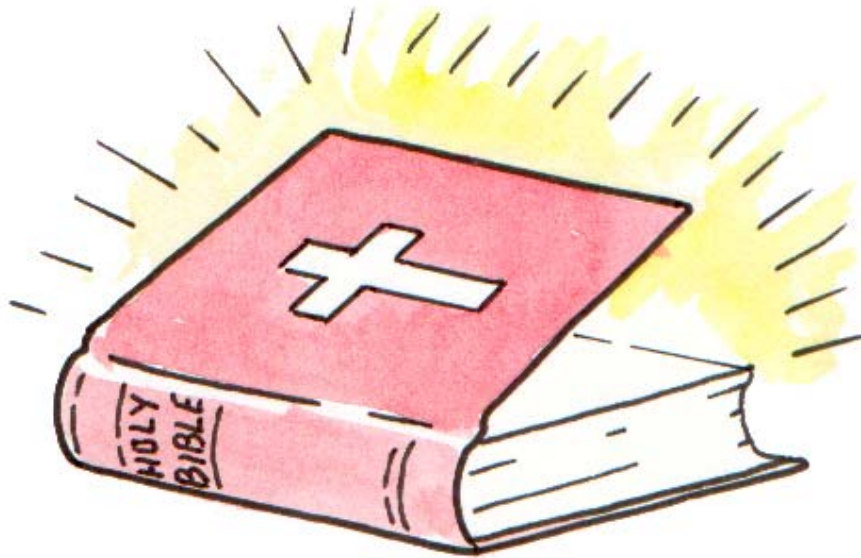


EXPLORING STEWARDSHIP THEMES IN THE PAGES OF THE BIBLE



Introduction

What is Christian giving? The Bible helps us to answer this question. The notes below point us to passages in the Bible which reflect on various aspects of giving. After each group of passages some questions are asked to help us relate these passages to our lives and the life of the Church today.

The best place to begin any Bible study is prayer – seeking to understand what God is saying to us through the words of the Bible:

*God, we come to the pages of the Bible to hear from you, to hear your word for us.
As we explore the words of the Bible and listen to the words of those around us,
may your Spirit guide our thinking and our speaking
and lead us in your way of loving and giving; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

You will probably be exploring the passages about time, talent and money at different times. It will be useful to use the opening section 'Gifts from God' at the beginning of each series of studies.

You may wish (or need) to adapt this material to suit the particular circumstances of your congregation.

I hope that you find this selection of biblical passages both enlightening and challenging, and invite feedback after you have used the material.

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Gifts from God

Before we consider what the Bible expects from us, it is important to remind ourselves of all that God has given, and continues to give to us. Our God is a giving God. Our God is a generous God. Our God blesses us in so many ways as we live our lives.

Genesis 1: 1-31

The first chapter of the Bible, which may be an understanding of creation written down as late as the 5th century BC, tells of the creation of the world. People have read this chapter and argued about it. They have had difficulty reconciling this six day account of creation with modern scientific understanding of how the world came to be. The essential truth of this chapter is not the detailed account, but the fact that life comes from God – life is a gift from God.

Hosea 11: 1-11 and Lamentations 3: 22-23

The Old Testament is the story of God and the peoples of Israel and Judah. It tells of Israel and Judah turning away from God, disobeying God's rules for living, and living as if they have no need of God. Yet God continues to love his people – to care for Israel and Judah. To this day God continues to love us and care for us, even when we show little or no love for God in return. Constant love is a gift from God. The passage from Lamentations, which comes from the period after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587BC, inspired two well known Christian hymns – *New every morning is thy love* and *Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father* – which remind us of God's continuing and constant love.

Romans 6: 1-11 and John 10: 1-18

The New Testament tells of God coming to the world in the person of Jesus to redeem and re-create. The story of Jesus is the story of death and resurrection. The New Testament is about God's gift of new life in Christ.

In the 6th chapter of Paul's letter to the Church at Rome, baptism is seen to be the sign of sharing in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Adopting the Christian faith and the Christian life is putting life without God to death and taking on new life with God, which Jesus offers to all who will listen to his teaching and respond to his call. In the 10th chapter of John's gospel this new life (or life as God intended it to be from the beginning) is described as 'fullness of life'.

Acts 2: 1-21 and Galatians 5: 16-26

The 2nd chapter of the Acts of the Apostles tells of the coming of God's Spirit on the day of Pentecost. The 5th chapter of Paul's letter to the Church in Galatia lists the fruits of the Spirit – fruits which become visible in our lives if we allow God's Spirit to live in us and direct what we shall be. God's gift of his Spirit provides us with strength and direction for our lives.

When reading the above passages, consider the generosity of God and the extent of his love for all his people.

