



SAVING  
GRACE



# SAVING GRACE

A GUIDE TO FINANCIAL WELL-BEING

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b> . . . . .	1
<b>Pre-Work</b>	
Worksheet 1—Goals to Achieve This Year . . . . .	7
Worksheet 2—What I Owe / What I Own . . . . .	8
Worksheet 3—Gift List . . . . .	9
Worksheet 4—What I Spend . . . . .	10
Worksheet 5—Money Motivation Quiz. . . . .	11
Worksheet 6—Money Autobiography . . . . .	13
<b>Chapter 1: All Manner of Good</b> . . . . .	15
<b>Chapter 2: Getting Started: Tracking Expenses and Income.</b> . . . . .	27
<b>Chapter 3: Giving and Saving</b> . . . . .	43
<b>Chapter 4: Understanding and Eliminating Debt</b> . . . . .	59
<b>Chapter 5: Spending.</b> . . . . .	75
<b>Chapter 6: Adjusting the Spending Plan</b> . . . . .	101
<b>Saving Grace in a Time of Crisis.</b> . . . . .	125
<b>Appendix.</b> . . . . .	129
Earning . . . . .	131
Giving . . . . .	133

Saving . . . . .	135
Debt . . . . .	141
Spending . . . . .	147
Record Keeping . . . . .	155
Implementation Issues. . . . .	159
<b>Form #1:</b> Debt Reduction Plan . . . . .	163
<b>Form #2:</b> Form for Tracking Short-Term Savings . . . . .	164
<b>Form #3:</b> Envelope Record-Keeping Worksheet . . . . .	165
<b>Form #4:</b> Spending Plan . . . . .	166
<b>Form #5:</b> Spending Record (Daily Variable Expenses) . . . . .	167
<b>Form #5:</b> Spending Record (Monthly Regular Expenses) . . . . .	168
<b>Notes</b> . . . . .	169

## CHAPTER 1

# All Manner of Good

**H**ere's a scene from a sleepless night. Perhaps you're familiar with it. You lie in bed trying to think happy thoughts and instead you can't seem to shake thinking about . . . money. The thoughts are not happy thoughts. You think about paying the bills or managing the debt. You wonder what your relationship to money says about what sort of person you are and what you value. Old family attitudes toward money and cultural expectations are tied up in your thoughts about money. And even though many churches seem hesitant to talk about money as a spiritual matter, you sense that God is tied up in all this too.

If you've ever had such a night (or day), you've already taken a step toward peace of mind. You picked up this study. Congratulations for making it this far! The first step toward a healthy relationship with your finances is to push back the fears and to become a student. What are we studying? The practical steps to a kind of financial well-being that liberates us for a grace-filled, abundant life with God.

John Wesley, the principal founder of the Methodist movement in the eighteenth century, knew how important this conversation was for Christians. In his classic sermon on the topic, "The Use of Money," he lamented that the society he lived in talked about money frequently, but it was "not sufficiently considered by those whom God hath chosen out of the world." Part of a full Christian life, a life of holiness, was to continue growing in our employment of this gift. And Wesley did consider money a gift to be used for "all manner of good."

People of faith have always known that spiritual struggles accompany our discussions of money. We can see this in the many references that the Bible makes to the subject. Money may be a gift, but as 1 Timothy 6:10 famously notes, “The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.” The prophet Isaiah knew our temptation to misuse money on things that are not good for us: “Why spend money for what isn’t food, / and your earnings for what doesn’t satisfy?” (Isaiah 55:2).

Then there’s Jesus. Jesus talked a *lot* about money. He was a companion to both the rich and the poor, and he challenged both to act on what was really important in their lives. He seemed to know our struggles with both the potential and the dangers of wealth, and he knew about putting it in a good perspective. “No one can serve two masters,” he said. “Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matthew 6:24).

The principal danger of the love of money, even if we don’t feel that we have much of it, is that it can make us forgetful—forgetful of who we are, of what our responsibilities to others are, and forgetful of God. That forgetfulness can lead us to misplaced trust. The writer of the Book of Hebrews knew that: “Your way of life should be free from the love of money, and you should be content with what you have. After all, he has said, *I will never leave you or abandon you*” (Hebrews 13:5).

So, let’s start our journey here—putting our trust in God. With trust we may have fewer of those restless nights wondering about where it’s all going to come from, because God is the creator of all things and the giver of every gift. God desires that we live in close relationship with God and each other. And God has provided all the resources we need to flourish, no matter our condition.

