

God's generosity: our response

Bible studies on Stewardship from the Diocese of Southwark



**Hearts
on Fire**

The Diocese of Southwark

Loving God
Walking with Jesus
Led by the Spirit

Luke 24:13-35



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Philippians 2: 4

Introduction

From the very beginnings of the Christian Church, when small but growing groups of people were meeting together in houses in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas, God's work depended upon the generosity of God's people.

The early Christians lived together and shared what they had. The Israelites were used to giving to God's work and continued to do so, and they drew the Gentiles and others who joined the group of new believers into doing the same.

As Christians we are, and have always been, compelled to give to God's work with great generosity because of God's generous love for humanity. God loves all the people that he has created and he loves us each as individuals. It is for this reason, in response to all that God has done for us and for the whole of humanity, that we are each called to be generous. Our generosity needs to reflect all that we have, all the gifts that we have from God; the time that we have; the skills which God has given us and the financial resources which God has also given to us.

Our generosity in response to God means that we should give of all that we have, not what is left over at the end of the month or when the bills have all been paid. Just like the people of the Old Testament (as we shall see) we should give of the first fruits of all we have. So before we do anything else with our time and money we should work out what we are going to give to God's work. That's not a very popular idea today and for many of us it seems very difficult to do as there are so many calls on our time and money.

But, God gave us his Son when he sent Jesus to earth in order that we might be reconciled to God, that's why we have so much to be grateful for and why we should share in God's work.

These Bible Studies are designed to help small groups to think together about God's generosity and our response.

Using these Bible studies

The Bible studies in this booklet are designed to be used by small groups who want to think about how best to respond to God's generosity in sending Christ into the world to give God's people a way back to God.

Allow about 1½ hours for the session plus some time for refreshments

Each session follows the same pattern and it is good if each group member can have a copy of the bible studies. They can be obtained from Trinity House or downloaded from the Diocesan website:

www.southwark.anglican.org/what/stewardship

It will be helpful to have some scrap paper and pens available at each session.

In some sessions the person who is facilitating the Bible studies will have needed to prepare something before the session. This might be cutting things from the newspaper etc (Session 1); finding a piece of music (Session 2); providing modelling clay or paper and colouring pencils (Session 2); ensuring

that people bring something along to the next session (Session 3) or having a basket or bowl to collect people's written thoughts about generosity (Session 5). At the end of a session when there is something that needs to be done between sessions, do make sure to ask group members to ensure that they have done the task and bring the results with them.

This will be made clear in the notes but, if you are the facilitator for the next session, do please make sure that you have read through the session before the day so that you have everything that is necessary for the next session.

Begin each session with the 'Hearts on Fire' prayer.

Hearts on Fire prayer

*Stay with us Lord,
open our eyes and set our hearts on fire,
as you open your word,
as you break your bread,
as we live your life.
Enrich us with your grace,
empower us by your Spirit,
enfold us in your love,
as we walk the journey of faith with you. Amen*

Background information

Before each session the person who is facilitating the session should read this material and if at all possible the members of the group should also be encouraged to read it too. If the members of the group do not each have copies of the Bible studies then try to give them a copy of the background information at the end of each session. Do encourage group members to look at any other references mentioned in the background information.

To begin

At the beginning of each session there is a brief introductory exercise to help group members to begin to think about the issue upon which the session focusses. This brief exercise is important because it also provides the opportunity for group members to settle into the meeting and leave the events of the day behind.

The group should allow about 15 minutes for this part of the session

After this exercise it would be helpful if the person facilitating the group were to check who has read the background information and to provide a brief summary of what it contains.

The group should allow about 5 minutes for this part of the session

What Scripture has to say

This part of each session will help participants to think afresh about what the Bible teaches us about God's generosity to his people and how we, God's people, should respond. At this stage the group will simply engage with Scripture, reading it together and reflecting upon it.

The group should allow about 10 minutes for this part of the session

Implications for today

This is the most important part of the session as it is the part of the session when the participants are asked to consider how the Biblical text can help to guide life today. Here too is the opportunity to use other activities to help people to focus.

The group should allow about 40 minutes for this part of the session

Closing and prayer

Group members should then take a few minutes to reflect silently upon what they have thought about together and to consider what they might take away into their days in the next week. Then spend some time in prayer together, seeking God's blessing and guidance. Close the session using the suggested prayer.

