

"Chuck and Ann Bentley share their experience and unique process so that any couple can unify their hearts and align their finances. It is practical and helpful!"

NICK VUJICIC, CEO of Life Without Limbs and Attitude is Altitude

MONEY PROBLEMS



MARRIAGE SOLUTIONS

**7 KEYS TO ALIGNING YOUR FINANCES
AND UNITING YOUR HEARTS**

CHUCK BENTLEY
WITH ANN BENTLEY



CHAPTER SIX

Key #6: Create a Unified Financial Plan

*Commit your work to the LORD,
and your plans will be established.*

PROVERBS 16:3 ESV

*The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance,
but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty.*

PROVERBS 21:5 ESV

ARE YOU CONFUSED about money? Many are. One couple I counseled explained to me that they were “debt free.” When I asked about how this good news came about, the wife explained that she had transferred all of their credit-card debt from seven cards to just one card and they did not have to make a payment for one full year. She was confused, to say the least.

Another couple I worked with felt they were too broke to live on a budget. They had been broke for more than five years, often not having enough cash to put gas in the car to get to work. They liked buying lottery tickets every week but resisted establishing a plan to live within their means. They were both

confused about what it means to make a financial plan and the freedom it could bring to their lives.

Approximately 70 percent of the couples I have spoken with are living by “default,” not by “design.” Those who resist living by design are perpetually struggling because they do not have a plan. Financial plans are often thought of as unimportant early in life. Couples tend to think that love and sunshine will get the bills paid. But reality sets in the moment the rent is due, the car needs new tires, and the utility bills are higher than expected. Without a plan, and with no foundation for building unity as a couple, confusion can lead the most loving of couples into a nightmare of trouble and pain.

We have been carefully building a foundation of what some call the “soft issues”—those factors that most of us mistakenly assume have little bearing on the practical aspects of managing money. The truth is that the soft issues are often the more difficult ones to manage. These are human issues, not just the cold, hard numbers. Before you begin to build your plan, you should understand the following: what it means to be a peacemaker; God’s view of prosperity; how to establish a common life purpose; how to align around a God-centered philosophy of money; and how to honor and respect each other’s personality. You have done some important foundational work and are now ready to build a plan, and not just a financial plan but one that will unify your entire marriage.

As you establish this financial plan, our hope is that you don’t simply create a plan to get your head above water. Rather, my hope is that this plan will help you go wherever God is trying to take you and your family. We want you to dream about a plan that will fulfill your life purpose and align with biblical values of prosperity. But let me warn you now, no matter how much you plan, Satan will work overtime to keep you from planning,

and if that doesn't work, he'll try to make the planning process a discouraging failure, and finally, he'll try to keep you from following the plan you've established. Ann and I, even today, have to work to eliminate the confusion that our enemy seeks to inject into the things we hope to achieve. Confusion can be prevented with a plan and two people who are united to keep the plan working.

RUSS AND KANDY: DIGGING OUT

Russ and Kandy Hildebrandt's story is so encouraging that it made them famous. I first heard about their remarkable journey out of overwhelming debt when their story became one of the top personal finance stories of the year in 2010. In just four and a half years, they paid back \$123,000 in debt, which was more than twice Russ's salary of \$60,000 a year.¹

Russ, who was a quiet, diligent man and a chemist, had not seemed like himself lately. Or at least that was the first clue that alerted Kandy to a possible problem. Russ had seemed sullen, frustrated, and discouraged, and that was not like him. They would have described themselves as a typical middle-class American family, living in Wisconsin and raising twin girls about to become teenagers, and life was good. So Kandy could not figure out why Russ was not acting like himself and she became worried.²

Kandy did a little research and soon began to suspect that Russ had debt he was not telling her about. When she asked about it, he confessed that through the years, whenever they fell a little behind, he would borrow money to keep them afloat. He had maxed out a number of credit cards and even borrowed money from family members. But he didn't tell Kandy because he wanted to avoid worrying her. But these small incremental

charges continued to grow until their debt was out of control. When Kandy found out, she did not get angry or condemn her husband. She was shocked to hear the amount they owed and it frightened her. But she was also relieved to know the source of the problem. Her faith seemed to kick in immediately.³ Kandy acted right away as the Peacemaker even though she was the one who could have taken offense. She also helped them to divide roles and responsibilities, and because of their love and acceptance for each other and their common foundation of faith in Christ, they were able to unite quickly.

