

STEWARDSHIP SERMON 2

"WISDOM AND FINANCE"

One of the tax benefits clergy have is being able to designate a portion of their stipend as "Housing Allowance" and thereby not have that amount included as taxable income. Years ago, I was meeting with a vestry man who did investments. In the course of our conversation, I asked him, "is it OK for me to designate such a large percentage of my salary as a housing allowance?" He smiled and said it was up to me as long as I remembered that "You can do anything you want as long as you don't get caught!"

The humor in this is that we all know we are susceptible to this trap: We do something that's a little naughty, dishonest or illegal ... and we get away with it! The next time we are faced with the same temptation we are more likely to figure, "Hey, I got away with it the last time. I can do it again." And so it goes on and on. But each time we succeed our behavior gets reinforced. And, we also begin to rationalize - "Oh, it's no big deal, I know others who cheat. Actually, I deserve the break. You know, after this long - I'm entitled to it. After awhile, our little habit has us. But the truth is, what we call a habit is actually a sin.

From Jesus' description in [Luke 15:11-16](#), we see that the prodigal son had the **habits** of squandering and spending. The word prodigal does not mean someone who wanders away or is lost. It literally means "**one who wastes money.**" Many of us struggle with that habit - or should I say sin. . We're not worried about tomorrow; we want it today. The problem with that kind of thinking is that, for most of us, the "famine" eventually comes. It comes when we have spent everything we have and even a little bit of next year's income. So we use the credit card and charge it, and we go a little further into debt, a little farther into bondage. Finally, we come to a place where we have nothing left, not even credit, and we can't figure out how we are we going to get by. **Maybe this describes you or has at one time or another, maybe not. But most of us even though we might not hit "financial bottom" have smaller and smaller amounts of available money to "Give" - to church, to neighbors, friends or even family. In this the sadness of our sin lies. As we have learned, in God's economy Giving brings us joy, God glory, and justice and relief to those God would have us help.**

The more we make, the more we waste.

And all the while, especially in our culture inflicted with Affluenza and Credititis, we don't feel like we have harmed anyone. After all, it's our money, it's our life,

right? . It seems that the more financially secure we become, the less we worry about spending money here and there. We waste a dollar on this or that, and we forget where it went. Money just seems to flow through our fingers. We're not as careful with our money as we should be. There are many ways we waste money, but there are two primary money-wasters that many of us struggle with. It is not necessary to eliminate these two things altogether, *but we should think more carefully about how we spend our money*. Remember, a little habit grows into a potentially big problem. A habit like impulse buying!

What if we started to change our habits around this area of impulse buying just a little bit? What if for the next two weeks (the amount of time it takes to make or break a habit) we vowed to:

- Never go grocery shopping when you are hungry.
- Shop only for what you need.
- Make a list and stick to it; buy what you need and get out of the store!
- Wait twenty-four hours before following through on an impulse buy.

Another big area where money just flows out is Eating out. What if, for the next two weeks we were more aware of often we eat out.?

- The issue is frequency. The average American eats out an average of four times a week.
- By eating out less frequently, we will have more money to save, to spend on more important things, and to give away.

You can't change everything all at once but we can take a closer look at what and how we spend our money. I guess what I'm suggesting is that we begin to re-clarify our relationship with money and our possessions!

We do not exist simply to consume as much as we can and get as much pleasure as we can while we are here on this earth. We have a higher purpose. We need to know and understand our life purpose—our vision or mission or calling—and then spend our money in ways that are consistent with this purpose or calling.

Be clear about your purpose and calling.

Our society tells us that our life purpose is to consume—to make as much money as possible and then to spend it. The Bible tells us that we were created to care for God's creation. We were created to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We were created to care for our families and those in need. We were

created to glorify God, to seek justice, and to do mercy. Our money and possessions should be devoted to helping us fulfill this calling. We are to use our resources to help care for our families and others—to serve Christ and the world through the church, missions, and everyday opportunities. We have a life purpose that is greater than our own self-interest, **and how we spend our God-given resources reflects our understanding and commitment to this life purpose or mission.**

Set worthy goals.

