

Financial Freedom

by Senior Pastor: Bill Couch

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We are living in time of great uncertainty and confusion about the state of the economy. The net worth of many people has plummeted by 40 to 50 percent. As Christians how do we respond to what is happening around us and to us during this economic crisis? God's word has solid principles upon which we can stand during these times. We find some of those principles in the Letter to the Hebrews.

Hebrews 13:1-6

Keep on loving each other as brothers. ²Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. ³Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

⁴Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. ⁵Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said,

"Never will I leave you;
never will I forsake you."

⁶So we say with confidence,

"The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.
What can man do to me?"

The Letter to the Hebrews shows us how to live life in such a way that troubles don't master us, but rather to live in such a way that we master our troubles. That message is extremely relevant to us today. Many people are allowing the trouble with the economy to master them.

The Letter to the Hebrews tells us that the way to master our troubles is by living a life of faith. Hebrews 11:1 says: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." Faith means trusting God in the midst of whatever is happening in our lives. In the 13th chapter, the author tells us that faith enables us to overcome our troubles and to experience a lifestyle of openness and extravagant generosity.

Hebrews 13:2 says “do not forget to entertain strangers”. A life of faith enables us to live a life of hospitality. We open ourselves to people we don’t even know—to strangers. We live in a time where most of us are very cautious about opening ourselves to strangers. We teach our children not to talk to strangers. In a world where kidnapping is a reality that is something we must do for our children. This scripture reminds us that we can go too far and isolate ourselves from the world. We can live in fear of all strangers. How would you ever make a new friend if you avoided all strangers? Every friend you have now started out as a stranger. I think the principle for us to apply from this verse is to be open to strangers and new relationships. Persons who live by faith are not afraid of life. They are not pushed around by circumstances or bound by fear. They can be open to new people. When you approach persons of faith, they do not give off the signal that they are too busy or too important to have time for you. They smile. They welcome you. They listen to you. They exude hospitality—openness to new relationships. They will move prudently and listen to their instincts about strangers. If they perceive that someone is dangerous or manipulative or totally self-absorbed, they will move away. But they do not make snap judgments about people. They give it some time.

Recently our staff and church council asked some persons from our church this question: What do we do best as a church? One of the top answers was that we are an accepting and friendly church. That was gratifying to me since the first word in our mission statement says that we seek to be an accepting community. It is so important for us to live lives of hospitality—openness to others. You never know when the person sitting beside you on Sunday morning is coming to church for the very first time or back to church after a long time. One of the questions those persons ask is: “I wonder if God will accept me?” When the person sitting next to them greets them warmly and takes time to talk with them after the service, they feel accepted not only by the church but by God. When you take

time to be with a stranger, you are God's representative. Each week we put in the bulletin and on the screen the message: "Talk to someone you don't know, before you talk to someone you know." You may be God's lifeline to the person next to you who is a stranger. Do you give off the signals that you are too busy or too important to talk to strangers? Do you give off the signals that you only care about your family and friends? If so, your life is closed. People of faith live open to new people and open to let God use them to touch the life of a person they do not know. People of faith are people of hospitality.

In verse 3 the author tells his readers to "remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering." A life of faith opens us to respond to those who are suffering and trapped. Throughout the letter to the Hebrews it becomes clear that the recipients of this letter are beginning to experience persecution for their belief in Jesus as the way to God. Some of them have been thrown into prison. When the author asks them to remember those in prison, he is asking them to do more than just lift up an occasional prayer for them. He is asking them to go visit them in prison and take them food and water. This was a dangerous thing for them to do because it meant that they would be publicly identifying with the Christians in prison. They would be putting themselves at risk of being arrested and thrown into prison.

The author of verse 3 goes on to encourage them to remember those who are mistreated. Again this means more than just think about them. It means get engaged with their suffering. Find the people who are hurting and give yourself to them. It is dangerous to go to the places where people are really hurting. Fear keeps us away. People of faith are free to go. They trust in God to take care of them. They do not take unnecessary risks, but they feel free to go and help others.