The group should allow between 10 and 15 minutes for the closing and prayer



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Luke 24:13-35

A crop field at Harben
Park Gardens, Zimbabwe

1 Chronicles 29: 11

The earth is the Lord's...

Before this session the leader needs to gather a selection of photographs from magazines/ newspapers/ the web etc. showing people who are enjoying whatever it is that they are doing.

Begin the session using the 'Hearts on Fire' prayer which can be found on page 4

Aim: *To provide an overview of stewardship in the Old Testament and to consider how it applies to God's people today.*

To begin: *What do you think of when you hear or read these brief words from Psalm 24:1: The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.*

Share with your neighbour how you respond to these words. Like so many others in the Old Testament they speak of God's relationship with the earth. Think together about whether this verse and other similar ones change the way in which you live in any way? After about five minutes share what you can with the rest of the group.

In this session members of the group will have an opportunity to look at some Old Testament passages on using the resources given to humanity by God and begin to think about how this might affect their own lifestyle and priorities.

What Scripture has to say

Before reading the passage from Scripture spend a few minutes in the group considering whether group members think that having wealth is a sign of God's blessing. Ask people to explain the reasons for what they think and how they see this in their own lives.

As the history of the Old Testament unfolds, life changes for the Israelites and they move from being a nomadic to a settled people. So, by the time that the events described in Chronicles unfold, they are settled in Jerusalem and have a King who is planning the building of a Temple.

Spend a few moments reading this passage:

¹⁰Then David blessed the Lord in the presence of all the assembly; David said: 'Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of our ancestor Israel, for ever and ever. ¹¹Yours, O Lord, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all.

¹²Riches and honour come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might; and it is in your hand to make great and to give strength to all. ¹³And now, our God, we give thanks to you and praise your glorious name.

¹⁴But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to make this freewill-offering? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. ¹⁵For we are aliens and transients before you, as were all our ancestors; our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no hope. ¹⁶O Lord our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own. ¹⁷I know, my God, that you search the heart, and take pleasure in uprightness; in the uprightness of my heart I have freely offered all these things, and now I have seen your people, who are present here, offering freely and joyously to you. ¹⁸O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our ancestors, keep for ever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people, and direct their hearts towards you. ¹⁹Grant to my son Solomon that with single mind he may keep your commandments, your decrees, and your statutes, performing all of them, and that he may build the temple for which I have made provision.'

²⁰Then David said to the whole assembly, 'Bless the Lord your God.' And all the assembly blessed the Lord, the God of their ancestors, and bowed their heads and prostrated themselves before the Lord and the king.

I Chronicles 29: 10-20

This is a familiar passage when thinking about the use of resources. You will probably recognise verse 11 as part of the prayer which is sometimes used as the collection is brought to the altar during Holy Communion.

Implications for today

1. Read verses 10-11 aloud in the group and then turn to your neighbour and discuss together what you think it means that 'all that is in the heavens and on the earth' belongs to God? How and in what ways does this affect the way that you live?

Share what you would like to of your discussion with the rest of the group.

2. David reminds the people that everything that they had came from God. That's true for us too, so that when we give to God's work through the Church we give back to God of what God has given to us. Does it feel at all like this for you when you give of your time, gifts and money to the Church? What might help you to be more aware of this?
3. Take a look at these pictures of people who are clearly really enjoying what they are doing. Think about the things that they are doing that are making them happy and about the things that you do that make you happy and joyful.

Are you aware of times when you have felt joyful to be giving to the Church or seen others giving who have clearly been joyful when they have been giving to God's work?

What do you think helped you to feel joyful in that situation or helped those you have seen be joyful in giving to be so?

4. What things do you do that are a response to God's generosity or that help you to respond to God's generosity?
5. Turn to your neighbour again and think together about what might help you to be generous in giving and sharing your gifts in the way that the Israelites were. Can you commit yourself to trying to discover more about this in the coming weeks?

Closing and prayer

Spend a few moments in silence reflecting on the passage and your discussions. In the silence offer your thoughts to God and invite God to help you to think more about your response to all that God has given to you as individuals and as a group.

