

## Proverbs 22:26-27 Get out of debt

There is an old English proverb which says; “He goes a-sorrowing, who goes a-borrowing” and looking around us at our society we can see that that is very true – did you know, for example, that the average household debt in the UK is £57,888, or a mere £18,784 if you take mortgages out of the equation? And that as a result of that borrowing the sorrow it causes means that the Citizens’ Advice Bureau deals with 9,300 new debt problems each day!

But it’s not just us as individuals – it’s our country too. Did you know that the Government’s national debt increases by £4,385 a second? It’s no wonder that many people put “Getting out of debt” down as one of their New Year’s Resolutions and in fact 15.5% of the people who have voted on the website said that “sorting out their finances” was part of their new start to 2010.

So, what does Proverbs and God’s word have to say to those of us who have some form of debt; be it a mortgage, a new sofa on four years interest free credit, a car, or just a Master Card in our purse or wallet and how we should handle money?

First of all we are warned in God’s Word about owing money and the dangers of getting ourselves into debt. Sometimes our debt is caused by our own greed; Proverbs 17:16 says, “Of what use is money in the hand of a fool, since he has no desire to get wisdom?” and there are those who just have no money sense. Liz had a friend who managed to get herself into thousands of pounds of debt, so at great sacrifice her parents gave a large cheque to pay off her debt. What did she do? “Of what use is money in the hand of a fool”? She went on a shopping spree and blew the lot!

Was she free from her debt? No quite the opposite and proverbs 22:7 reminds us that;

“The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender.” Debt takes away our freedom, our independence and puts our very homes at risk and so the instruction in verses 26 and 27 of chapter 22 is clear, “Do not be a man who strikes hands in pledge or puts up security for debts; if you lack the means to pay, your very bed will be snatched from under you.”

We need to remember that whilst spending seems fun and easy a loan does have to be repaid.

Now sometimes we take out a loan with the best of intentions, we take out a mortgage to provide a roof over our family’s head, or the car finally packs in and we need to replace it, we might even put ourselves in debt to help someone else; the bank of Mum & Dad for example.

But we are encouraged in God’s Word to think clearly about what we are doing. One wit said that “All progress is based on a universal innate desire on the part of an organism to live beyond its income.” And even if we are doing good, the Bible questions whether it is right to put ourselves in debt for that purpose – to live or even to give beyond our means. I know that last week we saw the benefits of sacrificially giving to God, but where should we draw the line?

For example, you might be horrified at what you see in Haiti, but would God want you to put yourself in a financially dangerous situation with debt so that you could send a large donation?

Well, look at chapter 6 for an answer, “My son, if you have put up security for your neighbour, if you have struck hands in pledge for another, if you have been trapped by what you said, ensnared by the words of your mouth, then do this, my son, to free yourself, since you have fallen into your neighbour's hands: Go and humble yourself; press your plea with your neighbour! Allow no sleep to your eyes, no slumber to your eyelids.

Free yourself, like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter, like a bird from the snare of the fowler.”

Here someone has, with all the best intentions, found themselves putting up security for someone else, but how foolish they have been – it’s their home, their livelihood, their security which is on the line.

We all know how heartbreaking it is for rescuers in places like Haiti – at the end of a long day they go back to their base, somewhere with some sort of shelter, some sort of food and access to clean water; how tempting it must be to give it all away, but what help can the rescuer be if he or she is starving themselves? There are ways that we can help people but Proverbs reminds us that we are no help to anyone if we ourselves are ruined by our good intentions. And so our kind-hearted friend is instructed to act immediately, be humble and do everything he can to be free of such a mill stone.

Why must he do this? Unfortunately bitter experience tells us that the investors, or those who put up security are those who end up ruined whilst the person they are helping walks away; Proverbs 11:15, “He who puts up security for another will surely suffer, but whoever refuses to strike hands in pledge is safe.”

So Proverbs reminds us to be wise with our money, prudent with our investments and slow to allow ourselves to fall into debt, especially for another over whom we have no control.

You see, when the shoe is on the other foot, then you may well find that those others are not as gracious to you, “Wealth brings many friends, but a poor man's friend deserts him.” Declares Proverbs 19:4. Now, in no way is this a get out clause for helping people, but it is a reminder that we must not become financial slaves or harm our own families by unwisely helping others beyond our own means.

Now, it is the fear of poverty, or the desire not to appear poor that drives many people into debt. When we were in Oxford we lived in a modern terrace house on a modern housing estate and around the corner from us in a similarly low budget house were a couple who drove a Porsche and a Ferrari. To every one they met they must have seemed to have had it made – but I suspect they never invited anyone back to their house, that would have revealed the truth!