In this chapter, we’ll explore the tensions in our relationship to money and begin to develop a plan that will help us see our financial well-being in the light of our spiritual health. We’ll look at how the cultural messages around money can feed into distorted views about our financial goals and priorities. And we’ll begin the journey to financial well-being by starting a plan that reflects God’s intentions for our lives.

## **Activity: The Idols We Keep**

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Though money itself is not innately a bad thing, it can become an idol—even a rival god—in some people’s lives. Has there ever been a time in your life when you felt money or possessions became an idol in your life? How did it affect you?

The reality of life is that every day we must make financial decisions—often they’re relatively small ones, and sometimes they are big ones. Often we make those decisions, even the major life decisions such as where we work and where we live and who our friends are, strictly on a monetary basis rather than on the basis of prayerful consideration of where God would have us work and live. When we do that, money has become our idol—it has become a rival god in our lives. So, while this study is about how to practically manage your money, it is also about values and priorities, joy and well-being, and most importantly, how to manage your money and resources to honor the God who provides them.

## **What Our Consumer Culture Says About Money**

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Too often our consumer culture feeds us some really bad information about money and possessions. We encounter these myths many times a day in many different ways.

One myth suggests that things bring us happiness. This is probably the most powerful of the myths, and it is certainly what the advertising media would like us to believe. They scream: Buy me! Drink me! Wear me! Drive me! Put me in your hair! Do this and you’ll be happy, popular, powerful, and utterly desirable! But if things really did bring this much happiness, America would be a deliriously happy nation because we have a lot of things. But statistics on depression,

suicide, divorce, addiction, and a host of other negative indicators suggest that maybe we're not overall a happy nation.

So why, in face of all the evidence to the contrary, do we tend to live our lives as though things we can buy really do bring happiness? Maybe we've heard this lie over and over and over until we've finally concluded, consciously or unconsciously, that it must be true.

A second myth is that debt is expected and unavoidable. The implication that often accompanies this myth is that there are really no negative consequences to debt. In reality, there are both serious economic and spiritual dangers to debt, which we'll explore in a later chapter. The Bible warns us to be cautious about debt (Romans 13:8, for example). The cautious debtor is one who seeks to avoid entering into debt, is careful and strategic when incurring debt, and always repays debt.

The last myth we'll explore is the one that tells us that a little more money will solve every problem. Some interesting research has been done related to this myth. People at various points along the economic continuum were asked how much more money they would need to really be "okay" financially. Here's the finding:

Whether they were making \$25,000 or \$250,000, the answer to how much more they needed was always right around 10 percent more. The truth is, if we haven't learned to handle well what we have, having more will leave us with the same set of problems, only bigger (apparently about 10 percent or so bigger!).

## **Activity: The Myths We Believe**

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1. Whether we're aware of it or not, we are constantly influenced by the culture we live in, and often that means we buy into these myths when it comes to money and possessions. Read the list below and put a check mark next to the myth that you think influences you the most.
  - Things bring us happiness.
  - Debt is expected and unavoidable.
  - A little more money will solve all my problems.
2. How has believing this myth influenced the way you live your life?

## Money and the Faithful Way

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How do we guard against being influenced by the myths of our consumer culture and controlled by this powerful force called *money*? By acknowledging and submitting ourselves to a more powerful force—the faithful way toward financial well-being.

While our consumer culture is hard at work trying to influence and control our financial behavior, God and the faithful way are quietly encouraging us to not be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. We renew our minds by understanding what the Bible says about money and our relationship to it. And the Bible has a great deal to say. In Scripture, we see three core truths about how God tells us to use our resources:

1. God created everything.

Genesis 1 tells us that, in the beginning, there was nothing, and God created every grain of sand and every star in the universe. There was nothing, and then there was everything, all orchestrated by God alone.

2. God owns everything.

God didn't create everything and then turn God's back on the creation. Scripture makes it clear that God continues to be involved and has retained ownership of all of creation: "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, / the world and its inhabitants too" (Psalm 24:1). The concept that God is the owner of everything may be easy to say, but it is often very hard to move that concept from our head to our hearts.

3. We are trustees, not the owners, of all God has made.

If God created everything and retained ownership of everything, then we are trustees, not owners, of God's creation and resources. That's a powerful thought and an awesome privilege. But here's the key: First Corinthians 4:2 says, "In this kind of situation, what is expected of a manager is that they prove to be faithful."