Spend some time in prayer then draw the session to a close using the following or other suitable prayer:

*Yours, Lord, is the greatness, the power,
the glory, the splendour, and the majesty;
for everything in heaven and on earth is yours.
All things come from you,
and of your own do we give you.*

*Creator God, help us to give generously in response to all that you have
given to us. Amen*



Money, money, money

If at all possible try to play 'Money, money, money' either by Abba or the version from Mama Mia as people are entering the room, or alternatively 'Money, Money' from Cabaret. Both tracks are available from online sources for a small fee and the lyrics will also be available online. Then just before you begin ask them to listen to the words for a few moments. How do you respond to them?

Begin the session using the 'Hearts on Fire' prayer which can be found on page 4

Aim: *To look at some of the Bible's teaching on money and consider what implications it has for the way that Jesus' disciples live today.*

To begin: *Think back to the last session. Reflect once again on the notion that all that we have comes from God. How do you react to this idea now?*

Share in the group your first reactions to this verse:

10**For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. **1 Timothy 6:10

In what ways do you think the love of money or riches might be the root of all kinds of evil? Share your ideas with the group. Then think quietly to yourself whether this has ever been true for you.

What Scripture has to say

Jesus spends a good deal of his ministry talking about money and the 'danger' of being rich. For Jesus and for his followers, then and now, the 'danger' in being rich is that we focus

too much on what we have and how to preserve it rather than responding to others generously because God is generous to us. In fact *Giving for Life* says: 'There is no shortage of biblical material on giving, with over 2,300 verses in the Bible on money, wealth and possessions. Jesus talked about it frequently, and over one-third of the parables relate to these topics.' (*Giving for Life* was published by the Archbishops' Council in 2009, and resources are available to download or to order by post on www.parishresources.org.uk/givingforlife)

Take a few moments to make a list of the passages or stories and parables that you remember from the Gospels. Is there a general message that you can identify from these stories as you remember them?

Spend a few moments reading this passage:

¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

²²“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; ²³but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

²⁴“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

²⁵“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” ³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

Matthew 6:19-end

This long passage from the Sermon on the Mount is as radical as it is familiar. It gives Jesus’ followers a great many pointers for how they should live if they want to truly respond to God’s Kingdom coming near.

Implications for today

1. Use some modelling clay or paper and coloured pencils, and spend a few moments as individuals modelling or drawing what you consider to be your treasure.
2. Talk with your neighbour about your drawing or model and why what you have drawn or made is treasure for you. As a group see if there are any common themes in what people think of as treasure.
3. Then thinking about the treasure that you have identified consider where your heart is in relation to that treasure. Do you think that it is in the right place?

In modelling or drawing your treasure you have a depiction of something very precious to you. How might these treasures, that you have depicted, be affected if you were to store your treasure in heaven rather than here on earth?

4. The economic situation worldwide means that many people today here in our Diocese, and possibly even in our own church, do not have enough to eat or to get by on. Yet, verse 25 and the verses following it suggest that God's people will always have as much as they need. How do you feel about this statement? Does it describe your life and the life of your community?
5. How should Jesus' followers today respond to these verses in the light of what is happening in our communities? What can we do to help people to be less concerned about their material needs and more able to concentrate on following Jesus?
6. In what ways does your life show that you are following God and not wealth? Do you think that you have the balance right?

Closing and prayer

Spend a few moments in silence reflecting on the passage and your discussions. In the silence offer your thoughts to God and invite God to help you to think more about what it means to 'store up treasure in heaven'.

Then allow time for the group to pray together in silence or aloud. As this session has been thinking about a passage from the Sermon on the Mount it seems appropriate for the group to pray together:

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.*

Amen.

Remind people that next week they should try to bring in some information about people and/or organizations they support either financially or through giving their time or through prayer.



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Luke 24:13-35

Brixton Foodbank
Numbers 10: 32

SESSION 3

Everything was held in common

In this session people need to bring information about people and charities they support.

Begin the session using the 'Hearts on Fire' prayer which can be found on page 4

Aim: *To consider the life of the Christian community and how Christians share what they have with each other and the wider community.*

To begin: *Last session the group looked at part of the Sermon on the Mount. Turn to your neighbour so that you can talk to each other for a few minutes about which verses you have remembered most often during the time since the last meeting. What has most struck you about what you have remembered?*

Now read these verses from the early part of the Acts of the Apostles which tells us about the early church.

³²Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.