Once we take the time to think about our life purpose (and the other goals we have too - like vacations and other fun things) we can make a plan that works toward accomplishing it all. Being able to accomplish the greater purposes God has for our lives requires some real thought. Taking the time to set goals related to our lives and our finances is crucial if we are to become wise stewards of our God-given resources. Each of us should think about our life purpose and goals and then identify two short-term financial goals, two mid-range financial goals, and two long-term financial goals that are aimed at helping us accomplish our broader life goals. At least one goal in each category should relate specifically to our faith. My old sales boss used to say, "Make your plan and then work your lan!"

Once we've set some financial goals, we need to develop a plan to meet those goals. A budget is a spending plan that enables us to accomplish our goals. Some people use an envelope system to help them manage their saving and spending and stay on budget. Others use a variety of different approaches. Many people find it helpful to seek the advice of a financial advisor. For those who find themselves in the midst of a financial crisis, a financial counselor can help arrange terms with creditors and develop a workable financial plan. Whatever approach you choose, the important thing is simply to have a plan.

Let me finish by offering you *six financial planning principles*. *These principles aren't new - you know them already. But if applied they will help us change our relationship with money and grow in wisdom and faith:*

1. Pay your tithe and offering first.

Put God first in your living and your giving. Give your tithe and offering from the "top" of your paycheck, and then live on whatever remains.

2. Create a budget and track your expenses.

Creating a budget is simply developing a plan in which you tell your money

what you want it to do. Tracking your expenses with a budget is like getting on the scales: it allows you to see how you are doing and motivates you to be more careful with your expenditures **Simplify your lifestyle (live below your means).**

3. Establish an emergency fund.

An emergency fund is an account separate from checking or long-term savings that is set aside specifically for emergencies. Financial advisor Dave Ramsey recommends beginning with \$1,000 and building that to three months' worth of income.¹ When you have this amount, you won't need to use your credit cards anymore.

4. Pay off your credit cards, use debit cards for purchases, and use credit wisely.

As you are building your emergency fund, begin to pay off your credit card debt and start using cash or debit cards for purchases. Some experts suggest starting with the credit card that has the highest interest rate. Others suggest paying down the smallest debt first, experiencing that victory, and applying your payments from the first card to the second, and so on, creating a snowball effect to pay off the cards as soon as possible. Cut up your cards as you pay them down so that you are not trapped or leveraged by your future for present-day pleasure, as the prodigal son was. If you must use a credit card, such as when traveling or making purchases online, be sure to pay off the debt monthly. If you are unable to do this, then it is better for you to cut up your cards and stop using them altogether.

5. Practice long-term savings and investing habits.

Saving money is the number-one wise money management principle everyone should practice. We do not save merely for the sake of saving. There is a word for that: *hoarding*. Hoarding is frowned upon in the Bible as the practice of fools and those who fail to understand the purpose of life. Saving, on the other hand, is meant to be purposeful. There are three types of savings we should have: for emergencies, for wants and goals, and for retirement. (Dave Ramsey, *The Total Money Makeover: A Proven Plan for Financial Fitness* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 102-108.)

A budget is a plan, your plan, that includes God's plans for you - your giving and your fun too. We just have to say I'm going to slow down and stay within "God's speed limit". I'm going to do this God's way, I trust in him.

This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹² Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back from captivity. ^[b] I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile." (Jeremiah 29: 10-14)

Let us pray. God, you know all about us, even when we don't. We don't know where every dime went, but somehow you know what we did with all that we had, last year and every other year. You don't forbid us from having joy in our possessions; in fact, you delight in our having joy. But what you know is that simply acquiring more stuff isn't where we find joy. Lord, forgive us for being wasteful, for being prodigal. Forgive us for leveraging our future in order to have pleasure in the present. And help us to be good managers of the talents that you've given us. Help us to be generous and willing to share, kingdom-minded and focused on accomplishing your purposes for our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.