

*Zebedee Commitment: A study for Personal
Stewardship Growth
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Lesson Five: Stewardship of our Treasures

James and John experienced a dramatic life change from being fishermen at the Sea of Galilee to being leaders in the early church. We don't have many records of their personal experiences after the resurrection, but we can see evidence of their commitment poured out into the world through the experiences of the early church of which they were leaders.

Read Acts 2: 44-47 and Acts 6: 1-6.

The scriptural record is somewhat idealized, but it is clear that those who committed themselves to the Risen Christ made a dramatic break with the norms of their society. Early Christians were incredibly generous. Those who suffered in their communities often owed their lives to the generosity of those who proclaimed Jesus Christ. Non-Biblical, first century sources report that Pagans alternately mocked and admired the generosity that the early church displayed.

In Rome the generosity of Christians in the second century was well documented. More than 1500 widows, some of the most marginalized in that society, were being cared for. Hundreds of other poor were also receiving aid, including the families of prisoners who were left without any means of support when the male of the house was sent to work the salt mines for the benefit of Rome. A full-time administrator assisted the many deacons and deaconesses to manage a program that in today's world would cost between 25 and 40 million dollars annually! (1)

Even after Christianity was endorsed by Constantine in the fourth century, and the church could legally own property (supported by the donations of Christians), at least one fourth of the revenue of the church went to caring for the poor and sick. Another fourth went to caring for Christians who came from all over the world to visit in Rome. (2)

What do you think motivated early Christians to give so generously that even their pagan neighbors marveled?

In this study we will consider 3 major components of participating with God through our financial giving. These components are:

- 1.) Walking as partner with Christ in ministry to a world in need.
- 2.) Giving ourselves, (our heart, soul, mind, and strength) to God as a means of knowing God's presence and love in our own lives.
- 3.) Learning to trust that God will carry us regardless of the difficulties of life.

Walking as Partner with Christ

Consider the following story about James and John. This is NOT a story found in scriptures, but it might have happened.

Jesus was walking between 2 villages with his disciples when they met a small group coming from the other way. Walking in the middle of the group was a teen aged girl who wept silently. Jesus saw that they were headed to the small well just ahead. Along with his disciples, he followed them. When they had drank and were watering the animals, Jesus asked about the girl. He learned that she had just been given to this trader in payment of a debt that her father could not repay in any other way. The girl, aware that she was the topic of Jesus' interest, said, "Please, Sir, can you help me? I was to be married next month, and now I am being taken away." Jesus asked how much money the father owed, and when he was told 20 denari, he turned to the disciples and asked them to share from the money they had been given in the last town. Matthew, the tax collector, reminded them that this was the money that they would need to buy food and supplies in the next days. Jesus assured them that God would take care of them. When he looked again James and John were already heading for the box in which the group's money was kept. Jesus and the disciples bought this girl's freedom, and proclaiming the Kingdom of God, sent her home to her family.

How does this story reflect the type of messiah that Jesus was in our scripture?

How does the need of the disciples for food compare with our need for financial resources?

If this had actually happened, how do you think the disciples might have felt about purchasing the girl's freedom?

How are we called to do similar things in our world?

We are the body of Christ

We have all heard the church described as the Body of Christ. We have even reviewed Paul's offering of this metaphor in **1 Corinthians 12: 12,13**. Please review that scripture.

We all know that the church needs all members in order to do the ministry given by Christ. In looking at the metaphor further, though, we note that muscles and nerves, feet, hands or mouths do not function independently. Constant connection, information and impulses are sent from the body's main-frame computer—the head. If Christ is our head, and if we want to be more connected to Christ's peace, love, wisdom and goodness, doesn't it makes sense that we need to be more a part of the body that is involved in what Christ is doing in our world?

Name 4 areas of need that you believe Christ is concerned with in our world.

How can you or our church be involved in these areas of concern?

Can our finances make a difference? And how can we find ways to connect the giving of our dollars and cents with the concept of being Christ's hands and feet to care for people in need?

To give ourselves to ministry with Christ is to give our heart, soul, mind and strength to God.

How often we want to crawl into God's lap and find ourselves enveloped in God's care! We imagine the serenity and peace we would find there. We wish for the wisdom to make better choices and to be more loving with our family and friends. We look with envy upon the joy we see in other Christian's lives. We want that, too!