³³With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴There was not a needy person among them, for as many

as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Acts 4.32-35

Even today some Christian groups hold everything in common and share all that they have. In what ways is this true of your Christian community? Do you think that it might be possible to share at least some more of what you each have in your Christian community? How might this work?

What Scripture has to say

Spend a few moments reading these passages quietly or aloud:

²⁷At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius. ²⁹The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; ³⁰this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul. Acts 11:27-30

³⁶There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'). ³⁷He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; ²with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet.

³'Ananias,' Peter asked, 'why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!' ⁵Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. ⁶The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

⁷After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸Peter said to her, 'Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price.' And she said, 'Yes, that was the price.' ⁹Then Peter said to her, 'How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.'

¹⁰Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things. Acts 4: 36 - 5:11

Here are two completely contrasting passages. The first speaks again of the generosity of the members of the new community.

The second seems very hard and harsh. Ananias and Sapphira want to appear to be generous but in fact are not able to be as generous as others in the new Christian community. Unlike Barnabas, even though they choose to sell their land, they do not choose to give all of the proceeds to the community. They keep some for themselves. In itself this is fine - giving to the community is voluntary, something that people were doing in response to all that God had given to them. The issue is that they try to deceive the community by saying that they had given the whole amount to the common purse and had not done so. It is this deceit which really causes them difficulties, even if the punishment does seem harsh to us.

Implications for today

1. Share together the material that you have brought in about the people or charities to which you give or support in some way. (It might be the church or other types of charities that you support and the support might be financial but it can also be time and skills that you give.) Explain to other members of the group why you give to them.
2. Spend a few minutes reflecting upon how you decide what to give away or share. How do you use the possessions that you have? Turn to the person sitting next to you and share your reflections.
3. Think about (and you will not have to share this material) what you give to the groups you support. Is it time and money or just one or the other? Think about how much you give. Do you feel you are being generous or do you think that you could give more? Roughly what percentage of your income do you give away? What time do you give?

Without going into personal details share what you want to with other members of the group about the kinds of things you thought about and how you decide what you do with the resources that God has given to you.

4. Do you think that it might be possible for Christian communities today to more regularly share all that they have with each other so that everyone has all that they need? How might that be made to work? Are there ways in which your local Christian community can do more to share with each other and others so that everyone has what they need?
5. Ananias and Sapphira wanted things for themselves and they deceived the members of the early church. How do you respond to what they did? How does it make you feel? Do you feel more strongly about the fact that they keep some of the money or that they were deceitful? Share with the group how you feel and think together about what this can tell you about your life together as a church community.

Closing and prayer

Spend a few moments in silence reflecting on the passage and your discussions. In the silence offer your thoughts to God and invite God to help you to think more about how generous God is to us and how generous we are in return. Ask God to help you to be generous with everything that you have as God is generous to you.

Spend a few moments in silence reflecting on the passage and your discussions. In the silence offer your thoughts to God and invite God to help you to think more about your response to all that God has given to you as individuals and as a group.

Spend some time in prayer then draw the session to a close using the following prayer.

Pray together

*Generous God,
we thank you for all that you have given to us;
help us to respond to your call
with generosity and joy.
Give us your wisdom to see need,
that we might seek to live
lightly on this earth,
sharing your riches with those around us.
May we each live more simply
that others might simply live.*

Amen

For the next session it will be good if everyone can bring a story from a newspaper or the web, or someone they know, telling of people who have given generously or received generosity.



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Luke 24:13-35

God's holy gifts for
God's holy people

Acts 2: 42

Sharing

This session needs stories and pictures of people giving generously or receiving generosity.

Begin the session using the 'Hearts on Fire' prayer which can be found on page 4

Aim: To explore giving as a part of discipleship.

To begin: Last session the group thought about how the early church shared what they had with one another and about the consequences of lacking integrity or of dishonesty within the community. This session will focus on how we share what we have with those who are part of the wider Christian community and how this is part of our discipleship.

These brief verses speak of the offertory which we will think more about later:

*...I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; ²⁶for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. ²⁷They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things. **Romans 15: 25b-27***

What do these verses tell you about the link between spirituality and material possessions?

What Scripture has to say

The verses from Romans which we looked at above remind us all that God's love is for everyone and that everyone who becomes part of the Christian family gains responsibilities because they have done so.

