognize that our money and how we handle it has powerful consequences in this world and to our spiritual life.

#### Principle #1 **Pay your tithe and offering first**

Now the principle here is that when you look at your gross income, 10% of it is a tithe. The word ‘tithe’ mean ‘a 10<sup>th</sup>’, so you can’t say you will tithe 2%. You can give 2%, but a tithe is 10%. Tithing is mentioned numerous times in the Old Testament. Under the law of Moses it was an obligation of God’s people to bring the firstfruits of their labor to provide for God’s house and people in need. Offerings are amounts above your regular gift to God’s work.

Some of you will automatically say, “10%, I can’t do that-it is way too much.” And it may be true, right now. But, if you have overextended your living expenses so that 10% looks unattainable. Start somewhere, and increase it on a regular basis. Pray about it, ask God to help you find the amount and affirm it. You will know if you are playing games and God will know what the difficulty is. Work it out together. If you’ve never tried tithing, try committing to

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bea.gov/briefrm/saving.htm>

it for 3 months. At the end of 3 months, if you are worse off then renegotiate the amount. Think of it as an exciting goal you can work to attain, you and God- a partnership.

In Gen. 1 <sup>27</sup> So God created human beings<sup>[a]</sup> in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. <sup>28</sup> Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth **and govern it**. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground."

In the image of God, God gave humankind a job, a goal, a responsibility: to govern this creation. To care for it, to be its caregiver, or a steward over it.

Our finances are a part of what God has given to us, and we were created to govern it, be a caretaker, or steward of it. It really isn't ours, it is God's and God trusts us to use it to care for his creation as a part of his creation.

2<sup>nd</sup> Principle **Create a budget and track your expenses**

In your bulletin today, there is a template of a budget worksheet that you can start with to really take a look at your financial picture and get a handle on it. Take this home, and figure out the actual percentage of your income that you spend on each item. On the sheet is a suggested percentage shown.

Basic Budget Worksheet			
Item	Actual %	Suggested %*	Plan for next 12 months
Housing		25–35%	_____
Transportation		10–15%	_____
Charitable Gifts		10–12%	_____
Food		5–15%	_____
Saving		5–10%	_____
Utilities		5–10%	_____
Medical/Health		5–10%	_____
Debt		0–10%	_____
Clothing		2–7%	_____
Miscellaneous		12–23%	_____

These percentages are adapted from Dave Ramsey's *The Total Money Makeover* (Thomas Nelson, 2007).

If your numbers are w/in the recommended amount, you are being reasonable with your finances. Remember the amount you spend of your income should not exceed 100%. If it does, then you know you are living beyond your means. If you are living beyond your means, putting these principles to work as soon as possible will help you to *govern* your assets, instead of worrying there will never be enough. On the Budget Worksheet, there is also a place for you to plan over the next 12 months to reign in any areas that you see are out of control.

When you have an accurate and working budget, you are in control of what God has provided. You are governing it, You are caring for it. You control it, it does not control you. Can you see how that is what God has made you to do?

Principle #3                    **Simplify Your Lifestyle, live below your means**

This is important, because if you live below your means, than an economic downturn is going to squeeze you - it is not going to hurt you. The fewer 'things' you have the less you have to worry about, be responsible for, or spend money caring for. True contentment is being happy with what we have, rather than trying to attain things thinking they will make us happy.

Right now this is something I am struggling with terribly. Wayne and I generally lived below our means. We have always tried to make sure our credit cards are paid off and that we do not have a lot of debt that needs to be paid on monthly. And right now we are doing a great job of living below our means. But because we have done that, and because we have a lot of equity built up in our house, and with a recent empty nest... I have this really strong desire... this niggling thought inside of me... this temptation, if I am honest – and that is to sell our home and buy something smaller. ***But*** I want a home on the lake. So I've been looking all over the Lake Norman area for something that will 'satisfy my desire.'

Now, I can justify (to myself) buying something on the lake, because it is a buyers market and I just might be able to find something for less than market value, if someone has to sell their lake home. That is prudent, economic, business sense, right?? ... but it still means I will be taking advantage of someone's bad situation.

But here is the downside:

- I have driven by, or looked at on line, every home that is on the market in the Lake Norman area... And not one of them will be a downsize. A few are lateral square footage, but there are just no starter homes or retirement homes size wise, so we wouldn't really be downsizing at all.
- Another problem is that even with all the equity in our house, we would be taking out a mortgage that is 2 or 3 times what we currently have. So our monthly mortgage payment would be quite a bit more than we pay now. Truth be told, I am cheap at heart, and we have an incredibly low interest rate that even today's low rates would be hard to match with a low monthly mortgage.
- Another problem is that some of these homes, even at a good price are rather pricy. That would mean much of our money, on this budget sheet would go to the mortgage so we wouldn't have a lot of liquid capital to make any changes we would want, needed upgrades that the owners have not done. Not without making the mortgage even that much higher.

So there is my confession. Right now in my life, I want a house on the lake, but if we got one it would mean we might not be able to follow some of these other principles. I even asked Wayne to talk me out of it...and he refused... But he did give me some perspective. Realistically, if we were to sell our house we need to do some repairs and upgrades first. And that will probably take a while. So if I can refrain from looking at tempting houses now... we should work on our house for a while and when that is done, then and only then consider if there is anything that we can afford..... and I may love our own changes so much I won't want to move.

So I think I can do that. I can get excited about making some upgrades and living with them in our current home...

Do you know what God gave me to help me with this? Recently I was scrutinizing our mortgage statement and I realized that we are actually in a position to pay of our mortgage in a reasonable amount of time. If we owned our house outright, imagine what we could do with no monthly mortgage payment. We could then give to the church much more than 10% because Romans 12:8 'If one is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously.' The New Testament talks much more about giving away in proportion to what you have been given... I can think of so many places we can give more. The moral to this (temptation) story is.. I can wait and do what we need to do first, and then and only then whatever God leads us to: we will be living within our means.

Principle #4                      **Establish an emergency fund**

Why is this important? Because 'stuff happens.' If many Americans are living one paycheck away from disaster, then they really do not have any disposable income. They may have credit available, or equity they can still tap – but that is borrowed money, not available liquid money. An emergency fund, which is generally 3-6 months of your monthly income, can get you through a difficult time, should something unknown hit.

Right now, there are people in Atlanta Georgia who have lost their homes this week to a rainfall that started one day and ruined their home the next. An emergency fund will help them live in a decent place until insurance, or family or friends can get them on their feet again. Look at the wildfires in California – if that does not give you pause to consider "if I had to leave my home in 30 minutes, what would I take with me?"

The only thing of ultimate value in your home is another person. If there are 'things' you would consider dying for... you may have some attachment issues that need to be worked out!

The emergency fund is not your regular checking or savings account. It is a separate emergency fund. Then if you have a sudden car repair that pops up, it doesn't compete with your mortgage or grocery money. If there is an unforeseen medical need, or even a death. Then you have something monetary readily available. This fund is for things that cannot be planned on but happen to everyone at some point.

Principle #5                      **Pay off your credit cards. Use cash/debit cards for purchases and uses credit wisely!**

The average person spends 15%-20% more when using a credit card than they do using cash. It is our human condition to think we have more money to spend when the actual cash is not in our hands. When it is in our hands we can see what we have and we know we can't spend more than that. But with credit... The credit card companies know this. They count on this. They make money when you do not pay the full balance, and they are making multimillions of dollars because of our lack of self discipline, our impulsiveness, our selfishness.

Can I ask you to consider two places where money is so easily spent and wasted? 1) Impulse buying 2) Eating out.

Impulse buying usually means you are making the decision based on emotion and not on need. I am married to a salesman. He sold retail appliances many years ago and was fully aware that people will pay more when they let their emotions make the decision. Avoid impulse buying.

Eating out – the average family in the United States eats out... 4x a week. You know a meal at home is a fraction of the price of a meal out. How much money could you save by cutting down the number of times you eat out?

The final 6<sup>th</sup> principle **Practice long term saving and investing habits.**

There is another page with that Budget Worksheet. This is something to discuss in Sunday school/after this service and/or with your family. This sheet is titled: 'Thinking it Through.' This sheet can give you clarity on whether you - work to live, or live to work.

### **THINKING IT THROUGH**

How would you define or describe your life purpose?

What are 3 goals that can help you achieve this life purpose?

What are some financial goals to support your life goals and purpose?

-short term (next 12 months)

-mid-range (2-5 years)

-Long-term (5yrs – retirement)

If part of your God given created purpose is to care for creation, govern what you have been given – what other passions has God put in your life that you can impact with your life and with your finances?

Do you embody these 6 principles in your life? If not, why not. You see, giving/tithing/supporting your church is not about the money. It is about obedient to what God has created you for. If you are upset, or uncomfortable about the church talking about money management - that says more about your money management than it does about the church. Remember the men with the testimonies of what Christ has done in their life. Truth is, as

believers, we should be willing to own either of these stories. If God blesses us, do we really use what we have for His kingdom? If we were to lose everything for the Gospel, can we still thank God for what we DO have? If we really believe it is God's, when we lose everything, we are not losing our things – they are God's.

The Westminster Confession is thought to be one of the grandest documents to come out of the Protestant Reformation. It was made into a shorter Catechism to help lay people teach their children about the faith. It was a question and answer format. The very first question:

What is the chief end of mankind? The answer: To glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

Does the money that goes through your hands and household glorify God? When it does, that is when real, deep and true Joy is yours. It's about loving God by how you use what He has given you.

You too can enjoy Him forever! Let us pray:

**Closing Prayer**                      Precious Lord. I use the word Lord, with thought and reverence... You know so many things we do not know. We don't know where every dime went, but somehow you know what we did with all that we had... last year and the year before.. You are loving and gracious and I know you delight in us having joy in our possessions. But you know that all too easily we allow our possessions to own us, and there is no joy there. Forgive us for being wasteful. Forgive us for selling out our future in order to have pleasure now. It isn't even all that pleasurable, when we know it dishonors You. Help us to be good managers of our things, good governors of what you have given us. Stewards who care and don't think selfishly. Help us to be generous and willing to step out and to things Kingdom style, where true treasure resides. Show us our real purpose so we can make a difference with our lives and our things. Using your creation to help your creation. We offer this prayer in Jesus' name. Amen!