

ABCs of Financial Freedom #3 - Choices

Are you living the life you chose, or a life that was handed to you? Is your life the result of your choices, or the result of someone else's choices –your parents? Your spouse? A friend? An enemy? An employer? Think about your answer.

(Advance Slide) This message is all about choices. That's the C in the ABCs of Financial Freedom. Financial freedom is something we choose. It is not something that happens to us. We've all made choices. Some of them good choices. Some of them bad choices. I've made some really good choices. Teresa being the best of them all. As she assures me, I'm not a total idiot because I did marry her.

I chose to follow Jesus. I heard his call on my life, I responded in faith, and I submitted in baptism. That's a great choice. We chose to get out of debt. Everything but the house. We're not able to buy a car with cash just yet, but we buy very reasonable, and the last few cars we've gotten we've paid off in just two years. Wise choices.

But I've also made some bad choices. Especially when I was younger, I made some ugly decisions...like getting a perm. Twice. Getting into debt to begin with was a dumb choice. One of the first things I did when I got on my own was I went to Best Buy and I bought one of those tower stereo systems with all the components and giant speakers. I was a big music fan and I wanted something to enjoy my tunes on besides a boom box. I bought it on store credit. It was \$1,000 and by the time we paid it off a few years later, it probably cost me \$2,000.

Life is a series of choices. In fact, who you are today is the sum total of all the choices you've made. Pastor and author, John Maxwell says, "Life is a matter of choices, and every choice you make makes you." The ever quotable Zig Zigler says, "Your life is a result of the choices you have made. If you don't like your life, start making better choices." That's powerful stuff right there. That's worth the price of admission alone.

The bible also has a lot to say about the importance of our choices. Here are a few highlights.

Joshua 24:15 "...**choose** for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

Psalms 119:105 "Who, then, are those who fear the Lord? He will instruct them in the ways they should **choose**."

Proverbs 12:26 "The righteous **choose** their friends carefully, but the way of the wicked leads them astray."

John 7:17 "Anyone who **chooses** to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own."

James 4:4 "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world

*means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who **chooses** to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God."*

(**Advance Slide**) One of the greatest leaders ever, Moses, here's what he says about choosing. Let me give you some context. This is Moses' farewell address. He's 120 years old. He's been leading the people of Israel for 40 years. They're about to enter Promised Land, but God has told Moses, he won't be allowed to enter, because of some bad choices he made. He disobeyed God's command. He took credit for God's provision, and so God told him he would be allowed to view the Promised Land from a distance, but he couldn't go in, so Moses gives his farewell address to the people, and here's how he lays it out for them. Deuteronomy 30:15

"See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction."

You have two choices— life or death. You have choice. You get to pick one or the other. Life, goodness, provision, success, or death, destruction, failure. Well, that sounds like an easy choice, but how do you pick? Moses continues in verse 16.

For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

This is how you choose life. You love God. You obey Him. You keep His word, and He will honor you and bless you and give you success. But he also tells them how they can choose death in verses 17 and 18,

But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

Oh, how prophetic these words are. If a nation could have a tombstone, these are the words that would be carved on the tombstone of Israel. But Moses makes his heartfelt plea to his people in verses 19 and 20.

*This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. (You have a choice. You can choose to love God and trust Him, or you can turn your back on Him. You can choose find your own way. Follow whatever false god, guru or idea you choose. The choice is yours, but here's what Moses says.) Now **choose** life, so that you and your children may live 20 and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.*

We have the power to choose the life we live. This principle is true in every area of life. It's true in parenting, in marriage, in divorce, in diet and health, in addiction, in our work lives...our choices accumulate into who we become. Our choices define who we become as moms and

dads and husbands and wives, as employees, as humans. This is also true of our financial lives.

I. 3 Questions for Honest Evaluation

Question 1. What are the choices you've made up to this point, financially, that have brought you to where you are? What choices have led you to this point in your life?

Go back to my opening question, "Are you living the life you chose, or are you living a life that was cast upon you?" The reality is this: financial freedom is something you choose; not something that happens to you.

Yes, it's true that our starting points vary greatly. Only in Monopoly do we all start at the same place. Our starting line in life is something that was handed to us. We had no choice in the matter. Nobody consulted me before I was born and asked my soul, do you want to be born in this time, in this place, to these people in this family? I wonder if we were given the choice now, how many of us would go back and change it. If we started life at a different starting line, would we have made different choices?

Some of us were given a huge head start in life. We were born to loving and supportive parents who gave us everything we needed. They encouraged us along the way. They helped us get a few squares ahead.

