

1 MONEY

*Your Premarriage **Experience** with Finances*

When Bill and Melinda Gates of Microsoft fame were dating and considering marriage, they did not come to us for premarital counseling. Same goes for Warren Buffet, the Oracle of Omaha. After carefully checking our records, we can also report that the entire Walton family—so far—has not come to us for counseling.

When we sit down with premarried couples, or couples in the early seasons of their married lives, we are almost always sitting down with “real people.” That is, people for whom money is scarce, making a living is challenging, and setting up a new household is more difficult and more expensive than they expected.

Early marriage leads to early discovery: everything costs money!

“I had no idea,” Kelly tells us, flashing a dazzling smile through perfect teeth. “My parents took care of everything I needed from childhood through college. I had great health care, an amazing dentist and orthodontist, and my wardrobe was always up-to-date and first class. Looking back, I have no idea how my mom and dad managed that. It’s not like they’re rich or anything!”

Husband Martin, sitting beside her in a crowded coffee and pastry shop where we are meeting, adds his comment to the mix. “Her parents are generous people, and they’ve both always had really good jobs. Kelly comes from a very blessed family.”

Martin and Kelly have come to us because they’re fighting about money a lot, and they’re hoping we can help. Money—or more precisely the lack of it—is one of the key stress points of early married life. It’s rare when two people come together in marriage having had precisely the same experiences with money.

We ask Martin and Kelly who’s in charge of the money in their new marriage.

They look at each other in the same instant, framing exactly the same thought as they both ask us, smiling broadly, “What’s money?”

All of us laugh out loud.

We’re sipping coffee and noshing on muffin tops, which have fewer calories than a whole muffin and cost substantially less, as we tell Martin and Kelly that coffee-shop dates are favorites of ours. Both of us love coffee anyway, and coffee shops tend to offer casual, friendly, upscale surroundings.

Before we can explain how our dates work, Martin jumps in with a few quick thoughts of his own.

“See, that’s what I’m talking about,” Martin argues. “That’s great for you two, you’ve been married a while and you’re both working. But we could never afford to do that! By the time you spend four dollars each for two coffees, then maybe each of you has a bagel or something, before you know it, you’ve blown twenty dollars. And, I’m sorry, but we just don’t have any extra twenty-dollar bills at our house!”

Money Issues Are Global and Universal

Across the ocean in The Netherlands, newlyweds Mark and Daphne discovered a similar reality as they married. Although today the couple is well-established and prospering, they didn't begin their marriage as wealthy persons.

"Most of our arguments in our early married life came from a rotten feeling we both had about our finances," Daphne explains. "Sometimes we were overdrawn and had to buy groceries only for that day instead of for the whole week."

Feeling poor and wishing for luxuries such as new CDs, new books, or maybe going out to see a movie, the couple discovered that financial stress sometimes caused them to lose sight of what really mattered. They realized that if they weren't careful they could lose their focus and possibly even their relationship. They made a conscious decision to value and cherish each other.

"For us, the financial part of our marriage wasn't smooth or simple at first," Daphne says, "but being together and being married felt great!"

So instead of letting their energy and their joy be worn away by financial stress, the couple chose to bond, connect with, and celebrate each other. For Mark and Daphne, financial stress lasted only for a season. Meanwhile, they took deliberate steps to help their marriage last for a lifetime.

Their example is helpful for all married couples, especially those who are still adjusting to each other in the first few months or years of married life.

The Thrifty Romantics: Our Four-Dollar Banquet

We're eager to explain our dates to Martin and Kelly.

Sitting back in her chair, taking a slow sip of her coffee, Lisa takes the lead.

“One of our helpful marriage traditions is something we call the four-dollar banquet,” Lisa says with the wide smile she’s famous for. “We set aside some personal time, often in midmorning or early in the evening, and we go to a coffee shop for a date.

“We’ve been doing this for almost ten years now,” Lisa continues. “Here’s what we do: We go to a coffee shop that also offers bakery items, and each of us orders a muffin top or we share a whole muffin. That’s our food for the date. Then we each have coffee, and sometimes one of us will have just water, which is free.

“When we first started doing this, quite a few years ago now, our total at the cash register usually came to about \$3.56 or \$3.67, but we rounded up and started calling it our four-dollar banquet.

