



Living for Giving: A Wesleyan View of Stewardship

Including “Creating a More Generous Church”
a Stewardship Plenary from the 2017 Arkansas Annual Conference
presented by the Rev. Dr. J. Clif Christopher, President, Horizons Stewardship Co.

With permission revised and published by the Arkansas Conference Board of Discipleship for use in the Arkansas Conference of the United Methodist Church, 2017.

Originally published by the Stewardship of Giving Task Force of the Western NC Conference of The United Methodist Church and the United Methodist Foundation of Western NC, Inc. 2007. Session Guides by Mark Barden Graphic Design by Marty Folsom

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Welcome to Living for Giving: a Wesleyan View of Stewardship

Dear Vital Disciples of Jesus Christ,

I want to commend to you this six-session Bible study entitled *Living for Giving – A Wesleyan View of Stewardship* as an excellent course of study for United Methodist churches or small groups interested in creating vital disciples who engage in personal stewardship in response to God’s abundance.

Using the video links provided in each session and this workbook, I believe Adult Sunday school classes and small groups will discover biblical and theological inspiration to enhance their practice of stewardship. You will expand your view of stewardship as a gift from God, a spiritual discipline and a means of God’s grace. An understanding of stewardship in this light produces the joy through giving that God intends for each of us.

Through this study, you’ll learn that personal stewardship is a spiritual discipline and way of living in response to God’s abundant generosity. This study draws on insights from our Wesleyan tradition to address many dimensions of stewardship and challenges you to prayerfully consider the implications on your life as a vital disciple of Jesus Christ.

Each session will give you a chance to unpack the scriptures, to discuss the material, and to reflect on how you will answer God’s call to be a vital disciple. As you encounter God in new ways throughout the study, I hope you will experience the joy about which Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 9:7, “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough, you may share abundantly in every good work.”



In His Name,

Bishop Gary E. Mueller

Arkansas Conference Trajectory

To create vital congregations that make disciples of Jesus Christ,
who make disciples equipped to transform lives, communities and the world.

2017-2018 Conference Theme

Vital disciples create vital congregations who make disciples of Jesus Christ
who have a vital impact on their mission field.

Living for Giving Study Purpose

To create vital disciples who engage in personal stewardship in response to God's abundance.

Our Stewardship Core Beliefs:

- ◆ Disciplined giving moves disciples toward abundance thinking.

- ◆ Financial giving is a mark of spiritual development.

- ◆ Generosity allows others to experience God's abundance.

How to Use this Resource

This study may be used in a variety of settings such as Sunday school class, Bible study group, short-term study, membership class, etc. The session outlines are for planning purposes; you are invited to adapt each session to the needs of your group.

This study guide is both a participant workbook and leader's guide. It can be used in various ways:

- Duplicate for the entire group, so each person will have the entire guide with all the discussion questions and scriptures.
- Duplicate only the pages in the "Encounter the Message" section, which includes the basic text. These can be handed out the week prior to meeting to give participants a chance to read over the material.
- Use as a stand-alone resource for your own personal devotional time.

Session One includes a video presentation of the "Creating a More Generous Church" plenary given at the 2017 Arkansas Annual Conference by the Rev. Dr. J. Clif Christopher. The context of this study comes from the 2017 Arkansas Conference theme.

The Session One format is unique; the format for Sessions Two - Six flow in the same pattern. Session One includes a longer video and discussion time. Plan for at least 90 minutes for this session; the suggested time allotment for Sessions Two – Six is 60 minutes.

Videos for each session can be found at www.vitaldisciples.org/stewardship

Prior to Class

- View the session video on vitaldisciples.org to be sure you are familiar with the material. Write down any thoughts or questions you would like to share with the class.
- Make arrangements in advance so that you are able to show the video to the group at each session.
- Print enough copies of the lesson for each participant to have one.
- You may want to have copies of the next week's lesson to distribute at the end of each lesson.

Gathering and Opening

You may use a hymn and/or prayer to focus the group as it begins the meeting.

Video Introduction

Choose the appropriate video presentation from www.vitaldisciples.org/stewardship

Discover the Scripture

Several scriptures are listed for each session. The leader may read them and initiate discussion. The group could be divided into sub-groups with a scripture assigned to each for reading and discussion. The small group could be invited to share insights gleaned from the scriptures with the entire class.

Encounter the Message

This section contains the text for the session. Ideally, each participant should have read this section before the session. However, the material could be disseminated by allowing time for participants to read it during the session or having someone give an oral presentation of the material.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

These questions may be asked by the leader to stimulate discussion on the material presented in Encounter the Message.

Application for Living

At the end of each lesson are questions designed to assist participants in making personal and practical applications. The goal of the study is to create vital disciples who engage in personal stewardship in response to God's abundance.