Giving Time

Genesis 1: 14-19 and Psalm 90: 1-17

The fourth part of the creation story in Genesis tells of God creating light and dark, day and night – time. Psalm 90 contains many words about God's anger with the people, but it begins with the affirmation that God is eternal and then reflects on the limited period of time that may be described as 'the time of our life'.

In what ways do we treat time as a gift from God?

In what ways do we fail to treat time as a gift from God?

In what circumstances does time become a very special gift?

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8

Time is usually regarded as minutes, hours, days, months, years. The 3rd chapter of Ecclesiastes introduces us to a different understanding of time. This understanding of time reflects on the 'right' or 'appropriate' time for particular activities and actions.

What does this passage teach us about living a balanced life?

How would we re-write this passage to reflect our lives today?

Exodus 20: 8-11 and Leviticus 23: 1-8

The first five books of the Old Testament are the books of the Law – books which spell out in detail how God's people, Israel, were expected to live. The story of creation talks of God making his world in six parts or six days : the seventh part or seventh day was God resting after the completion of his task. Time for rest, or sabbath, is a very important part of the balanced life for God's people. It is highlighted in the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and as the first of the festivals in Leviticus 23.

How important is rest or sabbath in our lives today?

How do we create rest or sabbath in the 24-7 world of today?

In what ways do rules and regulations detract from a healthy attitude to rest or sabbath?

Luke 4: 16-21 and Acts 3: 1-10

Time for worship is the context of these two passages. Worship is an opportunity to be close to God, to praise God, to be fed by God.

Is worship still the most important part of the life of the Church?

In what ways should the Church be offering more opportunities for worship?

Haggai 1: 1-6 and Ephesians 5: 15-20

The opening words of the prophecy of Haggai criticise the Jews for failing to begin the rebuilding of the temple. They have made the excuse that it is not the 'right' time. Paul's

guidance in the 5th chapter of his letter to the Church at Ephesus exhorts the Christians there to make the most of the time they have been given.

In what ways do we waste God's gift of time?

When have we used the excuse 'not the right time' for not doing something – in the Church and elsewhere?

Matthew 10: 34-39 and Luke 9: 57-62

A great deal is said today about the importance of family and spending 'quality time' with family. In the gospels Jesus says some very harsh things about family, putting himself before family as far as Christian discipleship is concerned.

How do we react to Jesus' words in these two passages?

How often do we use family commitments as a reason for not doing something for God?

Luke 10: 38-42

Jesus' visit to the home of Martha and Mary is one of the most revealing episodes in the gospels. Jesus called people to action, but he criticises the 'busy-ness' of Martha and praises what might appear to be laziness on the part of Mary. He praises Mary for stopping what she is doing and focusing on him and his words.

In what ways is time with God yet another activity in our busy lives?

How difficult is it for us to stop doing things and be completely receptive to God?

Why would it be helpful to advertise worship as 'time out' from the 'busy-ness' of our lives?

SCROLL DOWN FOR 'GIVING TALENT'

Giving Talent

Psalm 139: 1-24 and Luke 12: 4-7

These two passages point to the importance of each individual. God does not see us as part of a great crowd of people, but as individual men, women and children, each with his/her own characteristics. God knows each of us by name. God knows our strengths and our weaknesses.

In what ways am I similar to other members of my family?

In what ways am I different from other members of my family?

Genesis 25: 19-28; 37: 1-11 and 41: 1-36

Before we can consider giving of our talent, we have to recognise what our particular skills and strengths are, and also recognise the skills and strengths we do not possess. The twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah, Esau and Jacob, had very different characteristics and were talented in different ways. Joseph comes to the notice of Pharaoh because he is able to interpret dreams. His earlier relationship with his older brothers points to certain weaknesses in Joseph.

What skills and strengths do I have?

What skills and strengths do I not have?

Are my skills and strengths people-orientated or more of a practical nature?

Exodus 3: 1-12; 1 Samuel 16: 1-13; Jeremiah 1: 4-10 and Amos 7: 10-17

These passages from the Old Testament all deal with the call of God to particular people – Moses, David, Jeremiah and Amos. God's choice was not always the obvious choice. In three of the passages the recipient of God's call argues that he is not the right person for the job : he does not have the appropriate strengths and skills. Yet God sticks to his original plan.

To what extent do we believe that God can help us recognise strengths and skills which may have lain dormant within us for many years?

To what extent do we believe that God's Spirit can work in us to produce new talents?

Is there a danger in the Church that the minister and church leaders may invite people with inappropriate talents to do particular tasks?

Matthew 25: 14-30 and Luke 19: 11-27

This parable of Jesus, recorded in both Matthew's gospel and Luke's gospel, has traditionally been called the Parable of the Talents. In Matthew it is placed alongside the Parable of the Bridesmaids and the Parable of the Final Judgement : all three are concerned with how we shall account for our lives.