Their plan included many drastic measures. They first went to a not-for-profit agency to establish a debt management plan.⁴ This was *after* two Christian financial planners advised them to file bankruptcy. They ruled that option out, believing since they had borrowed the money that they should pay it all back. Russ took on a second job working the night shift as a janitor at a grocery store in addition to his regular full-time work. He slept in the car for four nights a week to keep up with the grueling demands of holding down both jobs even through the harsh winters of Wisconsin. Kandy cut their family expenses in half, determining they would no longer go out to eat, could make do with home haircuts, and instituting strict grocery shopping lists. They even declined purchasing each other Christmas gifts. Both girls chipped in to do their part by earning extra money and finding ways to save money. All their extra income went toward the singular goal of paying back all their debt.⁵

Here's what is so remarkable. They continued to tithe a full 10 percent of their income throughout this journey and they also had a third child in the middle of working their plan. Now, fortunately not everyone finds themselves in

such extreme financial difficulties. Hopefully you are not just now learning that your spouse has hidden massive debt from you, or that your household debts are twice the size of your annual income! Your challenges may be more of the everyday, “too much month at the end of our money” variety. Or maybe you feel pretty financially secure. Good for you! But you still need a plan.

THE ESSENTIALS

Whether you are facing overwhelming amounts of debt, struggling to make ends meet, frustrated over your lack of progress in achieving your financial goals, or trust has been broken, there is hope if you and your spouse will unify and make a plan. Be like Russ and Kandy. They made a plan together and took corrective action immediately.

Stop fighting, blaming, arguing, criticizing, or rationalizing the issue. Accept that you both contributed to the problem and take responsibility for solving it. Next, make a plan that you can follow. Don't try to wish the problem away. Don't wait on a miracle. Use your mind and hands to get to work. Do what you have to do to make progress. Most importantly, invite God into your pain. Ask Him for the strength, patience, and diligence to follow through on your plan. Give your plan a higher purpose like Russ and Kandy, who wanted to “prove God's faithfulness.”

The first step in establishing your plan should be thirty days of carefully recording your spending so you know where your money has been going. Once this is completed, you are ready to set up a detailed monthly budget, including all of your monthly expenses and debt (mortgage payments, car payments, student loans, credit cards and store accounts, money owed family and

friends). You can download a free budget form at [crown.org](http://www.crown.org/Portals/0/docs/downloads/BudgetAnalysisForm.pdf) (<http://www.crown.org/Portals/0/docs/downloads/BudgetAnalysisForm.pdf>).

Ultimately, a budget is a guideline to help you spend less than you earn each month. This simple objective must be an essential part of your plan. When you are spending less than you earn, you can begin to direct your resources to the places needed to accomplish your financial goals, whether that is paying off debt, saving for retirement, or financing your children's educations. If you continue overspending, you will remain stuck in a cycle of debt and stress and financial confusion. Essential components of every financial plan should begin with these basics:

Work. Establish an income that will allow you to support your family and achieve your goals. Ideally you will be able to earn more than you spend each month. Additional jobs or sources of income may be necessary to ensure that you are earning more than you are spending. Ecclesiastes 11:6 says, "Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let your hands not be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well." Consider a home-based business based upon your skill or talents. I have a friend who has an adult son with a disability. She is not able to leave him alone. She started a fulfillment service that processes orders for small, Internet-based companies, all from the convenience of her home basement. It is an excellent, flexible part-time job and provides good income for their family. I also recommend *Love Your Work*, the newest book by Crown's president, Robert Dickie III.

Give. Commit to honor the Lord first. Proverbs 3:9–10 says, "Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing,

and your vats will brim over with new wine.” Since God owns 100 percent of all that you have and He has faithfully provided for you, I recommend that you make a commitment to begin giving 10 percent of your income to honor Him. Make Him first in your financial plans.