Closing

This time may be used for prayer concerns, prayer and instruction for the next session.

Additional resources for further study can be found at www.vitaldisciples.org/stewardship. The Arkansas Conference Board of Discipleship will continue to update and add new resources to this page.

Session One

Creating a More Generous Church

Prior to Class

- Preview the Session One video on vitaldisciples.org/stewardship.
- Make arrangements in advance so that you are able to show the video to the group during class.
- Have nametags ready for all participants.
- Have copies of Lesson Two to distribute at the end of this session.
- Total suggested class time: 105 minutes

Gathering and Opening (5)

As you gather for the first time, greet one another, making certain everyone knows one another. If your group is comprised of persons who may be unfamiliar with one another, provide nametags to help nurture community.

1. Begin your session with a prayer or a hymn.
Hymn Suggestion: "Be Thou My Vision" UMH 451

Introduction (5)

- At this point, what does it mean to you to become a vital disciple of Jesus Christ?
- What do you hope to gain from this study?

Discover the Scripture (5)

Invite class members to read aloud the following scriptures:

- 1 Chr. 29:9
- Luke 6:38
- 2 Cor. 9:6-8

Ask: At the beginning of our study, what aspects of these verses do you easily connect with and what parts cause you some concern?

Encounter the Message (1:15)

Play the Session One “Creating a More Generous Church” video located at www.vitaldisciples.org/stewardship

- Share with the class that this video is the plenary given by Rev. Dr. Clif Christopher at the 2017 Annual Conference.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion (15)

In his plenary, Clif Christopher made the following statements:

1. *“To create a generous church, leaders need to be generous!”* What does “generosity” mean to you at this time?
2. *“Generosity must become a core value in our churches, a centerpiece in who we are.”* What will it take to create a more generous church?
3. *“The vast majority of people in our churches love stuff more than God, and that becomes the great sin of our time.”* How do you feel about this statement and how important is it to address?

Application for Living

This study represents an invitation to explore what it means to be trustworthy “stewards of God’s mysteries” and “good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” We invite you on a journey as we explore a way of living in the world in response to God’s grace as understood and practiced in the Wesleyan tradition. The goal is that we be faithful stewards and participate more fully in the church’s mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for a transformed world.

Closing

Hand out copies of Lesson Two and encourage participants to read the written material before the next meeting. Close with prayer.



Session Two

Stewardship as Christian Discipleship

Prior to Class

- Make copies of Session Three to distribute at the end of this session. This will allow for more discussion time during the session.
- Preview the Session Two video at www.vitaldisciples.org/stewardship
- Make arrangements in advance so that you are able to show the video to the group at your first session.

Total suggested class time: 60 minutes

Gathering & Opening

Since there may be people who are just joining the class, be sure everyone has a chance to introduce themselves. Use nametags as needed to nurture community.

Begin your session with a prayer or a hymn.

- Hymn suggestion: “Go Make of All Disciples,” UMH 571.

Video Introduction

Play the Session Two video and then ask the class:

- What comes to mind when you hear the word stewardship?
- What feeling does the word create in you?

Discover the Scripture

You may wish to divide the class into smaller groups and assign a passage to each for discussion. When the group reconvenes, invited someone from each group to share the main insights gleaned from the assigned passage.

Scripture selections: :

- Genesis 1:26-31
- Psalm 8
- Psalm 24:1-2
- 1 Corinthians 4:1-2
- 1 Peter 4:7-11

Encounter the Message

Note: Participants should have read this material prior to the session. If some have forgotten to

do so, encourage them to read the “Encounter the Message” section before coming to class, and remind them that this will be the expectation for all future lessons as well.

Introduction

The Book of Discipline affirms, “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.” The calling forth, forming and sending disciples of Jesus Christ is at the heart of the church’s mission. It is essential, therefore, that we understand the qualities of Christian discipleship, how they are formed and what it means to live in the world as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is at the core of what it means to be a Christian. A disciple is a learner, an apprentice, a servant, a follower. Christians respond to Jesus’ invitation to “Come, follow me.” As Christians, we believe what Jesus says, do what he says to do, go where he says to go and welcome those whom he loves. Christian disciples share in Christ’s ongoing mission of announcing and living God’s present and coming reign of compassion, justice, generosity and joy.

Being a disciple also involves inviting others to receive and participate in God’s reign in Jesus Christ. The first disciples were given their mission by the Resurrected Christ in these words:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

(Matthew 28:18- 20)

Stewardship is another way of talking about discipleship. The Apostle Paul portrayed Christian disciples as “stewards of God’s mysteries” who are to “be found trustworthy” (1 Corinthians 4:1-2).