What is our initial reaction to this parable?

What is Jesus saying about wasting God-given talent?

What are the benefits of using God-given talent to the full?

Acts 1: 12-26 and 6: 1-7

The first of these passages from the Acts of the Apostles deals with the process of electing a disciple to take the place of Judas Iscariot as one of the twelve apostles. The second passage acknowledges that the twelve apostles could not do everything and tells of the appointment of seven deacons to be responsible for the practical service of the Church.

How important is prayer in recognising the person with the appropriate talent?

How do we relate the importance of prayer to a person's CV?

What are the dangers for the Church if a small number of people try to do too many things?

Romans 12: 3-8 and 1 Corinthians 12: 1-31

In these two passages Paul reflects on the uniqueness of each individual life and portrays the Church as a community of people with different but complementary talents. He uses the helpful imagery of the human body, with its different but complementary parts, to describe the Church. To fulfil its God-given purpose of sharing the gospel through worship, nurture, fellowship, outreach and service, the Church needs the variety of gifts which the people have to offer. Paul emphasises the fact that these gifts are gifts of the Spirit – gifts from God.

How significant is Paul's emphasis that our talents are gifts of the Spirit – gifts from God?

What talents are essential for the work of the Church?

What happens if certain talents are missing?

In what ways can neighbouring congregations share talents?

What talents can I offer for the work of the Church?

SCROLL DOWN FOR 'GIVING MONEY'

Giving Money

Genesis 1: 26-31

Genesis 1 presents us with a vivid picture of God creating the world. In this study we are not concerned with how God created the world or with the six days timetable for bringing the world into being. We are concerned with God the creator : we are concerned with God the giver of life.

The final part of Genesis 1 (verses 26 to 31) deals with the creation of humankind, men and women. It speaks of the power God gave to men and women – power over all other living creatures. Before speaking of this power we are told that men and women are created “in the image of God”. What does this phrase mean?

One interpretation of this phrase is to say that men and women are created to reflect or mirror, in some small way, the nature of God – the nature of a loving, giving God.

What human characteristics are essential if we are to reflect the nature of God?

In what ways are we less than the people God intends us to be if we are unwilling to give?

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11

The first part of Deuteronomy 26 is often read at harvest thanksgiving services. It speaks of the harvest in Israel and instructs the farmer to bring some of the first fruits of the harvest to the priest as an offering to God.

In this passage there is great emphasis on the land of Israel as a gift from God (verses 1 to 3). When the priest has received the offering of first fruits, there is a form of words to be spoken by the farmer (verses 5 to 10). These words recall specific events in the history of Israel – the journey to slavery in Egypt and God leading them out of slavery to freedom in their own land.

The farmer’s offering was a response to gifts from God. The passage also emphasises that this offering was to come from the first fruits of the harvest (verses 2 and 10).

The harvest festival was a community celebration of God’s gifts (verse 11). This community celebration was a time for sharing God’s gifts with everyone. The Levites and foreigners are specifically mentioned in this passage because they had no land to produce a harvest.

In what ways is our offering a response to the gifts of God?

What is a Christian equivalent of the form of words spoken by the Israelites in Deuteronomy 26: 5-10?

How do we understand ‘first fruits’ in relation to our incomes today?

What does this passage teach us about our own priorities?

**Genesis 14: 17-20 and 28:18-22; Leviticus 27: 30-32;
Numbers 18 v.21-29; Deuteronomy 14 v.22-29; Nehemiah 10 v.35-39**

The two passages from Genesis point to two examples of tithing (giving a tenth) before this practice was enshrined in the Law.

The other four passages refer to the practice of giving a tithe of the harvest as an obligation under the Law.

The tithe was taken to the priest as an offering to God. It was used to provide for the Levites (or priests), who had no land to produce a harvest for themselves. Giving the tithe maintained the house of the Lord and the worship of God.

There was also provision in the Law for an additional tithe every third year – to support widows, orphans and foreigners who had no land to support themselves.

If the distance was too great to transport the actual crops, an equivalent gift of money could be substituted.

There is very little mention of tithes in the New Testament (Matthew 23: 23; Luke 11: 42 and 18: 9-14). The first two verses refer to an occasion when Jesus commended the Pharisees for remembering to obey the Law on tithing, but this praise is faint compared with his criticism of their failure in more important matters – justice, mercy and faith. In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, Jesus did not praise the Pharisee, who remembered to tithe. His self-righteousness did not compare favourably with the penitence of the tax collector.

Why is it important that giving should be related to income?

Discuss whether it is easier for a rich person or a poor person to tithe.

In what ways does a willingness to give bring us nearer to God?