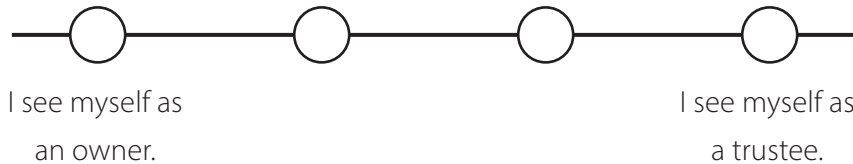


So, in order to be faithful we must understand the role of a trustee. A trustee, while a privileged and trusted position, has responsibilities. The key responsibility is to care for and manage what belongs to someone else. For example, if someone became incapacitated and you were made trustee of his or her affairs, you would not own that person's assets, only the responsibility of handling them in accordance with the person's wishes and in the person's best interests.

The importance of our role as trustees can't be overemphasized. All other biblical financial principles flow out of this understanding. God has given us many and varied resources and these assets are part of how the work of God is done on earth. Our relationship to money changes when we keep in mind that we are handling the assets of God and are entrusted by God to make good choices.

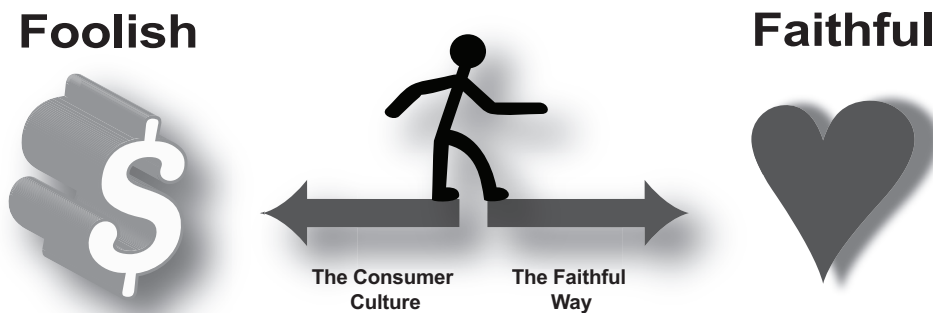
## Activity: Owner or Trustee?

Reflect on your own finances and possessions. Put an X on the continuum below to reflect how you see yourself, whether as an owner or a trustee.



Repeat the activity while considering specific things: of my home, of my salary, of my time.

## The Pull of the Consumer Culture vs. the Faithful Way



Throughout this study, we will continue to talk about the pull of the consumer culture on us versus the faithful way toward financial well-being. The graphic above illustrates this tension, and you will see it appear throughout our study as a reminder of the battle we often face, specifically in this area of our finances. We are constantly asked to choose one way—the way that seems best to us or asking the Lord to lead us in all our decisions.

In a parable found in Luke 12:15-21, Jesus tells the story of the rich “fool”:

*Then Jesus said to them, “Watch out! Guard yourself against all kinds of greed. After all, one’s life isn’t determined by one’s possessions, even when someone is very wealthy.” Then he told them a parable: “A certain rich man’s land produced a bountiful crop. He said to himself, What will I do? I have no place to store my harvest! Then he thought, Here’s what I’ll do. I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. That’s where I’ll store all my grain and goods. I’ll say to myself, You have stored up plenty of goods, enough for several years. Take it easy! Eat, drink, and enjoy yourself. But God said to him, ‘Fool, tonight you will die. Now who will get the things you have prepared for yourself?’ This is the way it will be for those who hoard things for themselves and aren’t rich toward God.”*

*Luke 12:15-21*

At first glance, we might not think the rich man's actions were foolish. After all, he's storing up his wealth and saving it, providing for his future. The problem is in his focus—he's concerned about his stuff and its protection more than he is about his responsibilities toward God and neighbor. John Wesley would have said that he was behaving more like a proprietor, one who has sole control over things, rather than a steward, who is entrusted with someone else's goods. In

his sermon on "The Use of Money," Wesley said God "placed you here not as a proprietor, but a steward."

Maybe you see the "bigger barns" problem in our consumer culture today. Our houses are twice as big as they were sixty years ago. Our families are 25 percent smaller, but our closets, attics, basements, and garages are so full of stuff, that the self-storage

business, which didn't even exist in 1960, is now a booming industry! Cultural messages may encourage us to hoard for ourselves, but Jesus called the rich man a "fool" for not being rich toward God.

The question raised by this parable is: How do we steward what has been entrusted to us in ways that reflect our faith in God? How can we be faithful and not foolish?