Others of us started out behind. Nobody helped you along. Nobody really encouraged you. You even had a few people in your life that kicked you back a few squares.

But in either scenario, what choices did you make on top of that? What did you do with it? How did you respond? Did you take advantage of your head start? Did you use the fact that you started out behind everyone else as an excuse to go nowhere yourself?

Because where you start does not define where you end up. How many people were given a huge lead in life? They were given every advantage. Good family. Wealth. Good schools, but they did absolutely nothing with it. They were given a head start and went nowhere. They made bad choice after bad choice and squandered their head start?

And how many people began already one lap down before they even started, but they didn't let that hold them back. They pushed ahead. They worked hard. They didn't use their disadvantage as an excuse, and they charted a new course and went a new direction, and they made good choice after choice, and quickly surpassed the person that had the huge head start?

I once knew a family who had identical twin sons. Good family. Good income. Two boys raised in the same home by the same parents with the same values. Went to the same schools, the same church. Involved in the same youth group. By their late 20s, one son was a preacher in a growing church, the other son was serving a long-term prison sentence in the state penitentiary. The difference is choices. You can't control what happens to you, but you can control how you deal with it.

Let me give you another example. How many of you have fantasized about winning the lottery? I know I have. What would I do with all that money? How would it change my life? Where would I live? What would I buy? What car would I drive. Don't worry, I'm a Christian with my lottery winning fantasies. I imagine I would just pay off this building, then maybe build us a whole other building.

But did you know that 70 percent of lottery winners are broke within 7 years? They're worth millions and then they're worth nothing. In fact, lottery winners are more likely to declare bankruptcy within 5 years than the average American. Having a lot of money doesn't get them out of financial trouble, because it wasn't having little money that got them into financial trouble. You see people who are bad with a little bit of money, are bad with a lot of money. And on average people who are good with money don't buy lottery tickets. This is why Jesus said, *"One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much."*

Question 2. Do you like where you're at in life? It's an easy question, but, man is it sure hard. Do I like where I'm at? Really?

And as you evaluate your answer, you have to gauge what is the source of my satisfaction or dissatisfaction? Is it coming from a godly place? Am I where God wants me to be? Or is it coming from a worldly point of view? Your satisfaction or dissatisfaction could be based entirely on selfish and sinful motives.

You see, it's possible from a worldly point of view to be in what looks like a really good place – good job, good money, lots of nice things, but you know you're not where God wants you to be. Inwardly, you know things aren't what they appear to be on the outside. On the outside, everything is nice and shiny, but inside, the priorities are all misplaced, everything is out of balance. You're a clown running a three ring circus and you can't keep all the balls in the air.

But after you sort through all of that, if you think not only are you not where you want to be, you're not where God wants you to be; you have to decide. Am I willing to make different choices to be someplace different?

Question 3. If you keep going the direction you're going, where do you think you'll end up? If you keep making the same choices, where will that lead you?

If you don't like where you are, making the same choices isn't going to lead you to a different place. A different destination requires different choices. It is time to stop making excuses and start making different choices.

Financial freedom is built on the right choices. Years ago when we were getting out of debt and I first started taking all this financial freedom stuff seriously, I read a book that completely changed my perspective on wealth. It was called *"The Millionaire Next Door"* by Thomas Stanley

and William Danko. These guys spent 20 years studying millionaires and found that the average millionaire isn't who you think they are.

The average millionaire lives well below their means. They're frugal. They don't buy fancy Italian leather shoes and Rolex watches. They will pay for quality, but they don't waste money on image. They live in average houses in middle class neighborhoods. They buy used vehicles and the most common vehicle driven by millionaires is an F150. Yeah, I know today that's a pricey vehicle, but most of these guys need the truck because they are plumbers, electricians, heating and air guys and contractors who own their business and they are very smart with their money.

They built their own wealth. They did not inherit it and they did not get handouts from mom and dad. Two-thirds of them live on a household budget. They started investing early in their lives and they contributed often.

Most of these traits are personal choices they've made. Their wealth came not from the lucky things that happened to them, but from the things they chose to do, and what they chose not to do.

II. Seven Biblical Choices that Lead to Financial Freedom

What I want to do over the next few minutes is look at some biblical choices that lead to financial freedom. The first two are quick review of what we've talked about the last two weeks. If you want financial freedom you will...

1. Choose to Give to God First

This is the most often repeated financial principle in the Bible – the importance of giving to God. Financial freedom begins with the right attitude toward money. Most of our financial issues begin not with money problems, but with an attitude problem. We must remember that everything we have ultimately comes from God and so we must honor God first with our money.

