

(Sermon by J Knapp. January 18, 2009. Scripture: 1 Peter 5:6-11)

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Thank you for letting me speak to you today on a topic that Lisa and I have become very passionate about, becoming "debt free". Now I know that this message runs counter to everything in our culture. Just about every message out there tells us how to go into debt. And, they're working! The Wall Street Journal says 70% of Americans live paycheck to paycheck. That means, "Normal", in our society is "broke". It should be our goal to be labeled totally weird!

But when it comes to talking about debt, if you spread a myth long enough, loud enough and often enough, eventually it becomes the accepted truth. If I took out a compass I could show you pretty easily that North is somewhere through there. But if I spent \$482 million a year, every year for over two decades, telling you that North was that way, some people, a lot of people, would believe it, wouldn't they? If for no other reason than they saw it on TV. Debt has been marketed to us with such intensity for so long that to even begin to imagine living without debt requires a complete paradigm shift, a completely new way of looking at things.

When Lisa and I made the decision to move back to Thomasville, and I joined a start up company, we knew it was going to mean a substantial pay cut, but only for six to twelve months. Well, it's been nearly seven years now, and all I can say is that things don't always work out like we plan.

The first year we relied on savings to help make ends meet. The second year we used up some assets. By the end of the third year, we had no savings and far fewer assets, and things were tough. The bottom line is, we found ourselves like many families, with too much month left over at the end of the money.

My dad was over for dinner one evening and I was sharing my financial frustrations with him and he told me about this guy, Dave Ramsey, and the book of his that he had read. Told me the guy even had a radio show on every afternoon and that I should listen to it and take a look at this book. I said, "Look, that's fine for you. You're retired and can read books and listen to the radio you want to, provided that doesn't take away from your fishing. I just don't have time." But over the next few

weeks he kept after me about this, actually harassed me about it, which was sort of out of character for my dad. So finally, I ordered the book. The Dave Ramsey website will not accept credit cards, by the way.

I would like to be able to tell you this was filled with rocket science and amazing techniques, but it wasn't. Reading this book just gave me a V8 moment. It was full of simple straightforward practices, most of which I had implemented in business my whole life, but never applied personally. But what a difference it has made for Lisa and I. We figured out where our money was going, we got on the same page together, and we made some choices to send it to different places. We built up an emergency fund, set up a household budget, began working the debt snowball. We changed how we looked at our finances. We fell out of love with "stuff."

You know, this business of living with debt is relatively new. I mean, our great grandparents thought debt was sin. Proverbs 22:7 says, "the borrower is slave to the lender", and they took it seriously. Did you know the 1910 Sear's catalog (Sear's, now) said quote, "Buying on credit is folly." As long as JC Penney was alive his stores offered no credit, ever, because he was so opposed to personal debt. It was another generation wasn't it?

By the way, did you know that 80% of millionaires in America are first generation wealthy? That means they started with nothing special and through hard work and strong principles became millionaires. That sort of goes counter culture also doesn't it. We always hear the little man can't get ahead. Well, 8 in 10 millionaires fly in the face of that.

Our grandparents thought debt was not smart and they only borrowed on a couple of things. In 1958 Bank Americard (VISA) and American Express arrived. Our parents began borrowing on a few things, but in 1970 only 15 percent of American households owned plastic. And then we come along, and we borrow on everything. You get 90 days same as cash if you pick up a new puppy at the pet store! Larry Burkett said, we spend the first 3 – 5 years of our marriage trying to attain the same standard of living as our parents, never mind that it took them 35 years to get there! How do we do it? Well, over 6 billion credit card offers went out last year, and as usual over 18 million people accepted the offer. And credit card users paid \$90 billion dollars in fees and penalties last year.

And debt is being marketed to younger and younger people. Fashion Boutique Barbie comes with a full size credit card to "pay" for her shopping spree. It's just pretend, but what's the message? When you're playing Barbie, and you want to go shopping and be cool, you do what? You shop with your credit card. Now, what's going on here? Could corporate America be conditioning children to associate

credit card use with receiving nice things consequence-free? So, maybe when they get older and go off to college...? We all know about the tables credit card companies set up on college campuses, offering free CD's or T-shirts if you'll just sign up for a card. You may not know that more young adults filed bankruptcy last year than graduated college, or that colleges are losing more students to credit card debt problems than they are to academic failure...

So, how do we break this? You've got to have a whole new way of looking at things. A caller into the Dave Ramsey radio show said, "You know, Dave, we really do want to save and to give, but by the time we go down through our budget and pay all the bills, there's just nothing left over." Dave points out that the problem is, the budget's upside down. You see, there are two competing views on how we should handle our money. We have the worldly view, and the biblical view. (PICTURE OF GLOBE)The worldly view looks like this: we determine what our lifestyle is going to be and we live it right up to the very edge of our income, no margin for error. When we see things we want, we go out and (CLICK AGAIN) buy them on debt, or credit. So, we accumulate debt by buying the things we want, not need. Next, we (CLICK AGAIN) save; but most of us do not save anything personally. We save through our employers 401(k) and what not. But there's no savings on hand to help us get through when times get lean. Lastly, we (CLICK AGAIN) give a little, if anything is left over.

There's another way. It's the Biblical view – and it's directly opposite. In the biblical pattern everyone should give something – with the goal being a tithe. Now, I didn't come here this morning to talk to you about giving, although as a member of your Finance Committee I would be remiss if I didn't at least touch on the subject. But all I'm going to say is this: you are made in His image, in the image of a loving and giving God; giving is a Godly practice. Until we cultivate within ourselves a loving heart and give joyfully and cheerfully, we will never truly know peace, financial or otherwise.