Save. After your income is established and you have maximized your talents in your calling and career, and giving has become a top priority, it is important to begin to save. Joseph saved in preparation for the great famine in Egypt. God says to consider the ant and become wise by also learning to save. Saving money each month will reduce your stress immediately. It is an essential habit to develop before you begin paying down debt. This will give you an Emergency Savings Account to break your dependency on credit-card debt in the future.

A WAY TO GET THERE

Once these essentials are in place, you are ready to make a complete plan. Years ago, I helped develop a simple tool to assist folks in making progress toward their financial goals. It is called the Crown Money Map and you can access it here: <http://www.crownmoneymap.org/moneymap/Home.aspx>. On one side of the map you can record your life purpose. Then, you make note of your short- and long-term goals and record your progress on specific steps to make your plan a reality.

The three key stages of your financial plan should be to Get Well, Do Well, and Finish Well. These stages are broken down into seven destinations on the Crown Money Map, which will get you on the path to achieving your goals and fulfilling your life purpose.

Get Well

Destination 1: Build Emergency Savings—Save \$1,000

Destination 2: Pay Off Credit-Card Debts—We recommend using the snowball method. A debt snowball calculator is available at <https://engage.crown.org/debt-calculator/>.

Destination 3: Pay Off Any Consumer Debt—Increase savings and giving

Do Well

Destination 4: Adjust Your Plan—Save for major purchases, increase emergency savings

Destination 5: Save for the Future—Increase savings and giving

Destination 6: Invest Wisely—Buy an affordable home
Begin long-term investing

Finish Well

Destination 7: Leave a Legacy—Invest your life and resources for God's purposes.

Crown has a *Money Map Companion Guide* that was developed to provide in-depth help for accomplishing each step of the seven Money Map Destinations. We also have an extensive library of free articles on a wide range of financial topics to help you accomplish your financial goals.

“STEADY PLODDING”

Now, there are many biblical and practical tips I can give you about planning. The Bible talks extensively about it. Consider God's warning that planning is a sure way to avoid ridicule:

“Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, ‘This person began to build and wasn’t able to finish’” (Luke 14:28–30). Notice that God expects us to plan, while trusting Him with our future and understanding that He alone will bring it about: “The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps” (Prov. 16:9 ESV).

A friend of mine was fond of saying, “Failure to plan is planning to fail,” which of course is a restatement of one of Ben Franklin’s famous quotes. I don’t want you to miss this vital step because it is one of the critical issues when it comes to dealing with money. Also make sure you or your spouse is in charge of your plan details, because making progress will require diligence and faithfulness.

Discipline is a behavior or action. It is the opposite of sloth and recklessness. God’s Word speaks to the rewards of discipline: “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12:11). If you lack discipline, pick one area of your life and commit to being very disciplined about that issue for at least ninety days. Since it only takes approximately twenty days in order to develop a new habit, you will be well on your way to real progress.

I once challenged a friend to drink only water (no coffee, tea, or soda) for one full year in order to be more disciplined and improve his health. He did it. But little did I know that it also convinced him he could be disciplined with money as well! It was the motivation he needed to overcome years of telling himself the lie that he was “not a disciplined person.” If you are very disciplined in one area of your life, you can learn to be

disciplined in other areas; but if you are not disciplined in at least one area, you will struggle to be disciplined in any.

If you struggle with financial discipline, I suggest you start with one simple goal that you will commit to accomplish. Make it something achievable, like saving five hundred dollars in the next six months. Then repeat that goal or set another one. As it says in Proverbs: “Steady plodding brings prosperity; hasty speculation brings poverty” (21:5 TLB). Discipline requires that you take small, diligent steps toward your goals.

