

Escaping Debt

Proverbs 6:1-11

July 26, 2020



Please read Proverbs 6:1-11 before going further in this transcript.

Proverbs 6 begins, “My son, if you have put up security for your neighbor, if you have shaken hands in pledge for a stranger, you have been trapped by what you said, ensnared by the words of your mouth.” This is talking about taking responsibility for someone else’s debt. But regardless of whether it’s someone else’s debt, or our own debt, it never feels good to be trapped by debt. Now there are many reasons why people take on debt. Sometimes we take on a reasonable debt, for things like purchasing a modest home or getting an affordable vehicle so that we can get to work. These are the kind of debts that we can sustainably afford to repay. But it’s an entirely different thing when we are TRAPPED by debt: We may have gotten trapped by debt, just like this son in Proverbs 6, by “taking legal responsibility for satisfying someone else’s debt.”¹ Or, we may have gotten trapped by buying a toy that we really couldn’t afford. Or by gambling away our rent money at the casino. Or whatever else it may have been. That said, sometimes we even get trapped by reasonable debt. It isn’t that we got greedy or got carried away on a shopping spree, we simply ran into unforeseen financial trouble. Perhaps we even had a healthy emergency fund built up. But then, the realities of life just pounded us down harder than we ever expected. Perhaps we lost our job or had our hours cut way back. Perhaps we ran into unexpectedly high medical bills. Perhaps COVID-19 reared its ugly head and threw our business plan into an unprecedented challenge. Whatever the case may be, being trapped in debt is a miserable feeling; being ensnared by debt, is just awful! But it happens sometimes, even to the best of us. Even to God’s people; and that’s why the book of Proverbs offers us Wisdom & Warnings. By the way, these Wisdom & Warnings are not just for those of us who are trapped in debt, they are also for those who are collecting the debts.²

Here’s a Bible trivia question for you: what is the chapter and verse where this proverb is found? “Neither a borrower, nor a lender be.” Do you know where this is found in the Bible? Well, this is actually a trick question; because this saying isn’t found in the Bible, nor is this particular truth for that matter. This saying comes from Hamlet, the tragedy written by William Shakespeare. We remember this quote because it seems to make some sense. Never borrow and never lend, then you can avoid all the drama. But this is easier said than done, and frankly, not very practical or even biblical. Here’s the full quote: “Neither a borrower, nor a lender be; For loan oft loses both itself and friend.”³ In other words, when we loan money to a friend, we may lose BOTH the money AND the friendship.⁴ The truth is, both borrowing AND lending can have a powerful impact on relationships.⁵ That’s what makes this topic of escaping debt SO important for us to think about. Escaping debt is not so much about the money, as it is about our relationships with our fellow human beings.⁶ So, is it actually wrong, perhaps even sinful, to borrow or lend money? The short answer is, no, not really. The Bible doesn’t quite say that; but it does warn us to be VERY careful about putting up collateral for someone else’s debt. Proverbs urges us to think long and hard before taking on any debt.⁷ Here’s one way to summarize a godly approach to taking on debt: we should only lend what we can afford to lose and

¹ NIV Zondervan Study Bible, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1204 footnote on Proverbs 6:1.

² Let’s be clear from the get-go, godly wisdom about debt, is not intended to DISCOURAGE anyone, or to beat up on anyone who is struggling financially. Nor is it intended to make us feel SMUG if we are doing well financially. Godly wisdom is meant to help all of us be godly. To live godly lives and make godly decisions about our debt, about how we borrow AND how we lend to one another.

³ From article “Why It’s So Dumb to Lend Money to a Friend” by Lee Dye, <https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/borrower-lender-scientists-explain-loan-friend-dangerous/story?id=16857078>

⁴ Another old proverb gives this advice, “Before borrowing money from a friend, decide which you need most.” From article “Why It’s So Dumb to Lend Money to a Friend” by Lee Dye, <https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/borrower-lender-scientists-explain-loan-friend-dangerous/story?id=16857078>

⁵ Psalm 37:21 says, “The wicked borrow and do not repay, but the righteous give generously.” Proverbs 22:7 says, “The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is slave to the lender.” We are often outright encouraged, even incentivized, to borrow much more debt than we can really afford to repay. With interest rates so low, and home values on the rise, it’s relatively easy for many of us to borrow money.