Next, in the biblical pattern, everyone ought to (CLICK AGAIN) save, with a goal of 10%. In the biblical pattern we should work to eliminate consumer debt. Now, I'm not talking about a reasonable mortgage. I'm talking about all of this stuff we purchase on installment plans, with interest and penalties. And the last thing, the one that is most foreign to our society today, is we should (CLICK AGAIN) live below our income so that we can survive the ups and downs, without getting ourselves upside down.

Have you ever thought about how your faith should impact the way you handle your money? In preparing for this opportunity today I asked myself, what did my grandfather do when he was preparing to step into this pulpit and share a Sunday sermon? He probably would have found a scripture that conveyed what he wanted

to say, and then built his message around it. So I started looking for a bible passage, and do you know that the bible mentions money and finances over 2500 times? Now, why is that? I mean, God doesn't need our money. This is God! He said, "Let there be light.", and 'BAM'! God doesn't need our money. He tells us to give, for what it does to US, because of the privilege it is for us to participate in His work. No, what God wants is our hearts, and just as Luke 12:34 tells us, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Jesus spoke so many times about how to handle our money and our finances, because if we don't get this right, then we get all confused about what our treasure really is, and where our heart should really be.

So I finally just settled on Proverbs. All of it. There are 31 Proverbs, one for every day of the month and I'm convinced if you really study the book of Proverbs you'll have the equivalent of a Master's Degree in Finance. It's all in there.

Dave Ramsey uses these biblical principles in a course called Financial Peace University. This is a course for families and individuals Lisa and I have been leading here at our church for about a year and a half now. We've had about 70 families take the class, although not all have completed the course. In their defense, it's not an easy course. To begin with it takes thirteen weeks, and you have assignments and reading. We've gotten to where we can sort of tell who is going to stick with it, and who's not. Usually it's after the budgeting lesson we see the first ones start to back away. It's hard work. It requires a change in the way you look at things. I mean, to actually sit down with your spouse and talk about a budget. Talk... not argue... it's not easy. But those that do stick with it, those that really learn the lessons, man, it's amazing to see what it does for them. They tell us how their marriages are strengthened, how liberated they feel to finally have control over their finances, and how clearly they distinguish needs from wants. Being cured from "stuffitis" is a blessing within itself. But really, with 52% of marriages ending in divorce in America, and 90% of those attributing financial problems as a factor to the marriage crashing, the communication lesson alone is worth committing to thirteen weeks. The lessons are not complicated, but it takes commitment and perseverance.

Dave Ramsey shares a story about his two daughters, who both became interested in horseback riding competitions. They started off in barrel racing, and then moved to calf roping. Now, they use calves for the boys, but for the girls they use goats. His daughters got really serious into this competition so they bought a goat for them to practice on, and named the goat Practice. Practice the goat.

So picture this in your mind. In a pasture in Tennessee this young girl is on her horse ready to go, they give Practice a kick to get him going, and there goes Practice. He's leaping across the field. "Man this is great! I love this! I'm not a goat, I'm a

gazelle! I'm gone baby." Practice is so lost in the moment he doesn't even notice the rope fall over his head. She ties the rope off, jumps down from the horse, follows that rope line down. The rope tightens, Practices jerks back into the air, and hits the ground. She throws him over ties his legs in the air and Practice says "What happened? I thought I was a gazelle. I must be a goat."

That summer they practiced for days on end with Practice in that field. They actually wore a bald patch in the ground from throwing the goat down and tying him up. Old Practice got to the point that he would run across that field and when he got to that bald patch he would immediately relate it – pain, right here, and he would just run out to that spot, and lay down.

You know what happened to old Practice? He lost his hope. He got beat up one time too many, and he just quit. He just went out there and lay down. It's a funny story but if you put it in the context of our own lives, it's pretty sad. And you know what Practice heard every time he went back to the goat pen with all of his friends: "Oh, you're not going to make it. That's just the way it is. Take it easy. Don't work so hard, you're not going to be a winner – were just goats man. Just go out there and lay down. The little man can't ever get ahead. You're always going to have a car payment. You can't have a master without a card. That's the way it is Practice. Get over it."

It doesn't have to be that way. Proverbs 6:1 – 7 tells us what to do. It says, "If you have signed surety, my son (if you've gotten yourself into debt) do this: Give no sleep to your eyes, no slumber to your eyelids and deliver yourself like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter and a bird from the hand of the fowler."

See, you can wander into debt in our society, but you can't wander out. You've got to get it into gear. You go to the football game and you go crazy for your team. You've got put that kind of passion and enthusiasm into your family, into where you're supposed to be financially. Stop worrying about what your neighbors or friends are going to think, and get your priorities in order.

You want the technique to get out of debt, here it is. It's called gazelle intensity. Eye of the tiger, baby. You've got to go for it. You've got to get wired up and fired up. That's how it's done. There are no options. And just imagine what you could do if you had no debt. Imagine what we could do as a congregation. Freed from the shackles of debt, what could we do for the Kingdom of God?

And the lesson plan is all right here. You have to start thinking differently. As this New Year gets rolling, I hope you'll make the choice to become debt free. Don't do it

because I say so, do it because He said so: Romans 13:8; "Owe no one anything, except love..."