The other character quality needed to fulfill your plan is faithfulness. The Bible makes it clear that as God’s stewards we are called to continual faithfulness, not success: “Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful” (1 Cor. 4:2

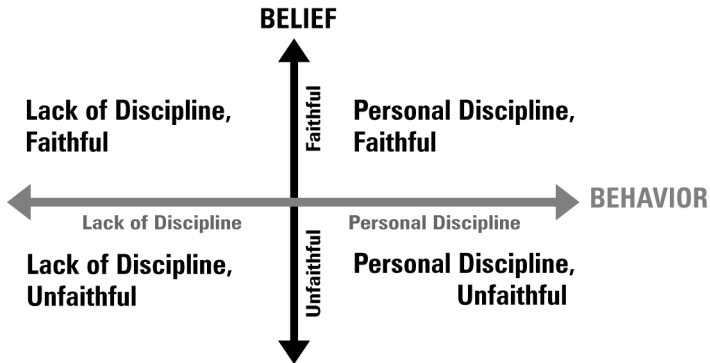
ESV). And faithfulness is measured in our heart and is a response to our belief in our faithful Provider, Jesus Christ.

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS BEING PARTIALLY FAITHFUL.

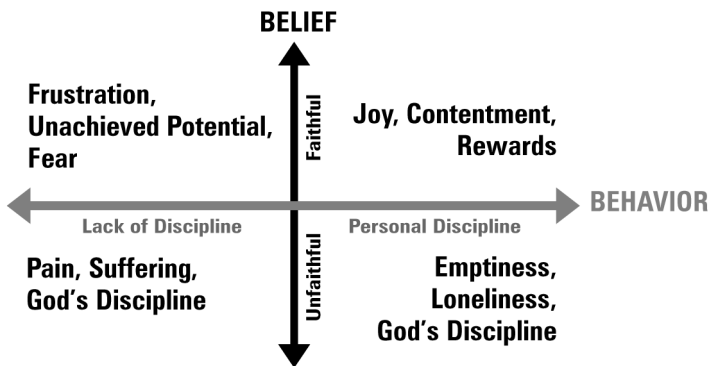
When we place our trust

fully in Him, we are expressing confidence in His principles and His ways. God wants us to fully rely upon Him. There is no such thing as being partially faithful. You either are or you are not. On the day we stand before the Lord, we will not be asked if we were financially successful, but whether or not we were faithful to God. If so, we will be rewarded.

The gospel of Luke explains that we are to be faithful to God in managing the smallest of our financial decisions and this is backed with a promise of true riches: “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. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?” (Luke 16:10–11 ESV).



Personal discipline = Strong financial controls.
 Lack of discipline = Weak financial controls.
 Faithful = Strong adherence to God's principles.
 Unfaithful = Weak adherence to God's principles.



Likely Consequences of Each Scenario

WHERE DO YOU FIT?

Use the chart above to do a self-evaluation of the area where you tend to operate when it comes to your financial plans. Pos-

sibly you fall into the top left quadrant because you have a great heart for trusting and obeying the Lord but lack discipline when it comes to your financial controls. Maybe you fall into the lower right quadrant because you have lots of discipline when it comes to your finances but your heart is not submissive to the Lord.

It is important for you and your spouse to identify where you each believe you fall on this chart. It will help you know how best to serve each other. The goal is for the two of you to combine your efforts to move into the top right quadrant to be faithful and disciplined in your financial plans. It is also important to consider the likely consequences for each of these scenarios. The second chart will identify the likely challenges you are facing now and help you to know where you need to grow to ensure you are fulfilling God's plans for your life.

There is nothing wrong with rewarding yourself for improvements in this area. In fact, I believe God designed us to respond to rewards, so I encourage you to include small celebrations along the way as you gradually fulfill your plan. Matthew 6 illustrates how God holds out His rewards for those who are faithful. As an old pastor used to say, "What is rewarded is repeated."

Now take the time to work out your plan. Work through your plan together. Be sure to visit crown.org and utilize our free budgeting and calculator tools, as well as the Crown Money Map. Ask a godly mentor to hold you accountable if you need that extra motivation. I have found that most people quit following their plan due to a lack of progress, which creates discouragement. But you are on your way to freedom! Don't stop now. I encourage you to go now to chapter 9 for additional study and application tools.

And when discouragement comes—what should you do? Read on.

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