Read the passage quietly or aloud:

⁸We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ²for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— ⁵and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, ⁶so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. ⁷Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. ⁸I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. ⁹For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. ¹⁰And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— ¹¹now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. ¹²For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. ¹³I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between ¹⁴your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. ¹⁵As it is written, ‘The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.’

⁹Now it is not necessary for me to write to you about the ministry to the saints, ²for I know your eagerness, which is the subject of my boasting about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year; and your zeal has stirred up most of them. ³But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you may not prove to have been empty in this case, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be; ⁴otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—in this undertaking. ⁵So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you, and arrange in advance for this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be ready as a voluntary gift and not as an extortion. ⁶The point

is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹As it is written, 'He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures for ever.' ¹⁰He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; ¹²for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. ¹³Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, ¹⁴while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. ¹⁵Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! 2 Corinthians 8. 1-15 & 9. 1-15

These verses are some of the most well known and most used when talking about stewardship of the resources which God has given to us. Here Paul is urging the early Church in Corinth to be as least as generous as the community of believers in Macedonia. Just like the widow in the passage from Luke 21 (see the Background Information for Session 2) the believers there were comparatively poor and yet they gave generously to the work of the church in Jerusalem. It seems that the church in Corinth was not being similarly generous and Paul was using all his best persuasive technique to convince them of their need to be generous because of God's generosity to them.

Implications for today

1. Consider together the cuttings or stories from the internet that you have gathered about people who have been given something or who have given something to others. Or, if you know of someone who has been the recipient of generosity or has been generous to others, tell their story.
How do the people who have given things to others seem to react and how do those who receive something react?
What do these stories tell you about the effects of generosity and being in receipt of acts of generosity? What kinds of emotions do they show?
2. In what ways might you be described as a 'cheerful giver'? In what ways might you ever be described as a 'grumpy giver'?
3. How does reading this Bible passage make you feel? What does it tell you about God? When you think about what God has done for his people, is there one particular image or thought in these verses which sums that up for you? If so what is it?
4. What does this passage say to you about how all those who are disciples of Jesus should respond to the call to give to the work of the household of faith?
5. Thinking back to the last session how do you decide what to give? How do you decide what you give to God's work through the Church? Be honest with yourself (you will not be asked to share this answer unless you wish to), do you think that you could be described as a generous or sacrificial giver? What would have to happen to change this?

Closing and prayer

Spend a few moments in silence reflecting on the passage and your discussions. In the silence offer your thoughts to God and invite God to help you to think more about everything that God has given for you and for those around you. Give thanks to God for all the riches that you have. Think about what you are able to offer to God as a thanks offering.

Spend some time in prayer then draw the session to a close using the following prayer:

*God of grace and love,
you gave your Son that we might live.
Help us to respond to your grace and call
by reflecting your generosity in the way in which we live.
Give us your Spirit that our lives might overflow
with the desire to serve others and share your abundance with them.
Amen*



**Hearts
on Fire**

The Diocese of Southwark

Loving God
Walking with Jesus
Led by the Spirit

Luke 24:13-35

Sunrise over the Sea of Galilee

John 4: 14

What does it mean for us?

Have your bowl or small basket ready for people to drop in their written thoughts about generosity.

For the final time begin the session using the 'Hearts on Fire' prayer which can be found on page 4

Aim: To explore how we should respond to God's love and generosity to us as individuals and as a Christian community.

To begin: Last session the group thought about responses to giving and being given things, and about whether or not we consider ourselves to be generous or cheerful givers.

Take a look at these few, familiar, verses:

Then he told them a parable: 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?"

¹⁸Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.

¹⁹And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." ²⁰But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" ²¹So it is with those who store up treasures

*for themselves but are not rich towards God.' **Luke 12:16-21***

It is unlikely that many of us today have barns full of crops which signify our wealth. But, as we have seen before, no matter how much or how little we have, we will all have treasures which we store up here on earth. Think about the material that you have looked at in these sessions and these verses; what do you think it means to be 'rich towards God'. Spend a few moments thinking about what your earthly treasures are. Do you think that your treasures might be stopping you being 'rich towards God'? If so, in what ways? If not, how have you managed to guard against this? Share what you can of what you have been thinking with

your neighbour. Is there anything that you might learn from your neighbour's experience that would enable you to let go of the treasure that you store?

What Scripture has to say

The parables that Jesus told are probably very familiar to all of us; but they are never less than very challenging.

This is another familiar parable.