In what ways does a reluctance to give cut us off from God?

In view of Jesus' few comments about tithing, discuss whether it is right or wrong to think of tithing as the Christian model for giving?

Is tithing a helpful model when we are considering the gifts we intend to make in our Wills?

Leviticus 19: 9-10; Ruth 2: 1-7; Luke 12: 13-21 and 19: 1-10; Acts 2: 37-47

The Law of Moses made provision for the poor. When the harvest of field or vineyard was gathered, some of the crop was left for the poor to gather. An example of this happening is found in the story of Ruth when the young widow went into the fields belonging to Boaz – to glean what was left after the main harvest had been gathered.

Sharing prosperity with the poor is enshrined in the Law.

The theme of sharing the harvest is found in the New Testament in Jesus' parable of the Rich Fool. Jesus told a story of a farmer who enjoyed a very good harvest. It was so good that he had nowhere to store all his grain. He decided to build new, larger barns to provide the necessary storage.

Jesus condemned this farmer because he thought only of his own material wealth. If he had been willing to share some of his abundance with those who were less fortunate, he would have been rich in the sight of God.

The story of Jesus' meeting with Zacchaeus, the tax collector, is the story of a man who was greedy. He used his position to exploit people by collecting more taxes than he was supposed to collect. He kept the surplus taxes for himself.

The people of Jericho were shocked when Jesus announced that he wanted to visit Zacchaeus and eat with him. However, this encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus led the tax collector to repay fourfold those whom he had defrauded and to give half of all that he possessed to the poor. The grace of God in Jesus led to a willingness to share.

The passage from Acts presents a picture of life in the early days of the Church. The Holy Spirit had come on the Day of Pentecost and breathed life from God into all who were followers of Jesus.

One of the effects of the coming of the Holy Spirit was the formation of community among the believers. Stimulated by prayer, the apostles' teaching and the fellowship of eating together, the believers were led to share all their material possessions.

Does God coming to us in the person of Jesus and sharing our human life to the full lead to a willingness to share on our part?

How does our giving to God enable the sharing of the gospel – locally, nationally, globally?

When we consider the ways in which our Church spends money, in what ways can the Church of Scotland be called a 'Sharing Church'?

Malachi 3: 8-12 and Acts 4: 32 to 5: 11

The passage from Malachi criticises the people for failing to obey the Law by withholding some of their tithe. This is described as robbing God.

The first part of the passage from Acts is similar to the passage mentioned above (Acts 2: 37-47) : it speaks of the early days of the Church when the community of believers lived in very close fellowship. One of the characteristics of this was the relinquishing of private property and all material possessions belonging to the community. We are told that Joseph sold a field and contributed the proceeds to the 'common pot'.

This is contrasted with the second part of the passage – the story of Ananias and Sapphira. They sold some property and contributed some of the proceeds to the 'common pot', but they withheld the rest of the money. This results in strong criticism from Peter. Here there are echoes of 'robbing God' in Malachi, but it goes further as the full proceeds are more than the full tithe.

Why is it important that our giving reflects our total commitment to God?

In what ways do we withhold things from God in our lives today?

How might we change this?

Luke 18: 18-25 and 21: 1-4; 2 Corinthians 8: 1-15

Here we encounter one of the hard sayings of Jesus (Luke 18: 22). The rich man was obviously a good man : he had obeyed God's rules in the way he had lived his life. Jesus wanted more. Only if he sold all his possessions and gave the money to the poor would he satisfy Jesus. Jesus did not say this to everyone he met, but he detected in this rich man a dependence on material wealth which was distancing him from God. The only way forward was sacrificial giving : this would enable the 'no longer rich' man to place his trust in God.

The second passage tells of Jesus and his disciples watching people presenting their gifts at the Temple treasury. The giving of rich people is compared with that of a poor widow. The rich people gave more money, but Jesus said that the poor widow was giving the most. The two small copper coins were all that the poor widow had. She kept nothing back. Her giving was truly sacrificial giving.

Paul encourages generous giving from the Christians at Corinth by holding before them the example of the Christians in Macedonia. The Macedonian Christians were not wealthy, yet they gave generously (verse 2). Their giving was not only generous but sacrificial (verse 3) because they wanted to contribute as much as possible to support the very poor Christians in Jerusalem.

Paul also encourages the Christians at Corinth to give generously by referring to the supreme example of generosity and sacrifice (verse 9) – the giving of God in the person of Jesus.

How do we measure generosity?

In what ways do we make sacrifices in the course of our daily lives?

Why are we willing to make these sacrifices?

Should our giving to God to support the worship, mission and service of the Church go beyond generosity to sacrifice?

In what ways does our level of giving to God relate to our level of trust in God?