The Epistle of First Peter described our mission as Christian disciples this way: “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received” (4:10).

“Stewards of the manifold grace of God” –that is our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ. We fulfill that calling as we receive, nurture, appropriate and share God’s presence, promises, grace and mission. Stewardship is a way of living in the world as God intends and as God in Christ through the Holy Spirit makes possible.

This study represents an invitation to explore what it means to be trustworthy “stewards of God’s

mysteries” and “good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” We invite you on a journey as we explore a way of living in the world in response to God’s grace as understood and practiced in the Wesleyan tradition. The goal is that we be faithful stewards and participate more fully in the church’s mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for a transformed world. (moved to session one)

More than Money and Church Budgets

Stewardship is commonly associated with an annual campaign to raise money for the church budget. Pastors often preach a series of sermons on giving, selected lay persons testify to the importance of contributing to the ministries of the congregation, materials are distributed describing the budget and members are asked to make financial pledges that represent a proportion of their income with the tithe being the ideal. In some contexts, members are also asked to pledge their talents by volunteering to serve on a committee and/or participate in the church’s ministries.

Neither pastors nor laity look forward with enthusiasm to “the annual stewardship campaign.” Yet, raising money for the budget and recruiting people to fill leadership positions are necessary to the ministry of the church. Restricting stewardship, however, to funding budgets and filling positions distorts the meaning of stewardship and erodes its spiritual foundations and power. Guilt and obligation replace grace and gratitude as the motivation and scarcity rather than abundance is the result.

Though stewardship includes money and talents, it is far more. A steward is one who is entrusted with receiving, cultivating, managing, using, preserving and distributing that which belongs to another. At the heart of the Biblical message and the Christian tradition is the affirmation that LIFE IS A GIFT FROM GOD; and one of God’s most precious gifts to humans is that of being a steward of creation.

As the Psalmist declares, “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it...” (24:1). Human beings are given the responsibility to gratefully receive, carefully cultivate, diligently nurture, wisely manage, justly distribute and compassionately pass on to subsequent generations the earth and its resources. (Genesis 1:26-30; Psalm 8) Everything belongs to God, including our very lives and we are accountable to God for the use of all the earth’s resources, as well as our own existence.

God has done more than create a world and bring us into existence to share in the goodness of creation. God is not a distant landlord who issues demands and pronounces judgment for our failures to fulfill our obligations as tenants and stewards. God gives more! God enters the world to redeem, heal, restore and bring to completion a blemished and damaged creation. God gives God’s own self. That presence of God to create, redeem, heal, restore and complete creation is

what we call GRACE. And the supreme manifestation of God's grace is Jesus Christ!

Christian stewardship is nothing less than gratefully receiving and generously sharing Grace, God's loving and transforming presence in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Stewardship is a way of being in the world that reflects God's love and purpose. It is living generously and gratefully in the church and in the world.

Paul Tournier, a Swiss psychotherapist, described this generous way of living in these words: "There comes a day when a man [person] understands that all is of grace, that the whole world is a gift of God, a completely generous gift...We see each flower, each drop of rain, each minute of our life as a gift of God."¹

Stewardship, then, involves all that we are and all that we have. It is openness to receiving God's mysterious presence and transforming power. It is being all that we were created to be; and giving ourselves, all that we are and all that we have, to God's present and coming reign in Jesus Christ: a reign of compassion, justice, generosity and joy. Christian discipleship is, indeed, being "good stewards of the manifold grace of God."

Wesley on Stewardship and Discipleship

John Wesley did not use the language of discipleship to describe the Christian life. Rather, he challenged early Methodists to be "real Christians" as contrasted with nominal Christians. Real Christians are characterized by holiness of heart and life, love for God and neighbor and "the love of God shed abroad in our hearts."

Permeating Wesley's preaching and the practices of the early Methodists was an understanding and experience of Divine Grace, God's presence and power to redeem and transform human hearts, communities and the entire creation. God's grace transforms nominal Christians into real Christians through forgiveness and the restoration of the divine image in which we were created. Grace is universally present with everyone and is forever wooing us toward our God-given potential as children of God, forgiving us when we falter and sustaining us in the relentless journey toward being made perfect in love.