Then someone came to him and said, 'Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?' ¹⁷And he said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.' ¹⁸He said to him, 'Which ones?' And Jesus said, 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; ¹⁹Honour your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' ²⁰The young man said to him, 'I have kept all these; what do I still lack?' ²¹Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' ²²When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

*Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' ²⁵When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, 'Then who can be saved?' ²⁶But Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.' **Matthew 19:16-26***

All the way through the story of the Jewish people, they thought that salvation would come in the form of a political liberation and that they could show that they were God's people by keeping the Ten Commandments and living by the laws specified by tradition.

Suddenly that just wasn't enough.

Implications for today

1. How do you think you might have felt if you had been the rich young man? What does this parable say to you about having possessions?
2. Many people do not think of themselves as rich but, even the poorest here in Britain, have more than people in some other parts of the world. How realistic do you think it is today to 'sell your possessions and give the money to the poor'? If that doesn't seem altogether practical, what do you think the equivalent of this might be for you in today's world?
3. In this parable Jesus makes it clear that simply keeping the commandments is not enough. He says to the rich young man, 'If you wish to be perfect...', it is hard to imagine that anyone will ever be perfect in God's eyes so what do you think that God means here and what do you think he expects the rich young man to do?
4. Remembering that we are all comparatively rich, how can those who are rich be Jesus' followers today? What can they do to inherit eternal life? Will you do it? How? When?

Closing and prayer

Think back over the sessions that you have shared together. What have you learned about God's generosity and your response to it. Try to sum it up in a few words. Write them down on a piece of paper. Fold the paper and place it in a bowl or basket in the middle of the group with the slips of paper from other members of the group. Add the bowl to the offertory at the next Sunday service so that it is taken to the altar.

Spend a few moments in silence reflecting on what you have learned and asking God to help you to put what you have learned into action. Commit yourself to remembering and acting upon what you have learned

Prayer together as a group that you may remember things that you have learned together and continue to be generous because of God's generosity to us.

*Generous God,
we thank you that we have so much.
Help us to share all that we have with others.
Give us the courage to take risks in being generous,
that we know the joy of giving
and of sharing your love with those around us,
without thought to ourselves.
We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ who gave all he was and had for us.*

Amen

Then close the sessions by saying the grace together:

*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all evermore.*

Amen

Background Information

SESSION 1

There is so much to think about when considering the many references to money and possessions in the Old Testament. There is not time to look at them all in the group meetings.

Try to look at some of the references before the group meets in order to aid your own thinking about stewardship matters as there is unlikely to be time in the group to explore them.

Sometimes it is almost as if the different Old Testament texts are arguing with each other about certain concepts and ideas. Contrast Proverbs 3:1-2 and 9-10 and Ecclesiastes 2:18-23. Part of the argument of the Book of Job is about whether wealth and prosperity are a sign of God's blessing. Two of Job's 'comforters' offer a traditional understanding of a doctrine of prosperity - see for instance their arguments at Job 5: 17-27 and Job 8: 107. One of the points of the story is that Job's experience does not match their conventional reasoning.

Exodus chapters 19 and 20 make it clear that God's grace precedes the Law. In Chapter 19 God recounts to Moses what he has done for the Israelites,

'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.' (Verses 4-5)

Then when Moses is on Mount Sinai God gives him the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20: 1-17) in order to help the Israelites live as God's covenanted and chosen people.

We have seen in the story of the Israelites' escape from Egypt that God is at work for his people. It is not until they have been in the wilderness for some time (and it has become evident that they find it hard, if not impossible, to live as God's chosen people) that God gives Moses the Ten Commandments to help them to know how to live in response to God's grace.

As the history of the Old Testament unfolds life changes for the Israelites and they move from being a nomadic to a settled people. So by the time that the events in Chronicles unfold they are settled in Jerusalem and have a King who is planning the building of a Temple.

SESSION 2

Money was much less important in the Old Testament because society was much less based on money than on the ownership of land and the exchange of goods. But the story of Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings 21 tells of how Ahab became so obsessed with owning the land that Naboth possessed that he brought destruction down on his family. Naboth's land, which was a gift from God (1 Kings 21: 1-3) and had been in his family for generations, became a commodity in Ahab's eyes and when Naboth refused to see it in this way the consequences were dramatic.