Compare Mark 12: 28-31 and Matthew 6: 19-21

In the Mark passage we are instructed to love God with our heart, soul, mind and strength. Why do you think that Mark left out money? Is it possible that he assumes that our material wealth and resources are already included under the other listings? How might our money be a part of our heart? Our soul? Our mind? Our strength?

Do you think it is possible to love God with our heart, soul, mind and strength and NOT participate in that love with our financial gifts?

How does the Matthew text inform that question?

In Presbyterian Worship services the offering is usually after the scriptures are read and the sermon is offered. The reception of the offering falls in the section entitled, "We Respond to God's Word." In a very real way, the offering is how we commit ourselves (our heart, soul, mind and strength) to Christ in grateful and loving response to the good news we have received through the Word. If we give only the minimum amount that we can, then we are offering God only the left over corners of our heart and our lives. If we offer an amount that represents a significant piece of ourselves, then we figuratively crawl into the offering plate, giving our heart, soul, mind and strength to God.

What are your thoughts about this concept of our Sunday morning offering?

The Parable of the Rich Fool

Read the Parable which Jesus taught from **Luke 12: 15-21**.

What is this man's goal in building a barn to store his crop?

What other solutions might this man have found for his problem?

Count the number of times that the word "I" is used in this parable. What does that tell us about the mindset of the rich man?

Do you think it is possible to say to one's soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." And still love God with all one's heart, soul, mind and strength?

Stewardship of our Resources and Trusting In God

The parable of the Rich Fool points to another problem with giving in our modern world. We have very real needs for housing, food, health care, education, etc. This man was seeking security and well-being. Money, more than most other commodities, represents security and well-being in our world. If we give it all, we won't be able to pay the bills! While Jesus invited the rich young man to sell everything and give the money to the poor in order to follow him (**Matthew 19: 16-22**), we note that he also invited the young man to be a part of the band of disciples who were cared for as they followed along with Jesus. This man would be cared for by the group if he had chosen to accept Jesus' invitation. In today's world we live in more individualized settings.

There is a line that modern Christians walk. Falling off one side is the expectation that someone will care for us such that we don't really need to work or make plans. Falling off the other side is the idea that we must be prepared for any eventuality that might arise. This means constantly amassing money and resources to make sure we have "enough". Responsible Christians walk between those two extremes by working to meet their own needs and make reasonable plans for emergency and retirement while also giving themselves to God, trusting that God will provide for the extremes. While few (if any) would suggest that having a job and working hard to pay one's own bills or making plans to care for retirement is inappropriate, the question becomes "when have we done what we can do for ourselves, and when do we need to turn ourselves over to God's care?"

How can we trust that God knows what we need and can help us to meet our needs?

Can you name a time when you didn't know how you were going to find the money to pay a significant bill, but God provided?

How did your faith life grow as you recognized that God had loved you enough to help meet your needs?

Being good stewards of what God has given us means that we give thanks to God for our abilities, our jobs, our paycheck and our ability to use that money in Christ's ministry.

Being good stewards also invites us to love God with all of ourselves (including the gifts which God has given) in order to participate with God as the body of Christ.

Talk with a partner about your giving patterns and about how you find joy and meaning as you feel yourself a part of Christ's body as you act as the hand or feet or mouth in Christ's ministry of healing.

You will be receiving your pledge cards by mail next week. You will have an opportunity to commit yourself to Christ and to the ministry of this church by offering your time and talents as well as your financial gifts.

Thank you for participating in this series of Bible Studies. Please fill out an evaluation form so the study can be strengthened and improved.

Pray: Thank you God for the money you have given us. Help us to see it as one more way you care for us and invite us to be a partner with you in the care of your world. Help our church to grow in faithfulness as more and more people see the joy of offering themselves to God in this way, and help us to grow in vitality and excitement as we find tremendous joy in being a part of your hope for our world. Amen.

End Notes -- Lesson Five: Stewardship of our Treasures

1. Stewardship Education: Congregational Ministries Division of the Presbyterian Church USA. "Covenants of Stewardship," Session Five. Page 27

2. Ibid. Page 27.