

Debt—A Daily Decision



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Ps. 37:21, Matt. 4:3–10, Matt. 6:33, Deut. 28:12, Prov. 13:11, Prov. 21:5, 2 Cor. 4:18.*

Memory Text: “Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law” (*Romans 13:7, 8, NIV*).

Sometimes you can be lucky enough to find someone who is willing to lend you money. Maybe that person does it with a pure motive—that is, he or she actually wants to help you out of a financial jam. But in most cases, people don’t lend you money out of the goodness of their hearts. They lend you money because they want to earn more (of your) money in return.

We should do all that we can to avoid debt. Of course, in certain circumstances—such as buying a house or a car, building a church, or getting an education—we may need to borrow money. But it must be done as wisely as possible, with the intent of getting out of the debt as soon as possible.

Yet, we must be careful. Spending money we don’t have is the gateway for God’s people to “make covetousness and love of earthly treasures the ruling traits of their character. As long as these traits rule, salvation and grace stand back.”—Ellen G. White, *Early Writings*, p. 267.

We are to improve our skills and abilities so that we can stay disciplined and do all that we can to avoid debt. This week, we will look at what the Bible says concerning debt.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 17.

Borrowing and Spending

The prophets and Elisha were getting wood by the river Jordan when “the iron axhead fell into the water. ‘Oh no, my lord!’ [one of the prophets] cried out. ‘It was borrowed’ ” (*2 Kings 6:5, NIV*). The verb “to borrow” means using with permission something that belongs to another. This permission carries risk and responsibility. Borrowed money is no different from the borrowed ax, except that it can have more serious consequences if misused.

The only reason we borrow money is to spend it. The financial risk we take is in presuming that we have the ability to repay and that there will be no financial surprises in the future. Yet, the future is unknown to us (*Eccles. 8:7*); hence, borrowing money always entails a risk.

What do the following texts have to say about debt?

Ps. 37:21 _____

Eccles. 5:5 _____

Deut. 28:44, 45 _____

We may borrow money with the idea to use it wisely, but the temptation to spend what we have, even of borrowed money, can lead to some very difficult problems. Indeed, spending borrowed money allows many of us to live in ways that we can’t afford. Temptation to borrow and spend is the heartbeat of a consumer culture that affects the rich and poor. When tempted, we should seek God’s provision (*1 Cor. 10:13*), because borrowing can be a curse (*Deut. 28:43–45*).

Don’t start the bad habit of borrowing money. If you already have, pay it back as soon as possible. We must learn to spend wisely and be masters of God’s money and not be mastered by the world’s money instead.

Again, there are some situations in which we may need to borrow. But it must be done cautiously and with the intention of paying everything back as soon as we can.

What spiritual dangers are there for a person who gets too caught up in debt?

Stewardship and Instant Gratification

“And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright” (*Gen. 25:34, NKJV*). Esau was a rugged outdoorsman who followed his passions. When he smelled his brother’s stew, he wanted the lentils immediately, even though it was unlikely that he was dying from starvation. Controlled by his emotions and feelings, he allowed the pressure of the moment to overpower reasoning, and he traded his birthright for some instant gratification. When he wanted his birthright back, and “though he sought it diligently with tears” (*Heb. 12:17, NKJV*), he did not receive it.

In contrast, we have the example of Jesus. After a 40-day fast and near starvation, Jesus was tempted by Satan three times (*Matt. 4:3–10*). But Jesus saw the temptations for what they were, and even in His weakened condition He did not give in to gratification. Jesus lived His entire life denying the pleasures of sin and gratification, and by so doing He showed that we could have power over sin too. He did not trade away or lose His birthright, and He invites all to share in being joint heirs with Him (*Rom. 8:17, Titus 3:7*). We keep our birthright by following the example Jesus gave when tempted (*1 Cor. 10:13*).

The best this world can offer is to experience the here and now, because it cannot offer an experience in the hereafter. To live for yourself is the opposite of living for God.

What do the following texts teach about the potential dangers of instant gratification, even for faithful people? *2 Sam. 11:2–4, Gen. 3:6, Phil. 3:19, 1 John 2:16, Rom. 8:8.*

The desire for instant gratification is symptomatic of an uncontrolled mind; it is an enemy of patience that undermines long-term goals, mocking and injuring accountability. To delay gratification is a learned principle; it is a life skill that helps us manage situations and pressures, especially the temptations that the world has to offer, such as borrowing money unwisely. This idea, however, is not popular in a world built on the indulgence of instant reward, quick fixes, and get-rich-quick schemes. Once we have experienced instant gratification, we are more likely to choose the short-term reward again, and then again, and again. Stewards of the gifts that God has given us must not fall into that trap.