⁶ Proverbs 22:26-27 warns us, “Do not be one who shakes 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.” See also Proverbs 11:15, 17:18,

⁷ Consider Genesis 43:9 and 44:32-33.

we should only borrow what we can afford to repay.^{8 9} Borrowing and lending debt is a HUGE topic. It's way too much for us to cover in just one sermon. So, today, let's focus on 3 key ideas about ESCAPING DEBT. First of all, **Escaping debt means that we need to...**

1 Work hard to pay off our debt. This is what Proverbs 6:6-8 is getting at, "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! ...it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest." Ants work hard. They "make hay while the sun shines." And so should we, especially if we have debt that we need to pay off. Proverbs 6:10-11 warns us, "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man." One of the best ways for us to escape debt is hard work. Christians should have a reputation not only as hard workers, but also as those who pay off their debts.¹⁰ This lends credibility to our Christian witness.

We are also given some wise advice earlier, in Proverbs 6:3, "So do this, my son, to free yourself, since you have fallen into your neighbor's hands: Go—to the point of exhaustion—and give your neighbor no rest!" What does it mean to "give your neighbor no rest?" As strange as this may sound, it actually means to badger them a little.¹¹ In other words, it's ok for us to be persistent, and to remind someone that we put up security for THEIR debt, and now they need to get it paid off. At this point, now both of them have a shared responsibility to pay off this debt. When it comes to repaying a debt, here's a great strategy to consider: If you owe someone a debt, stay in close, consistent communication with them. Don't wait for them to have to come and badger you for their money. Never let them think that you have forgotten about the debt you owe or that you don't care about it. In fact, do regular check-ins with them, and pay at least a little something toward the debt, as often as you can. Even if it's slow, steady progress, that should be enough to reassure them that you're taking this seriously. It will also guard your reputation and guard your relationship with them.

I know that it can be tempting to avoid thinking about our debt. It may even seem easier to run and hide from it; but that's not the counsel that we get from the book of Proverbs. Proverbs 6 pushes us hard. It pushes us to the point of exhaustion. It tells us to grab the bull by the horns. Well no, actually, it urges us to free ourselves like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter. What an incredible illustration for escaping debt! Proverbs 6:5 urges us, "Free yourself, like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter, like a bird from the snare of the fowler." Have you ever watched a gazelle trying to escape from a cheetah? I wanted to share a video clip with you that illustrates this for us, but I wasn't able to get the copyright permission that I needed. So, you'll have to use your imagination. A cheetah can run about 60 miles an hour, but so can a gazelle. Sometimes the gazelle gets caught by this hunter and eaten. But, other times, the gazelle escapes from its hunter. And that's the word picture that the Proverbs wants us to get in our mind. If we are trapped in debt, we should imagine ourselves to be like that gazelle, being chased down by a cheetah. We are running for our very lives. But eventually... if we allow no sleep to our eyes, no slumber to our eyelids... we get free. We escape! If you, or someone you know, is struggling with debt right now, then you can probably relate to how this gazelle must feel: running for our lives; feeling trapped and harassed and overwhelmed! Needless to say, it's NOT a fun way to live. And that's why we want to give our full effort to working hard to pay off our debt. Here's another angle to consider though, if you or someone you know, is playing the role of the cheetah, then consider this: **Escaping debt also means that we need to...**

2 Be gracious when collecting from our debtors. If we are playing the part of the cheetah, we may need to back off a little. Here's why I say this: God is honored when we extend people grace. I understand that we all have bills to pay; after all, even the cheetah needs to eat. If no one ever repaid their debts, our economy would be in shambles. People SHOULD work hard to pay off their debts.

⁸ When lending to their children, parents usually realize that it may end up becoming an investment in their child's financial future. When lending to a friend, there may come a point where we have to decide what's more important: the friendship or the money? When a bank or business does the lending... well, let's not get started on subprime mortgages and the 2008 fiasco!

⁹ It's also a good idea to put all debts in writing; whether the debt is with a bank or business, a friend, or a relative. One study notes, "When you borrow money from a friend or sibling or a co-worker, you enter a trust agreement that is a likely to be violated -- because we humans tend to rewrite our memories in a self-serving way." From article "Why It's So Dumb to Lend Money to a Friend" by Lee Dye, <https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/borrower-lender-scientists-explain-loan-friend-dangerous/story?id=16857078>

¹⁰ See 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 and Romans 13:8.

¹¹ NIV Zondervan Study Bible, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1204 footnote on Proverbs 6:3-4.

That was the whole first point of this sermon; but here's the second point: we should be gracious when collecting from our debtors.¹² This is another way that we escape from debt: by making sure that debt doesn't cause us to become greedy debt collectors. By making sure that we don't charge ridiculous interest rates or crippling late fees. By conducting our business affairs in ways that honor the Lord and the reputation of His people. God may have blessed us with a very keen business sense. But if we are a Christ-follower, then we need to consider what God says about debt collection.