Proverbs 3:9-10 *"Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine."* Give to God first with everything you make; then you will have plenty. Too often we want that to work in reverse. We want God to bless us with plenty, then we will give back, but Jesus says we must first be faithful with a little before God blesses us with a lot.

2. Avoid Debt When at All Possible

We talked about this one last week. If you want financial freedom, the Bible says avoid debt when at all possible. Remember Proverbs 22:7 *"The borrower is slave to the lender."* I'll sum up last week's sermon with these two things: avoid getting into debt, pay your debts back as quickly as possible.

3. Save & Invest for the Future

The third choice you have to make if you seek financial freedom is to save and invest for the future. This is what your grandpa called a rainy day fund. Proverbs 30:25 says *"Ants are creatures of little strength, yet they store up their food in the summer."* They prepare for the winter months by saving up in the summer.

In Genesis 41, we read the story of Joseph and how God used him to save Egypt from a disastrous famine. God had warned Pharaoh through a dream-vision that Egypt would have seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine, but Pharaoh didn't understand these visions. So God gave Joseph the ability to interpret dreams, so Joseph could explain all this to Pharaoh.

Because of this, Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of all the preparations. During the seven good years, Joseph had them save a fifth of every harvest so that they would have enough to last through the seven bad years. Lesson - we need to regularly save and invest for the future.

According to the latest studies, 63% of us are living paycheck to paycheck. We've got nothing set aside. No rainy day fund. No emergency fund. No savings. If something bad comes along, a medical emergency, a huge car repair, an appliance breakdown, we've got no choice but to go into debt. That's not financial freedom. We must choose to save and invest for the future.

4. Build wealth slowly; Don't Desire to Get Rich Quick

Number 4 Financial freedom comes from choosing to build wealth slowly. Don't desire to get rich quick. The Bible's teaching is this when it comes to financial freedom – slow and steady wins the race. Get rich quick schemes always bite you the end.

Prov. 13:11 says, *"Wealth gained hastily will dwindle, but whoever gathers little by little will increase it."* Prov. 28:19-20 spells it out this way, *"Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits will have plenty of poverty. A faithful man will abound with blessings, but whoever hastens to be rich will not go unpunished."* Proverbs 21:5 *"The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty."* Nearly everything that is marketed to get you rich quickly, is really designed to part you from your money quickly. Don't fall for it. Choose to build your wealth over time.

5. Diversify Your Investments

The fifth choice that leads to financial freedom is choosing to diversify your investments. Here's how grandma would put it. "Don't put all your eggs in one basket." Putting everything you have in Tesla is a dumb idea. Putting everything you have on Bitcoin is a dumb idea. Putting everything you have in any one place is a dumb idea.

Teresa's brother used to work for WorldCom. His retirement was set up so that everything was invested in WorldCom. So, when the company went bankrupt because of the largest accounting

scandal in US history, he lost all his retirement savings. If his savings had been diversified, he would have been protected.

Eccl. 11:2, says, *"Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth."* Don't put all your eggs in one basket, because something bad might happen to that basket. If the housing market collapses, you don't want all your savings in real estate. Verse 6 goes on, *"In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good."* This verse is saying that it's a good idea to have multiple income streams, or at least have more than one marketable skill that you can fall back on. Spread it around. Choose to diversify.

6. Have a Good Work / Rest Ethic

Number 6, choose to have a good work and rest ethic. Work hard. Rest well. Proverbs 10:4 reads, *"A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich."* Hard work builds wealth. A hand that does nothing builds nothing.

But life is much more than work. How many work hard but then neglect God and family because they are chasing just a few more dollars. Proverbs 23:4-5 cautions us, *"Do not wear yourself out to get rich; do not trust your own cleverness. Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle."* And of course, the Bible teaches the importance of Sabbath, or rest, of built in, regular periods of rest and worship.

7. Be Generous with what You Have

The final choice that leads to financial freedom is the choice to be generous with what you have. Giving is about more than just giving to the church or a charity, but an all around attitude of generosity that shares and helps others. Proverbs 11:25 says, *"A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed."* Clinging to what you have and keeping it from others does not lead to financial freedom according to God. Stinginess does not build wealth. That sounds counterintuitive, but it's absolutely true.

Generous people are happier. They're healthier. And studies find that they are wealthier. Giving money makes money. Part of it is generous people build better relationships; relationships that often pay off in the long run. But I really think that it is a spiritual principle the God has built into the fabric of the universe. If you hold onto your money too tightly, your biggest fear will be losing it. And if you are consumed with fear of losing what you have, you are not financially free. I think generosity protects from becoming lovers of money, and God blesses that and honors that.