It is hardly surprising therefore that Jesus is very aware of how the desire for possessions can affect the way in which people live and how they consider the needs of others. One of the passages with which you might be familiar which tells us about Jesus' attitude to money is in these verses:

He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; ²he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. ³He said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; ⁴for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.' **Luke 21:1-4**

People are so familiar with this passage that the really shocking words in the first verse are often missed. Jesus was watching what people were putting into the collection. He saw how much people were giving and knew if they were generous or not. In most of our churches where there is a collection during the service people avert their eyes so that they do not see what others give if it is not in an envelope. Here in the Church of England it always seems to be difficult to talk about money, but there was Jesus watching people - that's how important he thought it was to teach those who followed him about generosity.

SESSION 3

The early chapters of the New Testament contain the gospel stories about Jesus' earthly ministry, and the rest of the New Testament tells us about how the early church develops. Finally, the Revelation of John speaks to Jesus' followers about the end time. In Chapters 17 & 18 Revelation can also be seen to provide a critique of world economic systems and can help Christians today to think about what happens when wealth and materialism compromise Christian life.

The Acts of the Apostles tells us a lot about the way in which the early Christian church lived and how they worked out issues in their new life together. In their life together some of the members of the church work and share what they have. Chapter 16: 14-15 contains the story of Lydia, the purple cloth maker, who was clearly a powerful woman in the community. She hears Paul and the apostles and is baptised. She invites Jesus to stay and brings her whole household to faith and they become part of the community. Although she is mentioned only very briefly in Paul's writings he makes it clear that he, too, works as he travels to spread the Gospel (Acts 18:3).

Like Lydia and Paul, we are all called to support ourselves and our families and give to the Christian community in the best way we can; that is part

of how Christians should live. What the New Testament tells us is that we should use the resources that we are given to further the work of God's kingdom. What we need to do is prayerfully consider how God wants us to use what we earn, what we need to live and how we should use those resources for our own family and for others.

SESSION 4

So much of the Bible tells us about how we should live and gives us pointers for the whole of our lives. A great deal of the Old and of the New Testaments is about care for the community to which the people of faith belong. We see in the Old Testament, especially as a part of the outworking of the Exodus, that God tries to help the Israelites to remain separate from those around them, or at least not to be caught up with their gods and way of living. Much of the story of the early church too is about caring for those who are part of the new group of believers. To begin with this means the Jews who have become Jesus' followers. But, as the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 29-37) will have reminded those who heard Jesus, nothing is absolutely clear cut and straightforward but we are all called to care for our neighbours whoever they may be.

SESSION 5

Jesus' parables were often difficult. Sometimes it seems hard to get to understand the exact meaning of the story; other times the meaning seems all too clear but is rather uncomfortable. No matter how the parables are looked at, Jesus seems to be demanding a great deal of his followers and would be followers. Just as he demanded that the first disciples gave up fishing and became instead fishers of men, so Jesus expected those who followed him to turn their whole lives over to his

service. Following Jesus ought to be a life changing experience but for so many people it doesn't ever quite reach that point.

It should have been no surprise to the early disciples who came from the Jewish community because God had repeatedly turned the lives of his chosen people upside down and demanded that they moved from one place to another and lived in a certain way. But somehow human nature always seems to want to find the easy option.

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God's generosity: our response

Bible studies on Stewardship from the Diocese of Southwark

These Bible studies are designed to help small groups to consider God's generosity and how as God's people we should respond to this generosity in the way we live our lives and make important choices.

Each session lasts for about an hour and a half and offers a range of different ways to engage with Scripture and to help participants to apply their learning to their lives.

Bishop Christopher says: *'I hope that parishes and small groups throughout the Diocese will use this comprehensive new material fully. With a clear focus on God's generosity it will be especially useful in considering how best to share the Good News of God in Jesus Christ with those around us and to use in his service all that God has given us.'*

Southwark Diocese has placed a great deal of emphasis on the stewardship of God's resources. These well produced studies, based on stewardship teaching which has been used extensively within the Diocese, are timely as we embrace the new Parish Support Fund and the principles on which it has been developed. I trust that God will richly bless you in all your thinking and praying together as you use these resources.'

Further copies of the studies can be obtained from Communications and Resources, Trinity House, 4 Chapel Court, Borough High Street, London SE1 1HW. 020 7939 9400.

They can also be downloaded from the Diocesan website.



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