Living Within Your Means

“There is desirable treasure, and oil in the dwelling of the wise, but a foolish man squanders it” (*Prov. 21:20, NKJV*). This text contrasts the stewardship of economic responsibility with luxurious and wasteful management. Foolish people make no plans to live within their means. They greedily spend wealth at their disposal, even borrowed wealth, feeling that financial wisdom or frugal living is a hardship, like an unwanted diet. Yet, even when we need to borrow money, such as for a house, we must do it with careful consideration and the realization that we need to live within our means.

The wealthy can live within their means out of their wealth. Their problem is that they always are worrying about their wealth and how to keep it. When people have very little and live from paycheck to paycheck, they worry about sustaining life, not wealth. Still, the Bible gives counsel on living within our means, regardless of how much we have. Paul recommends what we might consider extreme simplicity: “But if we have food and clothing [could include housing], we will be content with that” (*1 Tim. 6:8, NIV*). Paul doesn’t consider earthly possessions all that important, because for him, living in Christ is enough (*Phil. 1:21*).

What principle must be remembered before anything else? *Matt. 6:33.*
How can we be sure that this is how we are living?

We should think of our means not as income but as resources that we have a responsibility to manage. A budget is the method we should use to accomplish this task. Planning a budget is a learned skill that needs to be studied thoughtfully. Disciplined practice and effort are needed to be successful in managing a balanced financial plan (*Prov. 14:15*). If we make the commitment to succeed in our financial stewardship plan, we will be able to avoid embarrassing financial mistakes.

If you are having a problem with money management, set up a budget. It doesn’t have to be complicated. It can be as simple as totaling all your expenditures for a few months and then averaging in your monthly expenses. The key is to live within your means, no matter what, and to do all that is possible to avoid debt.

Read Luke 14:27–30. Jesus illustrates here the cost of discipleship by giving the example of a builder estimating the cost of building a tower and describing what happens if he can’t finish it. What lesson on stewardship should we take from here?

Saying No to Debt

Read Deuteronomy 28:12. What does this teach us about getting into too much debt? What principle do we see at work here?

It's just common sense to avoid debt as much as you can. Scripture discourages us from cosigning other people's debts, as well (*Prov. 17:18, 22:26*). Debt leverages the future and obligates us to submit to its demands from our position of financial weakness. It is a smooth elixir that Christians find difficult to decline and manage. Debt may not be immoral, but it does not strengthen our spiritual life.

"There must be a strict regard to economy or a heavy debt will be incurred. Keep within bounds. Shun the incurring of debt as you would shun leprosy."—Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship*, p. 272.

Debt can become financial bondage that makes us a "servant to the lender" (*Prov. 22:7*). Because debt is so intertwined with the fabric of our economic world, we think of it as simply the norm. After all, whole nations exist on debt; why shouldn't individuals do the same thing? This is a wrong attitude to have.

"Make a solemn covenant with God that by His blessing you will pay your debts and then owe no man anything if you live on porridge and bread. It is so easy in preparing your table to throw out of your pocket twenty-five cents for extras. Take care of the pennies, and the dollars will take care of themselves. It is the mites here and the mites there that are spent for this, that, and the other, that soon run up into dollars. Deny self at least while you are walled in with debts. . . . Do not falter, be discouraged, or turn back. Deny your taste, deny the indulgence of appetite, save your pence and pay your debts. Work them off as fast as possible. When you can stand forth a free man again, owing no man anything, you will have achieved a great victory."—Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship*, p. 257.

Debt is a weak foundation for Christians to stand on. It can do damage to our spiritual experience and impact our ability to fund God's work. It robs us of our ability to give to others with confidence, and it steals opportunities for God's blessings.

What are some choices you can make right now that could help you avoid any unnecessary debt? What might you need to deny yourself of in order to stay out of debt?

Saving and Investing

Ants labor to save provisions for the winter (*Prov. 6:6–8*). We are wise to consider their ways when we save money routinely for a specific purpose. The point in saving is to have resources available for our living expenses or needs as opposed to wasting or hoarding what we earn. Managing money requires wisdom, budgeting, and discipline. If all we do is save for ourselves, we are pilfering God’s possessions instead of stewarding them.

“Money needlessly spent is a double loss. Not only is it gone, but its potential for earnings is also gone. Had we set it aside, it could have been multiplying on earth through savings or in heaven through giving. . . . Saving is a discipline that develops authority over money. Instead of letting money take us wherever our whims incline, we take control.”
—Randy C. Alcorn, *Money, Possessions and Eternity* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003), p. 328.

