Debt

"We try to be our own masters as if we had created ourselves. Then we hopelessly strive to invent some sort of happiness for ourselves apart from God. Out of that hopeless attempt has come human history…..the long, terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy." - C.S. Lewis

As children of Christ, we have a new heart, a new hope, and a new life. Of course, the moment of conversion does not immediately remove all the baggage of our life before Christ. Our former sinful life produced consequences we will likely endure for quite some time. In addition, we're going to continue to battle thoughts and habits that were cultivated up to this point.

Sanctification is the lifelong process of God continuing to conform us into the image of His Son. Over time, our objective is to live a life that more closely reflects Him. As we grow in our faithfulness, we will increasingly see the hopelessness of a world that offers nothing beyond the pleasures of today. Without the hope of eternity, it only makes sense to pursue maximum pleasure at every moment. However, now that our eyes are opened to the fallenness of this world and the fact that we are made for eternity, we will grow in our distaste for the desires of the flesh and increasingly desire things that have eternal value.

In considering the topic of debt, we need to realize that much of the debt we see today was generated by passions that outweighed the means available to pay for them. Those desires are not to be denied though and human ingenuity has worked hard to remove any barriers, including a lack of money. For most of human history, running out of money kept us from spending. Not anymore. We now live in a world that has commodified, marketed, and made debt so readily available that it can be difficult, and sometimes impossible, to make a purchase without it. The bondservants of the Bible and the debtors' prisons of centuries ago have been replaced by entitled consumers that expect easy access to credit they can use to fund their lifestyles, followed by debt-forgiveness programs freeing them of any consequences.

This is not how Christians should view debt. As ambassadors of Christ, our commitments are not to be taken lightly. While living in this society will likely cause us to use debt to some degree, we need to understand its dangers and approach it with extreme caution as God has instructed.

Is Debt Sinful?

Fortunately for us, God does not categorically forbid borrowing. That is good because we use it for everything that does not require payment in advance (rental cars, hotel rooms, credit cards you pay off at the end of the month, etc.). Technically, all these situations are available because of the existence of debt.

Every loan has two sides, a borrower and a lender. While we often think about debt from the side of the borrower, scripture also addresses it from the lending side, which can be very helpful in our understanding. Here are a few verses instructing lenders:

> Exodus 22:25 – "If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not treat it like a business deal; charge no interest."
> Psalm 112:5 – "It is well with the man who deals generously and lends; who conducts his affairs with justice."

Luke 6:35 – Jesus says "love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back".

From these verses, we can see that lending is even encouraged and from that we can conclude there must be times when it is okay to borrow as well. Otherwise, the act of lending would be leading people into sin and we would not be encouraged to participate. We do see instructions for the lender to not try to profit from the hardships of others and to not be coercive when it comes to repayment. These expectations are designed to both safeguard relationships and guard the heart of the lender.

The Dangers of Debt

While God does not prohibit debt, He does provide us with many warnings. As with all of Scripture, we will be wise to understand these warnings and seek to live accordingly. Here are a few aspects of debt that we need to consider as stewards:

Debt Commits Our Time

Proverbs 20:25 – "It is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider his vows."

Proverbs 27:1 – "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring."

There is a direct relationship between time and debt. We consume now by committing to pay for it later. God has told us that we don't know the future, which makes it dangerous to promise the time and money we don't yet have. What if God calls us to leave our current job or location behind? This becomes increasingly difficult when we've already committed our future to paying off debts. We should be striving to live our lives free from entanglements that bind us to this world so that when he calls, we can respond like Isaiah by saying "Here am I; send me."[1]

Debt Makes Us a Slave

Proverbs 22:7 - "The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender."

Debt creates a new relationship between the borrower and the lender. When debt is created, the borrower becomes a servant to the one they owe. We are voluntarily making ourselves slaves to someone other than God. This is why many relationships have been ruined by lending money to friends or family members. Once the money changes hands, the lender will be tempted to scrutinize every financial decision of the borrower until they are fully repaid and the borrower will feel the tension created by their new relationship.

We know that debt can be dangerous and it's largely based on the conditions of our servitude. Is the lender harsh and demanding or do they provide grace to the borrower? How easily can we get ourselves out of slavery? If we have other assets that are valuable enough to pay off the debt at any time, the burden isn't nearly as great as when we have no quick way to pay it off and free ourselves.

If we want to see an example of how intrusive the borrower-lender relationship can become, let's consider student debt. The first danger is that any money borrowed was used to pay for an education. While that education may be valuable, there is no asset that can be sold to pay it back. In addition, these lenders have been given extra protections under our legal system to

force repayment. If you fail to pay student debts, they can garnish your wages to force repayment. Not only that, but student loans are one of the only forms of debt that is not forgiven when a person files for bankruptcy. One of the worst things about student debt is that it targets young people that often don't fully understand the commitments they are making or the uncertainty of their outcomes.