In this study, we will cover five areas of our financial lives:

- Earning
- Giving
- Saving
- Debt
- Spending

These areas represent the usual way we get money, through earning, and then the four things we can do with it once we have it: We can give it away, save it, pay debt with it, or spend it. How we allocate between these four uses is a function of just two things: Our prior commitments and our priorities and values.

Wesley reduced his beliefs about money to three simple rules: gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can. As we flesh these out through this

## KEY QUESTION

Will God consider my financial decisions to be faithful or foolish?

study, we will discover how Wesley saw these rules in the Bible and what it would mean for us to follow them. When those rules are applied to these five financial areas, we become:

- Diligent Earners
- Generous Givers
- Wise Savers
- Cautious Debtors
- Prudent Spenders

When we embrace these qualities and a faithful relationship with money, we become free of anxiety and can begin to achieve genuine financial well-being.

## **Activity: Faithful or Foolish?**

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1. Think about some of the financial decisions you've made over the last few days, large or small. Reflect for a few moments on whether you think God would consider them faithful or foolish and write your thoughts in the space below.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. In which of the five financial areas listed on the previous page do you feel you need to grow? How might growth in that area lead you to be a faithful trustee of God's resources?

## **Why Create a Spending Plan?**

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When we talk about financial well-being, the key word we focus on is *contentment*. *Contentment* is not something that's related to a particular amount of money or circumstance, but it's an inward attitude, a serenity, that comes from doing the right and faithful thing and trusting in God to see it through. Ecclesiastes talks

about the contentment of those who give themselves to diligent work rather than to concern over riches: “Sweet is the worker’s sleep, whether there’s a lot or a little to eat; but the excess of the wealthy won’t let them sleep” (Ecclesiastes 5:12).

## FINANCIAL WELL-BEING

The contentment we feel as we faithfully manage our financial resources according to God’s principles and purposes.

What we hope to show you throughout this study is that being financially faithful leads to being financially content. We can’t know exactly how God will respond to every financial situation in our lives, but we do know that God honors our trusting and following God’s principles.

We can work toward this sense of contentment and well-being by creating a customized Spending Plan to guide us. Some people call this a “budget.” We know this word has negative connotations for some, but what we hope to do is give you a new perspective about this misunderstood tool. Money is a powerful thing. A budget, or a

Spending Plan, is the fundamental tool that enables us to control our money so it doesn’t control us.

## THE SPENDING PLAN:

The fundamental tool that enables us to control our money so that it doesn’t control us.

A Spending Plan is a plan for how we will allocate our financial resources. Think about building a new house and installing the plumbing. We don’t just run the main water line into our basement and

let the water run wherever it wants to go—we have a plumbing plan to divert the water to where it’s needed. But sometimes it seems we just let our income gush into our lives, with no plan on how to divert it into the areas that fulfill our goals. Whether it’s a gush or a trickle, we want our financial resources to go to the right places and be used in ways that are consistent with our goals and are honoring to God.

We make plans in order to achieve a goal, and a Spending Plan is a way to reach our financial goals and live out our values and priorities. It’s the means of achieving those goals you wrote out in your pre-work; and in turn, those goals help provide you with the motivation to stick to the plan when the going gets tough.

Again, throughout this process remind yourself that a Spending Plan is not meant to be restrictive or confining, but a tool that produces well-being. A foundational principle is that there is no true freedom without limits. A Spending Plan sets safe financial limits that allow you to reach a sense of well-being within those safe limits.

Imagine you're vacationing on a beautiful beach. A hundred yards or so out in the water, someone has set out some ropes and buoys. Beyond the ropes and buoys are dangerous undertows and shark activity, but within the ropes and buoys, you can swim and play in safety and with complete freedom. Of course you can swim beyond the buoys if you want, but it's not the smartest thing to do and could be very costly.

Now translate that image to thinking about a Spending Plan. A Spending Plan sets safe boundaries for how we use our money. By spending within its limits, we can safely and freely enjoy our resources. It's easy to spend beyond those limits, especially with credit cards. But if we do, we could easily get sucked down by the undertow of debt.

The hope of this study is for you to live in the well-being that comes from following the faithful way and using the resources God has entrusted to you for all manner of good to the best of your ability. We know this study can help you get there.

## **Activity: Wrapping It Up**

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- In this session, what new insights did you get into the role of money in our spiritual lives?
  
- How were your thoughts about a budget (a Spending Plan) changed by this session?

## NOTES

- What one word would you use to describe your relationship to your finances at this point?
  
- What are some specific things you hope to glean from this study?