

# STEWARDSHIP

## The Overarching Principle of Biblically Responsible Financial Planning

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In any arena we operate in there are rules, guidelines and expectations; at work, in society, in athletics and vocations. Living out our Christianity in the financial area is no different. If we are going to call ourselves Christians, we don't get to just do whatever we want to. I believe it's our responsibility to know what the Bible says about various financial topics, such as:

1. Spending / Lifestyle. If we see ourselves as Stewards of God's money, not owners, it should raise some fundamental questions around your values as you spend, save & invest. What is God's purpose for your life, your calling, your vocation? How much money is enough? Some parameters from 1 Timothy chapters 5 & 6:
  - a. Provision: "Am I adequately providing for my family?"
  - b. Contentment: "Am I fostering an attitude of contentment within my lifestyle?"
  - c. Enjoyment: "Am I enjoying my lifestyle, recognizing that what I have comes from God?"
2. Giving. What is your opinion on tithing? Some people think it's 'under the law', and therefore null & void. Some think it was a secular tax imposed by the Romans on the Jews. I used to hold these views, and my financial life suffered because of it. Then I read what the Bible says about tithing:
  - a. Malachi 3: 10-12 "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And test me in this, says the Lord of Hosts, and see if I don't open the windows of Heaven for you and pour down blessing on you."
  - b. Abraham gave a tenth of his plunder to Melchizedek.
  - c. Jesus instructed in Matthew 5:17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."
  - d. And in Matthew 23:23 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices-mint, dill & cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law-justice, mercy & faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former."
  - e. Giving a tithe isn't about fulfilling a law, or following a rule so that you escape some punishment-(by the way, God has already laid all the punishment he's going to on Jesus who took it on our behalf) it's about breaking the power of money (mammon) over your life. There are more verses in the Bible about money than any other topic. Jesus said you can't serve two masters, and he didn't mean him or Satan he said him or mammon. That ought to give you an idea of just how powerful this force is. Money is power, power to do what you want to do, acquire the possessions you want, influence people and bring about change. It's no wonder that God wants that power subjected

to his rule & authority, not yours because he knows that “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” Matthew 6:21. So make it a point to settle in your heart once and for all who is your Lord-you or God. One unmistakable, outward demonstration of this decision is your commitment to tithing. Until you get this right, I don't see much point in trying to implement the other Biblical financial principals because your heart will be out of order. Jesus said: ‘where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.’ When we see someone whose actions don't line up with their behavior, do we believe what they say or what they do?

3. Work and Retirement. Work is a blessing, and a calling. Before he did anything else, God gave Adam a job before the fall; name the animals. I do not believe that retiring to a life of self-indulgence is an appropriate goal for a Christian. Doesn't mean you can't do it, but you will miss out on the blessings God had in store for you had you followed his leading. Based on my observations, it is also an unsatisfying goal regardless of your beliefs. It has been my observation that men in general struggle more with retirement because so much of our identity is wrapped up in what we do, so retirement can be viewed as a threat to our identity, and a sentence to endless boredom. I believe that if we all seek God's leading in our vocations and hobbies, retirement will be more about attaining the financial freedom and flexibility to follow his leading and enjoying the blessing from it, then about stopping our life. God is a good God, and will always lead you to the desires he has for you, even if you don't know what that is yet.
4. Estate Planning. Are you seeking God regarding the final disposition of your lifetime accumulation of money and possessions? Is treating all your heirs equally fair? Does treating them fairly mean treating them equally? What about leaving money to charities?

“Wisdom along with an inheritance is good and an advantage to those who see the sun. For wisdom is protection just as money is protection, but the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the lives of its possessors.” Ecclesiastes 7:11-12

1. I believe as you seek God's will in this area you will find peace about how to proceed with the disposition of your holdings. This is truly between you and God. I believe you should seek wise counsel from a competent estate planning attorney, preferably a Christian one.
  2. I also believe that in order not to be a burden on friends and family, it is important to implement appropriate financial and health care powers of attorney.
5. Debt and the uses of it. I heard Warren Buffet say: ‘I've seen many very bright young men go bankrupt because of too much debt.’ Considering his position in life, my guess is he's seen some extremely rich and bright young men. Yet they were not immune to the siren song of debt. I personally have experienced using debt improperly, and have paid a ridiculous amount of interest on the debt as a result; interest that could have been used elsewhere in my life-including for kingdom purposes. Debt creates stress, there's no two ways around it. At best, it presumes upon a future ability to repay. James 4:13-15 says:

“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’ 14 Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. 15 Instead, you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.’”