“We still enjoy those dates,” Lisa continues, “although our total usually exceeds four dollars by a little bit. We still call it our four-dollar banquet. We sit together and talk with each other about our thoughts, dreams, worries, schedules. It’s not like we’re in a planning session or it’s business-related; we just talk through what’s going on. For us, especially now that we’ve done it for a while, we begin to relax when we leave the house for our dates. We know what’s coming—inexpensive, relaxing, high-quality couple time for just the two of us, just to celebrate our marriage.”

Martin and Kelly look at each other as Lisa explains the process.

Kelly states what they both seem to be thinking. “We could really use some time like that for our relationship,” she says quietly. “That would be helpful.”

Martin nods his head in agreement.

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Lisa resumes her narrative.

“We’ve talked to couples with no money at all, couples struggling to pay the rent and keep the cell phone bill paid, and even those couples have realized that they could find a few dollars once every two weeks or so to get away, sip some coffee, munch on a bakery treat, and catch up with each other. Even couples who claim they can’t do it somehow manage to find those four dollars or so.

“In fact,” Lisa adds almost as an afterthought, “we worked with one young couple in South Dakota that was fighting pretty much constantly about money and finances and spending. When we told them about how we did our four-dollar banquets, the husband really caught the vision. He told his wife, ‘If we want to save our marriage, we can’t afford *not* to do that.’ So the couple began a brand-new tradition and started having their own dates. We saw them months later at a conference, and they came over and thanked us for showing them that a date-night experience doesn’t have to be expensive.”

Martin rubs his chin thoughtfully.

“Maybe you’re right,” he admits.

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Whether you’re dating or engaged, or perhaps already in the early years of your marriage, you’ll soon discover that each one of you brings somewhat different experiences of money and finances into your new union, especially when it comes to spending and saving. Your experiences with money will shape how you choose priorities, make decisions, and set up a household. Your choices and decisions regarding money, unless you’ve done

a lot of strategic thinking and deliberate planning, will most likely reflect your previous experiences, at least in the beginning.

Without knowing it, you've already been shaped and molded into having certain opinions about money and how it ought to be used. Your economic values may be among the strongest values you hold. Yet you may never have stated them out loud, or even realized what they are. Then, suddenly you're married, and you find yourself fighting with someone whose financial priorities are vastly different from yours. You may find yourself arguing with someone whose money style—or pattern with money—seems impractical or irresponsible. You're angry and upset, thinking, *Surely this person I married should already realize the value of money! Right?*

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Dr. Danny Gales, a pastor and district leader in Canada and across North America, believes that making choices about money is one of the most difficult challenges a young couple confronts as they get married and form a household.

"Merging two different lives in the area of finances—both of you having different experiences with money and budgeting as well as the use of credit—may be the biggest challenge you will face together," Dr. Gales explains.

Having counseled with numerous couples both before and after their wedding ceremonies, Dr. Gales is uniquely qualified to make this observation. He has seen the complexity of bringing two different financial styles into a new household and trying to make it work while disagreeing about spending and financial priorities.

Time after time, young married couples fight and argue about money. Sometimes these arguments escalate into a constant state of tension that undermines the relational glue holding the couple together.

"All we do anymore is fight with each other, usually about money," a young wife tells us in suburban St. Paul, Minnesota. "Frankly, that's not what I thought marriage was going to be about!"

She shakes her head, admitting the obvious.

"Why did I think we were going to be rich?" she wonders aloud.

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For their part, Martin and Kelly are under no such illusions.

"We knew it would be difficult to make this work financially," Martin tells us later in the interview. "What we didn't realize was how different our attitudes are about money and spending. And what we also didn't realize was how much we'd have to give up. Both of us grew up in middle-class homes, surrounded by a lot of luxury and convenience. We just kind of took that for granted."

"Then we got married, and we suddenly realized that luxury is expensive and convenience usually costs a lot more than inconvenience!"

Kelly echoes her husband's wisdom.

"I can't even set up a decent kitchen!" she exclaims. "I can't believe how often I reach for something, only to realize, *Oh yeah, I forgot, we don't own one of those.* That happens to me all the time when I'm cooking or baking."

Martin and Kelly's experience is typical of newlyweds in many countries and cultures. All around the world, as we travel to minister and speak, to listen and to counsel, we encounter young couples who are surprised to find their standard of living has declined—not increased—as a result of getting married.