Debt Reveals Our Heart

Matthew 6:19-21 - *"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*

As a new creation in Christ, we need to constantly evaluate the desires of our heart to make sure we aren't still "living in the passions of our flesh" like we did before "God made us alive together with Christ"[2]. Debt is a warning sign that our affections may lie somewhere other than in Christ. When we borrow to buy things we can't afford, it's a denial of reality and often shows a lack of contentment in the circumstances God has ordained for our good. Debt is a tool often misused in an attempt to not wait on the Lord in our quest for personal satisfaction. Instead, we should be trusting in His provision, setting our minds on things that are above, and seeking our treasures in heaven.[3]

Eliminating Existing Debt

Many of us will already have debt when we come to Christ. Others of us may be forced into debt by future circumstances. Either way, the following steps will help you develop a plan for getting out of debt and preventing the need for more in the future.

1. **Understand the reason why you have each debt.** We must first figure out the root cause of any existing debt. Was our debt a result of sinful desires like greed, impatience, or materialism? Did we take the time to pray before making major purchases or did we see debt as the easy answer? In other cases, debt may have not even been our decision. It could have been caused by a medical emergency or left to us by a former spouse? Either way, we need to know if there's a heart problem to address otherwise, paying down debt will only be a temporary solution.
2. **Repent of sinful behavior.** If the source of our debt was sinful, we need to repent and do whatever it takes to claim victory. Since sin likes to live in the dark[4], the best thing we can do is place it under a light by sharing our struggle with a trusted friend that will be there for us the next time we're facing temptation.
3. **Commit to no new debt.** We should commit to only taking on new debt when we can answer yes to 3 important questions:
    a. Do I really need to make this purchase?
    b. Can I afford it?
    c. Have I sought counsel and do they agree that debt is the correct decision?

    Avoiding new debt is hardest in the beginning when we are trying to change our habits and likely have little saved for emergencies that will certainly come. Even if we are required to take on

new debt for an unexpected situation, do not be deterred from the bigger plan. Continue to seek advice from wise counsel, deal with the situation the best way you can, and stick with the plan to avoid future debt.

4. **Save for emergencies.** Unexpected expenses are a certainty. We just don't know when they're coming and how much they will cost. An emergency fund is really a debt avoidance fund and will be crucial for long-term success. The amount needed for emergencies will vary by person, but the most important thing is to get started setting some money aside for this purpose. The common rule of thumb is to try to get to $1,000 as quickly as possible. An emergency fund is not to be used for anything short of an emergency, so it is best to keep it separate from our normal spending money.
5. **Save for future planned expenses.** Once we have enough saved to cover a typical emergency, start saving for expenses you know are coming in the next few years. If you fail to plan for bigger future expenses, you are already making a decision to take on debt when that day comes. Avoiding future debt is the key to becoming debt free. If there is no future debt, you can actually calculate your debt-free date today even if you only make minimum payments. However, if we don't stop the cycle of debt, there is no end in sight. It is more important to fix the problem permanently than to celebrate a short-term victory that doesn't last.
6. **Pay your debts.** We may not like the debts we have or the lenders associated with them, but that does not remove our responsibility to fulfill our obligations. Psalm 37:21 tells us that "The wicked borrows but does not pay back".

   This brings up the issue of bankruptcy. There is absolutely no reason to consider bankruptcy if you are still living a lifestyle of optional spending. While bankruptcy is an often-abused process in our society, some situations can warrant it. Those cases typically involve abusive lenders or extreme mental and emotional stress brought on by financial strain. Bankruptcy is similar to the Old Testament Year of Jubilee (See Deuteronomy 15). Our legal system has provided this relief for those who get in over their heads to prevent a lifetime of servitude.

   If you are having trouble paying back your debts, I strongly suggest communicating with your creditors right away. Most of them will be much more willing to help a person that starts the conversation early than they will once you have fallen behind.

Getting out of debt is not going to be a simple or quick process. It will take time and discipline. The initial debt is always the hardest to eliminate because your budget is stretched the tightest. However, once you get it paid off, you can apply that payment to the next debt and so-forth. By the time you get around to the last ones, it may only take a few months to eliminate them.

To provide encouragement, I highly recommend updating a **Personal Financial Statement** each quarter. It may feel like you are not making much progress, but you will be surprised to see how quickly your balances go down when you simply stop adding new debt.

Conclusion

The life of the Christian will require some degree of personal sacrifice. For the faithful steward, those sacrifices are not a heavy burden, but ones they gladly endure as they bask in the joy of their salvation and place their hope in an eternity with Christ rather than in the fleeting pleasures of this world.

Those focused on living their best life today aren't looking forward to the return of their master. For them, the day of His return will be filled with sadness and regret as they are found using His time and resources for their own glory (Matthew 24:36-51). However, the faithful servant is longing for His return and will delight in hearing the words "Well done, good and faithful servant. … Enter into the joy of your master." (Matthew 25:23)

Regardless of your circumstances or the financial burdens you may be carrying in your Christian life, celebrate today that Christ has already paid your debt to sin in full. The one debt you were never going to satisfy on your own has been forgiven. If God is faithful and generous enough to remove that debt, what more do we have to fear?

"With your pardoned sin behind you, and a successful Christ pleading above you, and a glorious heaven before you, how can you be despondent about anything?" —De Witt Talmage

Endnotes: Scripture References

1) Isaiah 6:8 - And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me."

2) Ephesians 2:3-5 – … among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved…

3) Colossians 3:1-2 – If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

4) John 3:19-20 - And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.