The focus should be on what the Lord is leading you to do. I believe the Lord can lead you to use debt, like for the purchase of a home. I also know that a cavalier attitude can lead to enslavement by debt; According to Proverbs 22:7 (NIV),

“The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is slave to the lender.”

The best advice I personally ever got about getting out of debt was this: If you find that you’ve dug yourself into a hole, the first step to getting out is to quit digging. May sound trite, but to ‘stop digging’ you’ve got to change your mind set about debt, make a decision that you simply aren’t going to rely on it anymore to get through life. And here again is the reliance issue, who do you rely on: God or mammon? Will God help you if you aren’t honoring him with the tithe? It was many years from the point that I purposed to quit abusing debt and live debt free before it actually manifested in my life, but it DID manifest! I needed many years of discipline to make this a reality, but now that it’s here the peace that comes with it cannot be overstated. Which is an understated way of saying it’s fantastic! I highly recommend it! Here are a couple of other things to consider about debt:

The Bible teaches that it is wrong not to repay debts. Psalm 37:21 (NIV) states, “The wicked borrow and do not repay.” Holding this view of debt has clear implications on bankruptcy decisions and processes. Secondly, as Christians we should at least consider following the biblical teaching that surety (co-signing) is foolish, found in Proverbs 6:1-5 and Proverbs 11:15.

6. Saving and Investing. Proverbs 6:7 directs us to consider an example from nature about saving: how ants behave:

“Though they have no prince or governor or ruler to make them work, they labor hard all summer, gathering food for the winter.”

If the ants can do it, so can we. What about investing? We must have liquid, safe savings before investing. Without that, I have seen too many people absorb taxes & penalties needlessly to access their money that should have been put in a savings account and left alone. You’ve got to get a rainy-day fund established. After that, by all means take advantage of your employer sponsored retirement plans, particularly if they match your contributions. Here are some other topics around investing and what the Bible says about it:

- a. Business and market cycles are inevitable. Ecclesiastes 3:1 ‘For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven.’”

- b. Don't give place to fear. Philippians 4:6-7 "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."
- c. Establish written financial goals. Proverbs 21:5 "The plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage, but everyone who is hasty comes surely to poverty."
- d. Get established in your work before taking on greater financial responsibility. "Prepare your work outside and make it ready for yourself in the field; afterwards, then, build your house."
- e. Focus on preservation of wealth and the steady growth of capital, don't chase a quick buck. Proverbs 28:20 "A faithful man will abound with blessings, but he who makes haste to be rich will not go unpunished."
- f. Maintain a long-term time horizon. Luke 14:28 "For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it?"
- g. Diversify your portfolio. Ecclesiastes 11:2 "Divide your portion to seven, or even to eight, for you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth."
- h. Seek wise counsel. Proverbs 19:20 "Listen to counsel and accept discipline, that you may be wise the rest of your days."

In closing, I just want to say that I've broken about every rule I'm espousing above. God has been patient with me, and didn't let me get crushed by my bad decisions. I haven't arrived at some perfect level of financial discipline, but I've certainly left where I was! It takes time to change your thinking, time to see a harvest from the seeds of faith that you plant, time to trust in God's ways. You can't do everything at once, and God isn't asking you to. Like Elijah, whom God told: "Go to the east and hide by Kerith Brook, .." 1 Kings 17:3 God generally doesn't give us the whole plan he has for us mapped out step by step, he gives us step one, and waits to see if we'll trust him. If we won't take step one why bother showing us steps 2-50? My challenge to you is to take that first step.