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Making a Life

I recently came across the following quote by Winston Churchill (1874-1965): "We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give."

I'm not certain of the context of the quote, but he may not have been talking about stewardship in a Christian sense at all. Still, the words resonate remarkably with what it means to practice biblical stewardship. The Bible recognizes that work and compensation for work are a natural part of life. The writer of Ecclesiastes says, "I saw that there is nothing better that than all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot. . ." (3:22). But in the Bible, the money we make for our labors is always described as a means rather than an end.

Jesus reminds his listeners in John's Gospel to keep our work in perspective: "Do not work for food that perishes, but for food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you" (6:27). The food that endures for eternal life is connected directly to Jesus, whose own body is described as the bread of life. The things that Jesus gives—peace, love, forgiveness, hope, healing—are life-giving. So often we obsess over the material things we work to earn, but Jesus reminds us that the best things we receive from God are free. And we can "make a life," as Churchill says, by giving these very gifts of God away to others.

Making a living should never be confused with making a life. Your real life will never be defined by what you own (though the world seems to think that is important). Your real life will be defined by how you gave yourself – and the gifts of God – away.

Scott Tunseth
For the Stewardship Ministry Team

Does U.S. Need a Secretary of Personal Finance?

From Nathan Dungan, president and founder of Share Save Spend™ and his web site sharesavespend.com

A few weeks ago, I was flying back to Minnesota, my home state, after doing a workshop for a large community organization and the thought hit me -- we need a Secretary of Personal Finance.

Now before you dismiss the idea as being too "out there" or "too redundant" -- don't we already have a Department of the Treasury? -- please indulge me while I make the case.

As it currently stands, the Department of the Treasury does oversee the Office of Financial Education, created in 2002, and according to the Department of Treasury web site, claims to do the following:

"The Office of Financial Education works to promote access to the financial education tools that can help all Americans make wiser choices in all areas of personal financial management, with a special emphasis on saving, credit management, home ownership and retirement planning. The Office also coordinates the efforts to improve financial literacy and education for people throughout the United States."

With all due respect to the fine people who work in the Office of Financial Education, the status quo isn't working.

Here are four quick reasons for my criticism:

1. Our personal savings rate went negative in 2005 for the first time since 1933. The current savings rate for young adults 25 to 34 is negative 6 percent.
2. Our personal credit management in this country is abysmal and getting worse. The average credit card debt per household in the U.S. is \$9,000 -- an increase of 167% from 1990 to 2005.
3. While 69 percent of American households own their home, they increasingly use their accrued equity to pay off credit cards and finance other consumer purchases.
4. A stunning 75 percent of all U.S. workers have saved less than \$100,000 for retirement.

We have cabinet level positions for energy, transportation, education and labor to name a few, why not personal finance? After all, 70 percent of our total economy is dependent on consumer spending. Our economy won't keep growing if we don't ensure the financial health of all our citizens.

Now more than ever we need to acknowledge the need and recognize the urgency this issue has for all Americans. It's time we give it the prominence it deserves by naming a Secretary of Personal Finance.