

Well, one thing is for sure: there are a number of people who hold themselves out as Biblical experts in the area of handling finances and debt. But the reality is, some of their opinions can be difficult to substantiate as being truly, *comprehensively* Biblical. Here are some quick stories for us to ponder.

Matthew chapter 19 in the ESV Bible tells us that a rich young man came up to Jesus, saying, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” After Jesus told him to keep the commandments, Jesus then said to him, “If you would be perfect, be sure you keep out of debt.”

Well, you know that Jesus didn’t tell him to keep out of debt—I made that up because that’s popular among many sincere believers. Instead, again, after Jesus did tell him to keep the commandments, Jesus really said, “Go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.’ When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.”

To cut to the chase, there are lots of folks teaching Christians to be debt-free—and that might well be very prudent for many people. But I haven’t found very many teachers instructing someone to be asset-free. But Jesus did! What Jesus was doing was instructing the young man on basic Christian portfolio management, namely, the importance of not setting your heart on the assets currently in your possession for stewarding. You see, in God’s economy, there are two places to contemplate: the world and heaven.

Well, you might say, the story about this rich young man and Jesus was really all about the super-wealthy and their unspiritual, unhealthy love of assets. You know, the clearly-greedy top 1% and income inequality and all that—nothing to do with us normal people. So don’t come lookin’ here, Jesus!

Well, then, let’s turn to one of my favorite stories in the Bible—that which is typically called “the widow’s mite.” Luke 21:1-4, again from the ESV Bible, says this: “Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box, and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. And he said, ‘Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.’”

So the widow, apparently not even aware that anyone was noticing that day...for all we know, the first time she would find out who Jesus fully was and that He was watching her give her assets would be the Judgment Seat of Christ, where she would find out that her simple act of giving all her assets...well, her simple act would instruct billions of Christians for millennia to come! That’s amazing!

Now, being a financial-type of person, when I came across this verse, I wanted to calculate what her fiscal return on her investment would have been. So, her investment was a couple of mites...and researchers tell us those would have been worth a fraction of \$1, about 1/3 of one U.S. penny. Well, if she invested that in the year 33 A.D. at 3% interest annually, a reasonable rate of return, then how much do you think two mites would be worth today? Now, before I answer, this investing secret is called compound interest; so, her tiny investment would be worth about \$103 billion trillion! That’s right: \$103 billion trillion!

But do you expect God surely returns better than that 3% in His Kingdom? Of course you do! And I agree with you. And we see a clear example of that here: just what is the value of the poor widow modeling fantastic Kingdom-investment behavior, a model that has been revealed to billions of people for two millennia? Priceless! Exactly. That’s God’s version of “compound interest” on the widow’s act of giving!

And remember, this is the giving by a *poor* person! No griping about her financial poverty by the widow here—she was just simply obedient! But *Jesus* noticed that her giving was out of her poverty, while others gave out of their abundance. Jesus never misses anything!

But let us not miss this point here. Jesus was not focused on what the rich young man *or* the poor widow were doing with their *debt*—in both narratives, He was focused on what they were doing with their *assets*!

One of my earliest mentors when I was a new Christian in my 20s was amazing. He and his wife were totally committed to giving to others and, specifically, to Christian missions—they were very dedicated to helping numerous missionaries over the years. This man would learn about a missionary needing support...like for start-up resources or a front-end project...and my mentor would go to the bank and obtain a personal loan—and immediately send the borrowed money to the missionary's project! Then they would duly pay back the borrowed funds. This happened a number of times to my knowledge...and it surely happened many more times than that when I wasn't in a position to know about it.

Was this couple financially imprudent? Now they are both in their 80s, and while never really becoming wealthy in worldly terms, they are wisely well-positioned to finish out their years in this world without want. But what about their investment in the Kingdom? Wow, I just can't imagine what their return on investment will be. Because God is the best investment manager ever, with that measured in Kingdom terms: souls and the advance of the gospel, funded by givers!

But these two givers obviously weren't debt-free all those years—living under a supposedly unbiblical or imprudent burden of owing a bank due to their *spiritual* priorities. Apparently, they really needed to fix their behavior by attending a debt-free living seminar! Heh. But still, I must caution you: do not try to make this a formula that you try to force God to follow. Instead, as in all things, study, pray, discern!

So, all that brings up this question: is incurring debt good or bad? The quick answer from many is that, Biblically, the debtor is slave to the lender. And that's quite right! But isn't the renter slave to the landlord, too? And, in a modern economy with no debtor's prisons, like in the U.S., can it make sense to secure a home with a reasonable debt level that won't likely jeopardize the home dweller's other assets—rather than that same home dweller renting for years, including bearing higher rents each year and, indeed, those rents never going away like a mortgage debt schedule does? So, rightly, Christians—or anybody, for that matter—could well be wise to borrow against a home to buy it rather than be a lifelong renter!

And sometimes incurring debt can be a good strategy for others. How about a poor single divorcee who can better her lot by borrowing to buy a used car because she can then drive to a higher-paying job to not only cover the car payment and expenses, but also to put money into emergency savings for her family?

But...piling up debt for frivolous spending or caused by poor personal budget discipline? Of course not!

The debt-scenario possibilities are endless and can be complex, no? So...what about the use of debt: *sometimes good, many times bad*. It depends. And it depends on many important factors: the purpose, the circumstances, and the necessary personal wisdom and maturity of the borrower, to name a few.

And this discussion doesn't even begin to address the issues for borrowing by an entrepreneur, a corporation, or a nonprofit...even your church! Those possibilities and thinking are for other episodes.

Still, a few summary observations remain here for us. Many people get in over their heads with debt, often for the wrong purposes and the wrong reasons. They need help—real help—and wise instruction for readjusted priorities. But others can incur and handle debt well, discerningly and wisely!

You see, debt is just a tool. Are you qualified to expertly handle a tool like an electric tree trimmer? With that tree trimmer, you can nicely cut off the broken tree limb...or mistakenly cut off your arm! So you've got to know how to properly use whatever tool you are using. And using debt is no exception.

But the fact is, when it comes to finance, Jesus largely ignored talking about debt, yet seemed to look closely at how the rich *and* the poor handle their *assets*. What's your approach to finance, my friend? My recommendation is this: for personal clarity and for the sake of your stewardship, download this episode's PDF from [TheWhitestoneForum.org](http://TheWhitestoneForum.org) and prayerfully answer the discussion questions. You will be edified!

## *A&A: Application & Action*

1. What's your *comprehensive* view of Biblical personal finance, the handling of debts *and* assets? For example, if one becomes debt-free, what does one then do with one's unencumbered assets? Give comprehensive, integrated Biblical support for your answer.
  
2. Does personal Biblical finance change with the believer's worldly citizenship, say, whether one is an ordinary American or an ordinary Bangladeshi? Explain.
  
3. If someone sincerely tells you that one must be debt-free to truly be Biblical in one's approach to personal finance, what is your response?