"Maybe newlyweds are supposed to be poor," Martin wonders aloud. "Maybe that's just how it is. But at least for us, the problem is not just that we're poor but also that we can't agree on how to spend the little bit of money we actually have."

"We're coming from very different places when we think about money and how to use it," Kelly adds for emphasis.

What about you? What kind of financial decisions and choices did you observe as you were growing up? Did you watch your father or stepdad spend wildly on his personal "toys" only to hear your mother yell at him for being immature and selfish? Did you watch a parent lose his or her job at some point, with the result that your whole household suddenly became thrifty and changed its style of spending and choosing? Were you raised by a single mom who carefully managed every expense because there was never enough money to go around?

All of us come from somewhere, with regard to economic issues.

What has been your experience with money and finances?

More to the point, how have you been shaped by your own family of origin, your personal employment and job history, your use of student loans and credit cards, and your financial life as a single adult? In the remaining pages of this chapter we'll look at your premarriage experiences with money and finances, using key questions as starting points for your personal discussion and discovery.

You can respond to these questions on your own, separately, and then compare notes later. Or you can read the questions together, talking and sharing with each other as you read through the chapter. Whichever method you choose, be sure that you invest as much time and energy in listening to your partner as you do explaining your own history, background, and perspective.

Money XPR Discussion Questions

Here are some discussion questions to help you explore how and why your financial perspectives may be different from one another. Write out or talk through your answers as thoroughly as possible. The more deeply you can engage with these questions, the more learning and understanding can occur as a result.

1. As you think about the adults who raised you, did you see more than one style of managing money while you were growing up? If you had two adults in the home, did each of them share the same financial values or did each seem to have different views on money and spending? Thinking only about your growing-up experiences, which adult head of household (mom, dad, stepmom, stepdad, grandfather, grandmother) seemed to have the wisest and best view of money and how it should be used? Which adult—choose only one if at all possible—did you most respect with regard to money matters? Why?
2. Did your family experience hard times or financial stress while you were growing up? What are your childhood memories of a parent losing his or her job or being forced to go without much-needed items because you could not afford to buy them? Was financial stress the normal pattern for your family, or was it occasional and rare? What

are some of your earliest memories of financial stress as you became aware that there was not enough money in the household to meet the immediate needs? How did your parent(s) or family manage to cope with financial setbacks?

3. Was your family relatively affluent or wealthy as you were growing up? If so, did you realize it at the time? What did your family have as possessions or do together as a family that other families in your church, community, or area were not able to have or to do? Did you grow up feeling in any way privileged or having a higher status than others in your community or your church? If so, did you believe that this was because your parent(s) worked hard or were smarter than others? What are some of your earliest experiences as you became aware that your family was perhaps more affluent and successful than others around you? Did you ever feel guilty for the things you had, the vacations you took, the money you spent on clothes or computers or video games and such? Did other children or teens ever express jealousy of you or your lifestyle? How did this make you feel?
4. Do you remember watching your parent(s) sit down and make a household or family budget? If your parent(s) did prepare a budget, were you asked for your input in any categories? Did you get to voice an opinion about priorities for your family? Did you want to? Did one of your parents typically pay the bills for your household and, if so, did that parent have a pattern or a style, a place or a time, in which paying the bills was done? What are some of your earliest memories of becoming aware that life

cost money and that someone was paying the bill? As far as you could tell while you were growing up, did your parents run out of bills before they ran out of money, or did they usually seem to run out of money before they finished paying all the bills? How did you discover this? How did you know?

5. What are your earliest memories of watching a parent accept, obtain, or use a credit card? What do you remember your parent(s) telling you about credit and credit cards? Did your parent(s) warn you about credit, that it might become a trap that could lead to surprisingly high levels of debt? When did you become aware—if ever—that your parents owed money to credit card companies and that the amount of money might be substantial? Did your parents teach you to use credit only in emergencies? Is that how they used their own credit and credit cards? Do you ever remember your parents seeking or obtaining credit counseling or financial counseling? Did your parents ever attend a seminar on managing finances? Do you feel as if your experiences growing up provided excellent training in the proper use—and potential misuse—of credit and credit cards?
6. How old were you when you first heard the expression *FICO score*? Did you ever hear that expression, or at least a similar expression such as *credit rating* or *creditworthy* when you were growing up? Did you ever watch your parents attempt to qualify for a car loan or a home mortgage? Did you get to observe firsthand any aspect of that process? Do you recall whether that process was successfully completed? Did you realize as a child or a teen that

obtaining a home mortgage involved extensive amounts of paperwork, with someone—a bank or a lender—reviewing very private issues about your parents' personal history, employment, and use of money? Did your parents sign or cosign loans for you while you were growing up such as student loans or auto loans? To what extent, if any, were or are you personally responsible for those loans and debts?

7. How old were you when you filed income taxes for the first time? Did you do it yourself or did a parent do the math and paperwork for you? Did you hire a tax preparer or did you sit down with piles of receipts and canceled checks and do all the work yourself? When, if ever, did your tax return become complicated and difficult? Has it always been your experience that tax returns are a short-form and simple process? Has it been your pattern, as a working teen or working adult, to get money back from the government at tax time? If so, how much money is typical? If so, what has been your pattern for saving or spending that tax refund?
8. Did your parent(s) practice the biblical pattern of tithing their income to God's work or the church? When did you first hear the word *tithe* and what was your reaction to the idea? Did you grow up actively tithing your own income from babysitting or your first job at a fast-food restaurant, or did you believe that tithing was something for adults or parents, not for children and teens? Did your parent(s) tend to tithe only when they felt they could afford it or did they tithe in good times and bad times? When did you make up your own mind about

- tithing? What did you decide to do about it when it was finally your own choice to make?
9. At what age did you open your first savings account? Do you remember the amount of your first deposit? Did you make regular and systematic deposits into a savings account as a child or teen, or was your saving—if any—more of a random and haphazard choice? What is the highest balance you ever personally reached in your own personal savings account? Do you remember someone teaching you the value of saving and the value of systematic saving as a habit and practice? Who told you about this? Did that person practice what he or she preached? Who is the best saver you know, and why do you consider that person to be a good saver?
 10. When it was time for a big-ticket purchase such as a computer, a car, or something expensive that you personally needed or wanted, did your parent(s) require you to save up and contribute your own money, or did they purchase these expensive items for you? What is the first expensive item you ever purchased with your own money, money that you earned or saved all by yourself? What kinds of expensive items did your parent(s) purchase for you without requiring you to earn, save, or share in the purchase price? Did you grow up believing that your parents should be more generous with you, less generous with you, or did you believe that your parents were behaving just about right with regard to big-ticket items you wanted?
 11. Do you remember the first time a friend or family member asked you for a loan? How did you respond to that

request? Do you remember the first time—if ever—you asked a friend or family member for a loan? If you asked for help, did you receive it? What were you taught by your parents or by the adults in your life about asking for financial help when you needed it? Do you recall any time when your parents asked their own parents, friends, or relatives for money? Was their request granted? Did you grow up watching relatives and friends ask to borrow money from your parents? How did your parents respond when someone asked them for a loan? Who taught you about the etiquette involved in asking for a loan or responding to a request for a loan?

12. What was your first job that actually paid money to you? How old were you when someone hired you to babysit, wash a car, cut a lawn, or do a similar chore? Did someone approach you about these tasks, or did you go out seeking a paying job? What was your first real job that involved a paycheck and tax withholding? Do you remember the amount of your first actual paycheck? What did you do with the money from your first paycheck on your first real job?
13. Thinking about all the people you personally know—relatives, friends, coworkers, and others—who is the wisest person you know with regard to money and money management? Why do you consider that person to be wise? Have you ever asked him or her to teach you about money or financial matters? Have you ever made a conscious and deliberate decision to pattern yourself after that person? If so, in what way are you seeking to model your behavior on that person's financial wisdom? Why is

that person a role model for you in terms of finances and money?

14. Years from now, how do you want to be remembered by your own children, family, coworkers, and friends? To what extent would you like to be remembered as someone who was consistently wise about money and successful at managing money? Whether or not you ever become rich, is it your goal to be remembered as someone who always managed money wisely and well?

As you work through these questions, separately or together, or as you come together in a pastor's or counselor's office to consider these topics, you'll begin to realize that your premarriage experiences with money have been deeply formative. Your values about money have been shaped by your families of origin, your own experiences of employment and work, and the extent to which you've been rich or poor, successful or troubled, dealing with surplus or somehow always late in making your payments to credit cards, utility companies, and others.

Talking about your experiences will help you realize how each one of you has arrived at your current thoughts and feelings about money. You'll begin to realize not just *how* you feel about spending and saving, but more importantly *why* you feel that way.