Read Proverbs 13:11, Proverbs 21:5, and Proverbs 13:18. What practical words are here for us that can help us deal better with financial issues?

Stewards save for family needs and invest in heaven when managing God’s assets. It is not about how much one possesses but about having a biblical management plan in place, whatever your financial situation happens to be. Saving for family needs should be done wisely. To minimize any loss, spread out the risk (*Eccles. 11:1, 2*). Working at such minimization prior to your wants (*Prov. 24:27*) and then seeking qualified advice from others (*Prov. 15:22*) are two successful tools in this model. As needs are met and wealth grows, we must “remember the LORD your God, for it is [H]e who gives you the ability to produce wealth” (*Deut. 8:18, NIV*).

The most secure investment model for God’s steward is to invest in “the kingdom of heaven” (*Matt. 13:44*). There are no recessions, risks, thieves, or market downturns. It’s like having a purse or wallet that will never wear out (*Luke 12:33*). Accepting Christ opens the account, and returning tithe and giving offerings are deposits. That is to say, however much we need to take care of our worldly and earthly things here, such as paying the bills, we always must keep our focus on eternal truths.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:18. How can we keep this truth always before us while at the same time living as responsible stewards here?

Further Thought: Every natural ability, skill, or gift comes from God, whether we were born genetically with it, influenced and educated by our environment, or both. The important part of the equation is what we do with the abilities and skills we have. God expects stewards to learn to be masters of their skills and abilities through education and practical experience (*Eccles. 10:10*).

Bezalel was filled “with the Spirit of God, in wisdom and understanding, in knowledge and all manner of workmanship” (*Exod. 35:31, NKJV*). He and Aholiab (*Exod. 35:34*) had the ability to teach others their craft.

We can learn to be better stewards and specifically to eliminate debt while living in a materialistic world. We always should be developing our skills through reading, seminars, and formal education (whenever possible), and ultimately practice what we have learned. Growing our skills enables us to give our best to God and to be good stewards.

The parable of the talents indicates that each servant received talents “‘according to his own ability’” (*Matt. 25:15, NKJV*). Two servants doubled their amounts; the third hid his in the ground. We should always strive to improve what we have, but burying the talent did not show any ability or skill. Managing money, getting out of debt, cultivating discipline, and practical experience develop competencies that are blessed by God. To become successful and good at something, we must repeat it again and again.

“As the lessons of the Bible are wrought into the daily life, they have a deep and lasting influence upon the character. These lessons Timothy learned and practiced. He had no specially brilliant talents, but his work was valuable because he used his God-given abilities in the Master’s service.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 205.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Although self-control is always important for the Christian, it is especially important when a lack of self-control can lead to financial hardship or even ruin. What can we as a church do to help those who could be in danger of this problem?
- ② Read Romans 13:7, 8. How can we apply these words to our daily lives and in all our interactions with others?
- ③ Some argue that we shouldn’t worry about getting in debt, because Jesus is coming back soon. How would you respond to that assertion?

Mentally Tortured for Sabbath

by ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Her mother drenched her with water before Sabbath School.

Her father followed her as she walked—and then ran—to church.

Every time she heard the chain rattle on her father’s locked gun box, she feared he was coming for her.

“I was very, very scared,” said Margaret Wilfred, recounting the years after she was baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church. “I was a nervous wreck. To this day it still affects me.”

But Wilfred, 61, a retired Adventist grade-school teacher in the Caribbean nation of Trinidad and Tobago, has no regrets. “I am enjoying my walk with God,” she said. “I am getting all the peace I can have now.”

Wilfred was raised by Sunday-keeping parents near the campus of the Adventist-owned University of the Southern Caribbean in Maracas Valley. From childhood she loved the music that wafted from the campus church on Sabbath. Student singing bands sometimes visited the valley on Sabbath mornings. It was music that attracted Wilfred to an Adventist evangelistic series when she was 19, and she was baptized after the meetings.

“That is when the mental torture started,” she said.

Her parents were furious. Her father threatened her and locked her out of the house. The rattle of the chain on the gun box terrified her. She feared being beaten or worse. Once her father followed her halfway to church.

“I ran all the way because I was scared of what he might do,” she said.

Her mother threw water over her after she had dressed for church.

“Life wasn’t happy for me at all,” she said.

But Wilfred never considered abandoning her faith. She clung to Psalm 34:7, which says, “The angel of the LORD encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them” (*NKJV*). Another favorite is Psalm 27:10, “When my father and my mother forsake me, then the LORD will take care of me.”