In Leviticus 25:35-38 God says, "If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and stranger, so they can continue to live among you. Do not take interest or any profit from them, but fear your God, so that they may continue to live among you... I am the LORD your God...." We're not talking here about letting sluggards neglect their responsibilities. We're not saying that we should let someone off the hook if they are ABLE to work, but REFUSE to work. Proverbs 6 makes a sharp contrast between the hard-working ant and the lazy sluggard. What we're saying here, is that when we collect debts from others, we need to be mindful of our own greed. We need to be careful that we don't begin treating people as commodities or dollar signs, rather than human beings. Fellow human beings who, for one reason or another, may be struggling greatly to support themselves financially at this time.

Proverbs 19:17 reminds us, "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done."¹³ It's worth noting that in Old Testament Israel, they had a practice called Jubilee.¹⁴ The Hebrew people were an agrarian society, which means that owning land was the key to supporting oneself financially. You needed land to grow crops or raise animals. Therefore, God set things up in such a way, that no one could ever PERMANENTLY lose their land.¹⁵ Leviticus 25:10 says, "Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you is to return to your family property and to your own clan." In Leviticus 25:23 God says, "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers." Leviticus 25:16 clarifies, "...what is really being sold to you is the number of crops." In other words, it was more of a lease, because the land was bought and sold on the basis of this 50-year period of Jubilee. Every 50 years, EVERYONE got their land back. It was basically a reset, an equalizer of sorts, that kept anyone from getting too poor or too rich.

Now, I admit, that this is an overly simplified summary of something that doesn't translate perfectly into modern-day America. But there's a principle that we should at least consider. God arranged the Hebrew economy with certain safeguards. These safeguards provided for those who were falling behind. These safeguards kept any one person from going too far into debt. Therefore, it's reasonable for those of us who are collecting debts, to consider certain safeguards toward those who borrow from us. It's also reasonable for us, to keep in mind that God wants those of us who are owed a debt, to be gracious toward those who owe us that debt.

Now, the year of Jubilee is NOT a New Testament practice, and I am NOT suggesting that Christ-followers are somehow bound to this practice today. But I am suggesting that we should be patient when someone needs a little more time to repay a debt. In fact, God may even call us to be generous to someone who owes us; maybe even forgive a portion of the debt, or even the whole thing. This is also part of our Christian witness, because we should have a reputation for being generous. Treating people with grace lends credibility to our Christian witness. If we know that someone is going through a rough patch, we are called to be gracious toward them. After all, between the challenges of COVID-19 and the racial tensions in our nation and the trade wars around the globe, there are any number of acceptable reasons why some people are behind on their bills. Certainly, there are a number of people who just need to work harder; but there are others, who are genuinely struggling. There are some who are simply unable to make enough income or to find a well-paying job in this economy. So let's escape debt, by being gracious when collecting from our debtors.

¹² Remember the Lord's Prayer, "...forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors...."

¹³ Psalm 112:5, "Good will come to those who are generous and lend freely, who conduct their affairs with justice."

¹⁴ See discussion in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol 3:H-L*, edited by Merrill C. Tenney, pp. 715-716.

¹⁵ In fact, God states it bluntly in Leviticus 25:14, "...do not take advantage of each other."

Let me close with this, whether we are escaping debt, by working hard to pay it off, or by being gracious in how we collect it, **Escaping debt means that we need to...**

3 Prioritize the gospel in the way that we handle debt. Do you know who said these words? “I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.” (I’ll give you a hint: it WASN’T Shakespeare.) Jesus said these words in Luke 16:9. Isn’t that a strange thing for Jesus to say? He said these words to His disciples, but the Pharisees were also there listening. Do you know how the Pharisees responded, when they heard Jesus say these words? They SNEERED at Jesus! These words come from Jesus’ Parable of the Shrewd Manager. Interestingly enough, this parable talks about forgiving people’s debts. Jesus uses this parable to illustrate what we should value.

Let’s read the full story from Luke 16:1-15, “Jesus told his disciples: ‘There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. So he called him in and asked him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.’ “The manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I’m not strong enough to dig, and I’m ashamed to beg—I know what I’ll do, so that when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.’ “So he called in each one of his master’s debtors. He asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ “ ‘Nine hundred gallons of olive oil,’ he replied. “The manager told him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.’ “Then he asked the second, ‘And how much do you owe?’ “ ‘A thousand bushels of wheat,’ he replied. “He told him, ‘Take your bill and make it eight hundred.’

“The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own? “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, “You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God’s sight.”

Jesus concludes, “...What people value highly is detestable in God’s sight.” Brother or Sister in Christ, what do you value highly? When it comes to debt, let’s make sure that our attitudes and actions reveal a gospel priority.

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on July 26, 2020 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson