



The Methodist Church

Stewardship Bible Studies (for group discussion)

It has been suggested that everything we do in our Christian life is an act of stewardship. As Christians in a relationship with God through Christ, we receive the generous gifts God has for us and grow in our appreciation of what he has already given us.

Everything is a gift. The world we live in, the food we eat, our friends and family, our health, our time, the money that buys us what we need, even our very bodies; everything is a gift from God. As we grow in Christ, we realise that every good gift does come from God, and that we are merely stewards, tending and looking after the gifts that he has given us.

The following Bible studies focuses on the gifts God has given us and our calling; both individually and collectively as members of Christ's body, to make the best use of our gifts that we can, and use them in God's service. They are designed to be used in order, starting with an examination of the creation God has given to us, Jesus' life, death and resurrection and then onto a fuller examination of our own life in Christ.

Any feedback on these Bible studies should be sent to Mission Education, Methodist Church House, 25 Marylebone Road, London NW1 5JR.

A revised and updated version of Bible Studies originally produced by Revd. Jim G. Matheson of the Church of Scotland. Thanks to the Church of Scotland Stewardship Department for allowing us to adapt this material, and to members of the Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) Stewardship Network, whose ideas have been incorporated in these studies.

Bible Studies

- Stewards of Creation
- Worship and Stewardship
- Treasure in Heaven
- The Dying Church
- The Rising Church
- Personal Commitment
- Temple of the Holy Spirit
- Good and Faithful Stewards

Stewards of Creation

Genesis 1. 26-31

The 1991 General Assembly of the World Council of Churches described humanity as "accountable before God in and to the community of life, an accountability which has been imagined in various ways: as servants, stewards and trustees, as tillers and keepers, as priests of creation, as nurturers, as co-creators." That is borne out by this passage.

The earth in its overflowing wealth, and the universe in its vastness, is of God's making. We have been given power and dominion in it in cooperation with God (v.



The Methodist Church

26). We have a vast range of freedom in the authority given to us (v. 28), all in the over-arching sphere of God's lordship. Although God gave us dominion, it was expected that we would act as wise and faithful stewards, exercising our power with prudence and care. Something we have sometimes failed to do.

The image of God (v. 26) is closely connected with humanity's authority over the whole of creation, and especially the animals. Is that significant? Does it mean that while God is not seen and known by them they indirectly worship him through their obedience to us? In any rate it suggests that man has special responsibility for the life of the lower animals.

Indeed, we are called to be stewards not only of the animals, but also of the whole ecosystem in which both they, and we, live. We are called to tend for the earth, like caretakers in Eden.

Our stewardship begins with the recognition of the wonder, power and wealth that life in God's world offers. Genesis underlines the dignity and authority of humanity as the stewards of God.

Finally it stresses our responsibility under God for the whole of creation.

Questions

1. Detail some examples in the world today of our dominion over creation.
2. Discuss some of the areas in which humanity may be abusing its dominion.
3. Read Psalm 8 and discuss how it fits in with this passage and where it differs from it.
4. Would it be right from the view of us as 'stewards and trustees' to conclude that that we must do something about poverty in Britain and elsewhere in the world?
5. Should we as Christians be more involved in activities such as recycling, opposing pollution and pushing for renewable sources of electricity?

Worship and Stewardship

2 Chronicles 2:10-20

Stewardship is rooted in worship. The power of it comes from the vision of God in his unparalleled supremacy (v11) and boundless generosity (v12) who has given us everything we have.

When we realise we are God's stewards, the wealth and power we dispose of have a new dimension added to them; the dimension of gratitude and joy (v13).

The possession of such gifts can go with perfect humility (v14-16).

The motives for David's generosity and his people to the Temple are repeatedly underlined. Five times the point is made that the people offered willingly. It is with deep inward emotion that they offered (v: 17-18). They experienced a release of happiness in the act of giving (v9, 17).

At this point in the story, King David is at the end of his life. Having strengthened and enlarged the kingdom by military conquest, he hands it over to his son Solomon. One of the priority tasks he gives Solomon is to build the Temple as the focus for worshipping God and spreading Judaism. One of David's last acts was to gather a great sum of money - given by himself, the leaders of the nations, and the people - to be devoted to this purpose.



The Methodist Church

The passage is a classic text about money stewardship, particularly, as an act of worship.

In the passage, one cannot miss the close personal bond between David and God, and between the people and God. On God's part, his care for them is personal and everlasting. On their part, there is a warm outreach of love and affection expressed in their gift.

Giving belongs to the close bond of love and loyalty between us and God which is at the heart of true religion.

Questions

1. Is everything we do underpinned with God-centred worship and prayer?
2. Are worship and giving closely related in your church?
3. Why is there an insistence here that the people's gifts are freely given? In the Church, is there sometimes a temptation to subject people to undue pressure?
4. When we give, which are we more aware of: giving to other people or giving to God? Does it matter?

Treasure in Heaven

Luke 18. 18-30

To be honest, Jesus' teaching about wealth and poverty worries us. He himself seemed to discard all his property. He deliberately encouraged his twelve apostles to abandon their homes and their work and become penniless wanderers. In this story, he tells a wealthy young man with a promising career to throw it all away and become dependent on charity.

We should remember on the other hand he never taught that everybody should act that way. Tradition suggests that Jesus held the home in Nazareth together and provided for his mother and the rest before he "took to the roads." The parables all seem to assure us that a wise attitude towards material possessions would always be a point of decision for his followers.

The main point of the story, however, is not to tell us what to do about money or poverty. It is meant rather to straighten out what is the essence of the Gospel.

The story starts with a man asking about "eternal life." Though the narrative seems to stray far from that point dealing instead with our treatment of material possessions and standards of conventional behaviour. In fact, the whole tale is firmly anchored to that first question. The lesson demonstrates how we discover the secret of life.

According to this passage, we don't find it by merely concentrating on spiritual matters. The shocking revelation for this affluent young counsellor was that his salvation was tied up with his wealth and possessions just as much as his theology. Jesus will not tolerate artificial division between material and spiritual matters.

It has been said that if you want to know what someone really believes in, look at his or her chequebook. You will find what they really believe in on the chequebook stubs. Chequebook stubs and credit card statements are really theological documents. As Jesus said, "Where you treasure is, there is your heart" (Matthew 6:21)

Through the discussion of possessions and wealth, Jesus was leading his questioner to face the central message of the Gospel; salvation is a gift from God freely offered to all. It cannot in any sense be bought. It is a gift, one which we can have when we



The Methodist Church

know that we are poor, for then the Lord grants us his riches. In Jesus, we find the riches of his grace, which the Father has lavished upon us (See Ephesians 1. 3-9)

All the young man needed to do was respond to Jesus' call, "Come, follow me."

Questions

1. The young man was shielded by his wealth and possessions from the message of the Gospel; does our wealth have a similar shielding effect, preventing us from knowing that we are poor?
2. Do we keep the teaching of the gospel secret, or do we strive to speak about God and faith in ways that make sense to other people?
3. Do we possess our possessions, or do they possess us?
4. "You will have riches in heaven" (v 22) seems to suggest that Jesus was offering a reward. See also v:29-30. Is there any place in the Christian life for the question, "What can I get out of it?"
5. If this story says anything about our attitude to money, what is it?

The Dying Church

Mark 11. 12- 21

In the Bible, the Church is often spoken of as a tree. The story of the death of a tree can be read as a parable about the death of the Church.

The fig tree that looked healthy with plenty of promise bore no fruit. So it was cursed, it's inner life decayed and it died. It can happen to the Church. If it does not produce the fruit God looks for, it will die.

It was a warning to the Jews in Jesus' time. It actually happened to them. It stands as a warning to the Church in every generation. It might happen in our Church and in our congregation. At any rate, so Jesus says.

The story of the fig tree is bracketed around the cleansing of the Temple (v:15-19). The reason is presumably because they are saying the same thing. The Church has a particular job to do. To be a house of prayer where men and women can meet God (v. 17). If it is not, Jesus may visit it in judgement.

The story of the temple-cleansing in John's Gospel (3:14-21) tells of a further conversation, when Jesus' authority was challenged. He said, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." The Evangelist adds, "The temple he was speaking of was his body." This means, surely, that the Church Jesus was pledged to was not the building, nor the institution, but his own body, the company of people who accept him as the Risen Lord and live his life by his Spirit.

Questions

1. What fruits does God expect from the Church?
2. Many people today say that the Church is dying. What do you think?
3. The Church is supposed to be (a) a house of prayer (b) open to everybody (v:17). How do you think the Church today passes those tests?
4. What is the connection, if any, between the Church as the temple (or institution) and the Church as the body of Christ?