Eventually, tensions eased at home. Wilfred received a state scholarship to further her education, and she enrolled at the Adventist university. Later she accepted a job at its Maracas Seventh-day Adventist Primary School, where she taught first and second grade for 35 years.

“I know that I am the apple of God’s eye,” she said. “He will see me through anything.”



A portion of the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering in first quarter 2018 will go toward a new church for the University of the Southern Caribbean, which has never owned a church building and worships in an auditorium.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Romans 13:7, 8*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Identify the factors that contribute to needless debt within the context of being faithful stewards of God, entrusted with financial resources.

Feel: Experience the emotional freedom of becoming debt free with the liberty to invest surpluses for kingdom advancement.

Do: Structure income and expenses so that debt does not become a financial and emotional burden.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Legacy of Debt

- Ⓐ What are the primary causes of debt, and how can they be avoided?
- Ⓑ What are some practical safeguards that help us live within our means?
- Ⓒ How does saving and investing build a barrier against debt?

II. Feel: The Freedom of Being Debt Free

- Ⓐ What are the psychological and emotional benefits gained from being free from debt?
- Ⓑ How can believers feel satisfied and content with what they have when the world encourages them to accumulate more and more?

III. Do: Managing Debt

- Ⓐ How should Christians manage their indebtedness, and how should they relate to such things as credit cards?
- Ⓑ How can Christians budget wisely and set appropriate, God-given priorities to guide their spending?
- Ⓒ How does instant gratification relate to trusting God for the future?
- Ⓓ How can heavenly investments and wise earthly investments actually complement each other?

► **Summary:** The believer who lives debt-free is both financially and emotionally free. Godliness with contentment is marvelous gain, and wise management of life's financial and material resources includes investing and saving.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Romans 13:7, 8*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: God is accustomed to rescuing sinners from their sinful indebtedness, and He is perfectly capable of delivering them from financial indebtedness, as well.

Just for Teachers: Unwise debt has hindered the spiritual growth of many believers, accelerating multiple divorces, causing suicides, and contributing to depression. Satan's forces know that spiritual wholeness is very difficult whenever financial obligations consume lives.

Financial commitments have strong spiritual ramifications. Those who have avoided indebtedness generally enjoy better emotional health and higher community esteem. Debt can seem like emotional quicksand—the more one struggles to get free, the more quickly one starts sinking. As with smoking, the easiest way to break the debt habit is never to start. For those who receive this advice too late, God offers the hope of freedom.

Opening Activity: Discuss the dangers of *gradually* accumulating debt. An apt illustration is credit card debt in which paying the minimum amount due and adding new charges each month snowballs indebtedness. How does this illustration show the importance of never starting down the road of debt in the first place?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Indebtedness has become an increasingly common component of modern life. Families declare bankruptcy, cities declare bankruptcy, and even nations declare bankruptcy. The United States, which once boasted the most robust economy in the world, has assumed staggering amounts of debt. For many, multiple credit card payments are the source of constant anxiety. Does the Bible have anything to say about this worldwide epidemic? Indeed, it does.

Bible Commentary

I. The Risk of Borrowed Capital (Review Psalm 37:21, Ecclesiastes 5:5, Deuteronomy 28:43–45, and Proverbs 22:7 with the class.)

The book of 2 Kings records the story of a student who borrowed an ax for a construction project (*2 Kings 6:1–6*). During the course of the project, the ax head flew off the handle and sank into the riverbed nearby. The student was unsettled by two things: not only had he lost the ax, but the ax was borrowed.

Solomon warned that borrowers are slaves of lenders (*Prov. 22:7*). We see the truth of this warning played out in the use of credit cards. The terms of borrowing are highly unfavorable and stacked against the borrower. Exorbitant interest rates, skyrocketing to 20 percent (annually) and higher, are not uncommon—not to mention late fees and other penalties that merely compound the problem. Anxiety regarding repayment sometimes reaches unbearable levels. The wisest course is to spend only what one has and to save for future purchases.

Consider This: Why is having what one wants now *not* worth the anxiety over repayment? What did Solomon mean by his warning that borrowers are slaves of the lenders?

II. Instant Gratification (*Review Genesis 3:6, 25:34, Matthew 4:3–10, 2 Samuel 11:2–4, 1 John 2:16, and Romans 8:8 with the class.*)

How many, in the spirit of Esau, satisfy immediate cravings by sacrificing their spiritual birthrights? We live in the age of instant gratification. In many countries, there are instant meals, microwave ovens, overnight loans, easy credit, and fast-food restaurants. There is instant communication. Whereas generations past waited anxiously for months to receive letters from around the world, today’s communicators use Skype, FaceTime®, and other technological advances to connect instantly with people globally.