The staff at Metro Ministries in New York lives with those who are suffering. Paul Schreiber and I visited the headquarters in the Bushwick area near Brooklyn—one of the toughest areas in NYC. Several cab drivers refused to take us there. You know you are going to a dangerous place if a NYC cab driver will not take you there! Finally one agreed to take us, but said: “I will not wait for you. You are on your own to get back. Good luck.” We drove through a neighborhood that looked like a war zone to a graffiti-covered warehouse building. I got out and approached the door. I hit the buzzer and identified myself. They unlocked the door. Inside were brightly painted offices and several smiling young persons who greeted me warmly. Paul and I experienced one of the most upbeat and enthusiastic groups of people I have ever been around. Yet they are living and working in the midst of hell. They go there to reach children. They reach out to abused and neglected children and express the love of Jesus to them. Many of them have never heard the words at home: “I love you.” Many of their parents are drug addicts who are hardly aware that they have children. The young persons on staff at Metro Ministries come from all over the world to bring hope to the hopeless. Some of them have been mugged, robbed and raped. Yet, by faith they have overcome their circumstances and troubles. They live with incredible peace and joy. How can they do that day after day? Because their trust in God has set them free from fear. “What can man do to me?”

You don't have to go to New York to get out of your comfort zone and find persons who are hurting. Homelessness is a growing problem in our city. We have a ministry called Family Promise where we provide shelter and meals for homeless families with children. We will host this ministry again June 28-July 4th. Will you remember those who are suffering? Will you give one evening or one night to stay with these persons?

We will send a mission team to the Four Corners area of New Mexico to build a parsonage for a Navajo church there June 7-13. Over half of the people on the reservation

have no electricity or running water. This pastor and family have so little. Will you give a week's vacation to provide them with a home?

We will build another house for Habitat for Humanity this fall. Will you give a day to work on this house and help those who are suffering from substandard housing? Will you help to provide them with a home?

In verses 4 and 5, the author encourages us to be open with our financial resources. At first glance I thought these two verses were totally unrelated: "keep the marriage bed pure" and "keep your lives free from the love of money." Why does the author put those two things together? A commentator shed some light on this question. In verse 4 it says to keep our sexuality sacred. In verse 5 it says to not hold money as sacred. In the pagan world and in our own world, we have these two things reversed. Sexuality is not held sacred. In our modern world sexuality has no boundaries. Hollywood encourages people to have as many partners as possible—share your sexuality with whomever. But the same world also advocates holding money as sacred. Don't share your money with anyone. Keep it for yourself. The Bible says a life of faith works just the opposite. Hold your sexuality as sacred and reserve it for only your spouse in marriage. But do not hold your money as sacred. Share it with whomever. Christians are promiscuous with money but not their bodies!!

A life of faith changes our attitude toward money. "Keep your lives free from the love of money." How do we know if we love money? When we constantly spend money on ourselves, we love money. When we worry about it so much that we save it all and never spend any, then we love money. You love money if you are a free spender or a spendthrift.

How do we live by faith when it comes to our money? Faith enables us to live with extravagant generosity. The Old Testament required persons of faith to give a tithe (10%)

of their income to God's work and to help the poor. In the New Testament we find that believers went way beyond the tithe. They gave extravagantly. The world had never seen people so promiscuous with their money. The world had never seen people give with so much joy.

How could they do that? "Because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'" Because they totally trusted God, they were free to give without fear of losing everything. They were so secure in God's love that was all that mattered. In reality everything else you hold on to will leave you—everything. Put your money into a secular university and years from now that university will be gone. Now it is a good thing to invest in higher education. I am all for supporting Texas Tech or any other state school of your choice. But I wonder about people who give thousands and even millions to a university that will pass away and never give anything close to that amount to God's work. They are investing more in things that will pass away than they are in things that will last forever. Put your money into your appearance—plastic surgery and make up—it will fade. Put your money into clothes, they will go out of style long before they wear out. Now there is nothing wrong with giving to a university, or investing in your appearance or having nice clothes. The question is: "Are you investing more in things that will pass away than you are in things that will last forever?"

Where can you invest your money in something that will never leave you? Only when you invest it in God's work. Jesus said:

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (**Matthew 6:19-21**)

Christians are free to give generously because their trust is in God. He is the source of their security—not money or the things it can buy. They have discovered that when they hold money loosely and give it to God, he gives back to them.

A young couple in our church, Mark and Tess O’Keefe have experienced this truth.

Listen to their story:

Video: Mark and Tess O’Keefe

You cannot out give God.

Jesus also said: “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap.” (**Luke 6:38**)

We can overcome the fear and uncertainty of these difficult times not by trusting in our money, but by trusting in God. Giving to God first is a way we demonstrate our trust in him. If you live by faith, you will live a life of extraordinary generosity.