The Rising Church

Acts: 2:22-47

The incident recorded in this passage happened on the day of Pentecost, the Church's 'birthday'.

It started with Peter's preaching. In his sermon, he said:

- Jesus was shown by his words and works to be a man with divine authority.
- He was put to death by the authorities.
- They (that is, his hearers) were responsible for allowing Jesus' death.
- God raised him up.
- The risen Lord Jesus has been given the power and the Holy Spirit, which they have all experienced.
- His listeners must turn away from their sins, and be baptised.

As a result, the Church was formed. Our passage gives a careful account of the "marks" of the Church. We take this to be the ideal picture of a living Church.

It should be essential to the life of the Church that there should be:

- Instruction: "they should devote themselves to the Apostles' teaching."
- Fellowship: "*they devoted themselves to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. All who believed were together and had all things common. They sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all that had need.*"
- A sense of the supernatural: "*fear came upon every soul and many wonders and signs were done through the Apostles.*"
- The joy of the Lord: "*they partook of food with glad and generous hearts praising God and having favour with all the people.*"

Questions

1. Are these features evident in your congregation? If they are not evident, how could they be made more prominent?
2. How do you experience the life of the Holy Spirit in your Church?
3. How do you feel about the concept of selling your possessions to help those in need?
4. How does your Church devote itself to fellowship, the Eucharist, and prayer?

Personal Commitment

Romans 12:1-21

The Christian life is meant to be a living sacrifice (v 1). That should not alarm us unduly. In the Bible, sacrifice is not normally an act of blood, sweat and tears. Indeed the typical sacrifice is a time of festival; the dominant note is thanksgiving and joy. See, for example, Deuteronomy 26:1-12.



The Methodist Church

The motive of our sacrifice is thankfulness for God's mercy (v 1). The first eleven chapters of the book of Romans is taken up with the tremendous mystery of God's love, which we can either earn nor deserve, but yet it comes to us with overwhelming generosity and power (8:35-39). It is this measureless liberality of God's love to us in Christ that moves us to give our very selves in return. This motive of personal commitment is sheer thankfulness.

The gifts we possess (v 6) are for Christ's service. We are to use them humbly (v:3-5), not envying other people's gifts but freely offering our own (v: 6-8). This point is mentioned so often that we suspect Paul found Christians especially prone to be jealous of each other's abilities.

Eight separate gifts are mentioned. Some are as practical as giving to charity (v. 8). Others are as spiritual as prophesying (v. 6), yet they are all gifts of God's grace and equally needed for the functioning of the Body of Christ.

The precepts of Christian commandments (v:10-21) show the same total disregard of the difference between material and spiritual activities. It appears that everything is spiritual which is done in response to God's mercy, in love to Christ and his brethren. Personal commitment may lead us to high and special work for God. It is equally likely to prompt us in the way we fulfil our ordinary routine and in our attitude to the people around us (v:15-16).

Verses 17-21 might be written for today. In the New Testament justice and forgiveness are not thought of as opposites. They are both described as coming from God.

Questions

- The King James Bible says, "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice." The New English Bible says, "Offer your very selves." Which do you think describes more accurately what a Christian really does?
- Is it true that Christians in their congregations are prone to be jealous of each other?
- Some of the gifts described are used in Church activities, others in the everyday world. Which should be sought after more?
- When it is preached that we should do our daily work for Christ, does it mean anything to you?
- Can you think of some instances in which the behaviour recommended in verses 20 and 21 has worked in your experience?

Temple of the Holy Spirit

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Today, many Christians live in a permissive society. It is widely taught that sex, for example, is a natural appetite like hunger for food (v:13) and therefore may be satisfied.

The Bible teaches that we are stewards of our bodies. We are entrusted with them not for ourselves but for the Lord (v 13).

Note that the argument is based not on the creation (though it is true, surely, that since God made us we belong to him). It is a far stronger reason than that. The fact that our bodies belong to God rests on the resurrection (v 14). God has redeemed



The Methodist Church

us. He will finally raise us up in a perfect union with Christ, so our bodies belong to him.

Note too, that this passage goes to the heart of sex. For Christians, sex is not merely an appetite. It is meant for personal union in which two separate persons become one (v:15-17). Our bodies and our real selves cannot be separated.

To complete the irresistible argument that we hold our bodies in trust for God, v 19 says, "Your body is a shrine of the indwelling spirit." It is through our limbs and organs that God lives and acts in this world.