These modern miracles are not necessarily bad in and of themselves, but they do contribute to an atmosphere of instant gratification that fosters an attitude of “I want it now, and I’ll find a way to get it now.” With unscrupulous lenders all too willing to capitalize on the desires of consumers to have it all right now, the culture of instant gratification has become widespread. Spiritually, this ravenous hunger displays an absence of trust that God will take care of things in the long run. Thus, in the Bible we read, tragically, that Ahab wants Naboth’s vineyard—and gets it *now*. Saul becomes impatient with Samuel’s delay—and acts *now*. Where is the trust that God will supply the things needed when they are needed the most?

Consider This: How can believers differentiate between needs and wants, between things that can wait and things that are immediately essential?

III. Living Contentedly (Review 1 Timothy 6:6–10, Matthew 6:33, and Luke 14:27–33 with the class.)

Writing to Timothy, his young protégé, Paul extolled the value of godliness coupled with *contentment*. His reasoning runs against contemporary trends that strongly advocate *entitlement*. Coupled with this atmosphere of entitlement is human covetousness. Asaph confessed, “I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked” (*Ps. 73:3, NRSV*). “We deserve better” and “Everyone else is getting theirs” are the dangerous mottos of the spendthrift generation.

Against this selfish tendency, Jesus reminded His Jewish hearers that even pagans count the cost before building. Today we call this budgeting. Budgeting can provide a practical barrier against overspending, borrowing, abusing credit, and other dangerous practices. Budgeting enables believers to live within their means and plan wisely for future expenditures. Desiring nicer things is not wrong, but coveting them is sinful. Money is not the problem; *loving* money is. Living contentedly (1) demonstrates appreciation for God’s generous provision, (2) demonstrates confidence about His ongoing watchfulness, and (3) provides personal tranquility. Worrying about our futures changes nothing anyway.

Consider This: Paul makes a distinction between money and the love of it when he says that the love of money—not money itself—is the root of many evils. Why is this distinction important, and what does Paul mean?

■ *How might living contentedly improve our overall health?*

IV. Saving and Investing (Review Proverbs 6:6–8; 13:11, 18; 15:22; 21:5; 24:27; and Deuteronomy 8:18 with the class.)

So often we spend so much time on the negative consequences of debt that we neglect the positive value of investment. Solomon championed the ant’s example of preparing for future needs. Proper budgeting sets aside God’s portion first (tithe and offerings), then it takes care of current demands, and finally it sets aside savings for investment and preparation for future needs. Knowledgeable investors are not tricked by get-rich-quick schemes. They invest not only for personal gain but also for the benefit of those with whom they invest.

God bestows the intelligence with which to build wealth. He wants to multiply our financial resources. He finds trustworthy stewards such as Robert LeTourneau and entrusts them with wealth. With his wealth, LeTourneau founded a Christian college and, by the end of his life, was reportedly living on 10 percent and returning 90 percent to God.

Consider This: What are the keys to successful Christian budgeting?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Successful life management requires restraint and wisdom. Through God’s Spirit, we obtain both. Contentment demonstrates that we have both.

Application Questions:

- ❶ Where can believers find the tools to build a realistic, God-honoring budget?
- ❷ How can Christians cultivate contentment in a world that screams “entitlement”?
- ❸ How can today’s stewards present these principles to their children when their own lives have not demonstrated them up to this point?
- ❹ What steps should Christ’s disciples take to extract themselves from paralyzing debt?
- ❺ How can Jesus’ followers become successful investors?
- ❻ How would Christ want His followers to relate to those who may have borrowed from them?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: The action steps that members take from this point forward depend largely on the positions in life the individual members hold. Some have made good choices and investments, while others have succumbed to worldliness and instant gratification. We should also remember that some may be impoverished through no fault of their own. Some, because of accidents or illnesses they themselves have experienced, are poor. Others have family members who have suffered, thus draining family finances. Some grew up in homes in which these principles were not taught, and, thus, they never developed management skills. God, however, takes us from wherever we are to wherever He wants us to be, as long as we trust and obey Him completely.

Activities:

- ❶ Construct a budget. If you have never done this before, ask friends for help, or consult the many excellent Christian materials about budgeting that are available from your library or Christian bookstore.
- ❷ Research several investment opportunities for (1) income potential, (2) ethical considerations (for example, should Christians be financing nuclear warheads?), and (3) potential to help others.