“Wealth” or seeming wealth, “brings many friends”, but is that causing you to live unrealistically? Including your mortgage, every adult here has an average debt of £30,226 pounds, so what? Well when you do the maths that is 133% of average earnings. The average adult owes 33% more than he or she can actually earn.

We simply cannot afford our lifestyle and if we are not careful then we will affect those around us, not least our children and grandchildren who will grow up with unrealistic expectations. Again we need to take note of Proverbs where we read, “He who heeds discipline shows the way to life, but whoever ignores correction leads others astray.”

You see, our society has become so consumer driven that we don't think we need anything else other than things. Our new cathedrals are the shopping malls and if you don't believe me, just take a look at the architecture next time you're there – these are built as places of worship. And we have been led to believe that all we need to do to be happy is to spend money there, but our money is finite and so, to have what we want, we need to borrow more.

But is our worth really found in the shopping mall or the catalogue? No, the writer of proverbs hits the nail on the head in chapter 19 (22-23), “What a man desires is unfailing love;

better to be poor than a liar. The fear of the LORD leads to life:  
Then one rests content, untouched by trouble.”

We get our selves into debt because we want to be loved – we spend money to impress our boyfriends, girlfriends, wives, husbands, children, parents, friends, colleagues or neighbours, or simply to feel good about who we are. What we desire is unending love from others or ourselves, but styles come and go, fashions change and trends shift and what once impressed simply becomes embarrassing.

No, we are called to find the true, unending love of God, God who pays no heed to our bank balance, the cut of our clothes or the accessories on our car. Why not? Well Proverbs 22 (2) tells us, “Rich and poor have this in common: The LORD is the Maker of them all.” You see, in the eyes of God we are all the same, he made us all, but there is a problem and the problem is this; it is to God that every single one of us owes the greatest debt.

The Lord’s Prayer taught to us by Jesus makes that clear, because Mathew’s Gospel describes our “trespasses”, our “sins” as “debts”; “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”, so our sin puts us into debt with God?

Well, yes, our sin incurs God’s righteous and holy wrath, instead of being free to be in relationship with God we have incurred a penalty charge and so serious is sin that the penalty for it is serious too; death and that debt cannot be written off, it has got to be paid.

Now bearing that in mind, that sin has made us debtors, remember what proverbs taught about debt – debt makes us a slave to the lender, so because we are debtors to death, we owe our lives.

Our poverty robs us of our closest relationship with our holy God and it leads not only ourselves, but also others astray.

So how can we be free of such a debt? God cannot simply write off our sin as a toxic debt, it is far too serious and the cost is too great for us to bear and live. Well, let's turn to some of our more contemporary hymns to help us out, listen to Graham Kendrick who uses this imagery of debt very powerfully in his songs when he writes;

“My Lord, what love is this that pays so dearly  
That I the guilty one, may go free  
Amazing love oh what sacrifice  
The Son of God given for me  
My debt He pays and my death He dies  
That I might live”

And in other song;  
“The price is paid  
See Satan flee away  
For Jesus crucified  
Destroys his power  
No more to pay  
Let accusation cease  
In Christ there is  
No condemnation now”

And Keith Getty and Stuart Townend write;  
“See God's salvation plan  
Wrought in love borne in pain paid in sacrifice  
Fulfilled in Christ the man  
For He lives - Christ is risen from the dead.”

It is Christ's death which pays the penalty for our sin and his resurrection which heralds new life and new hope. Imagine that you win a competition; £1000 to pay of your credit card and you use that money to clear your account and then close it.

Can the credit card company charge you again? Of course not, you can direct them to the winning cheque; the price is paid.

And so it is with us and Christ, if we turn to God, fall into his hands and humble ourselves; turning to Jesus and trusting fully in him then we will be free from our debt to sin.

Next week we will return to the wife of noble character, but remember how she works hard, caring for her family but using her money wisely? Proverbs 15:27 reminds us that “A greedy man brings trouble to his family, but he who hates bribes will live.”

In other words, if we get carried away with money, we won't actually do those we love any good, it is much better to be materially poor, but wise for all eternity and know the unfailing love of God than it is to be greedy and materialistic and have a family heading towards eternity without Christ. Again Proverbs has great clarity; “Better a little with the fear of the LORD than great wealth with turmoil.” (15:16).

You see, one day your credit card account will be closed and your bank statements will stop arriving, your unpaid-for items and your outstanding balances will become someone else's burden, but your debt to God stays with you.

We have a responsibility to clear our material debts so that we and our dependants are free of them, but we also, and more importantly, need to make sure our spiritual and eternal debt is cancelled through faith in Christ because as Proverbs 11:28 says, “Whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.”

This new year we all need to get out of debt.

Let's pray.