The proclamation in word and deed of God's grace to save persons and transform the world accounted for the vitality and success of the Methodist revival in eighteenth-century England and the rapid growth of Methodism on the American frontier. Yet, toward the end of his long life and

¹ Paul Tournier, *The Meaning of Gifts* (John Knox Press, 1964) 59.

ministry, which spanned almost the entirety of the eighteenth century (1703- 1791), Wesley became discouraged and concerned about “the people called Methodist.” He feared that the Methodists were losing their experience of grace and, therefore, were in danger of becoming “a dead sect, having the form of religion but lacking its power.”²

After a tour of the Methodist work in the British Isles in the 1780’s, when Wesley was in the eighth decade of his life, he concluded that the greatest threat confronting the Methodists was their growing wealth and their failure to practice stewardship of God’s manifold grace. He writes, “I fear, wherever riches have increased, (exceedingly few are the exceptions), the essence of religion, the mind of Christ, has decreased in the same proportion.”³

Just two years before his death, Wesley lamented, “Does it not seem (and yet this cannot be) that Christianity, scriptural Christianity, has a tendency in the process of time to undermine and destroy itself? Why? Because...wherever true Christianity spreads, it must cause diligence and frugality, which, in the natural course of things, must beget riches– and riches naturally beget pride, love of the world, and every temper that is destructive to Christianity.”⁴

The danger is not the wealth itself but rather what wealth does to us. It gives us a false sense of self- sufficiency, security and independence. Wealth creates a sense of ownership and entitlement. We assume that we have earned and therefore deserve what we have. The awareness of life as a gracious gift subsides and reliance on others diminishes.

Wealth increases our options and tends to separate us from those who are poor, those who suffer and those without privilege. Wealth makes possible multiple choices about what to purchase, where and how to live, what to eat, where to go and what to give. Fewer resources mean fewer choices regarding even life’s necessities.

Self-sufficiency, independence, entitlement, multiple options, separation from the poor and those who suffer–these run counter to being “good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” Living in response to grace and God’s abundance is to see everything as a generous gift from God and treating all resources–money, abilities, time, relationships, education, life and the world itself–as a sacred trust to be humbly and gratefully received and generously used in accordance with God’s good purposes.

² “Thoughts upon Methodism,” The Works of John Wesley, vol. XIII, (Grand Rapids: Baker House Publishers, 1979) 258-261.

³ Ibid

⁴ Albert Outler, ed., “Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity,” The Works of John Wesley, vol. 3, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987) 95.

Stewardship, therefore, was at the heart of the Wesleyan revival. Albert Outler, one of the foremost Wesley scholars, contends, “On no single point, save only faith alone and holy living, is Wesley more insistent, consistent... [than on stewardship].”⁵ For Wesley, stewardship is an indispensable component of holiness of heart and life and a key to Methodism being a vital faith, having the power of authentic faith. Stewardship is, therefore, an expression and means of the manifold grace of God!

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Revisit the two questions asked at the beginning of this session. Would you answer them differently now? How?
2. What questions or comments arise after reading the text for this session?
3. Do you agree with Wesley that increased wealth tends to decrease our awareness of and dependence on grace? Where have you seen that principle validated or contradicted in your experience?

Application for Living

Discuss the following questions:

1. How does this lesson assist you in growing into an ever more vital disciple of Christ?
2. How can you help your church talk more about stewardship as a function of vital discipleship?
3. Based on what you learned in this lesson, what is one thing you will do to help you become a more vital disciple?

Closing

Hand out copies of Lesson Three and encourage participants to read the written material before the next meeting. Close with prayer.

⁵ The Works of John Wesley, vol. 2 (Abingdon Press) 265.

Session Three

Stewardship as Sharing in God's Life and Mission

Prior to Class

- Make copies of Session Four to distribute at the end of this session. This will allow for more discussion time during the session.
- Preview the Session Three video at vitaldisciples.org/stewardship
- Make arrangements in advance so that you are able to show the video to the group during class.
- Total suggested class time: 60 minutes

Gathering & Opening

- Begin your session with a prayer or a hymn.
- Hymn suggestion: "I Sing the Almighty Power of God," UMH 152.

Video Introduction

Play the Session Three video and then ask the class:

- How can your life make a difference?

Discover the Scripture

You may wish to divide the class into smaller groups and assign a passage to each for discussion. When the group reconvenes, invited someone from each group to share the main insights gleaned from the assigned passage.

Scripture selections:

- Genesis 1:1-2:4a
- Philippians 2:1-11
- Luke 16:1-13

Encounter the Message

Introduction

Stewardship is about more than money and budgets. It is about God—who God is, how God is present in the world and what God expects of us. Stewardship is not only a primary moral responsibility of Christian disciples, but also a way of understanding the nature and purpose of God.

The Bible and our Christian tradition speak of God through metaphors and images. Of course, God is more than the language and symbols we use. We understand God as Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Bible uses numerous rich images to describe the nature and presence of God—creator, rock, fortress, shelter, mother, good shepherd, refuge, comforter, judge, light, still small voice, householder and many others. All of the images affirm something important about who God is, where and how God is present in creation and what God expects of us.

God the Economist/Householder

M. Douglas Meeks captures an image of God that runs through the Bible and Christian theology. He refers to God as “Economist.”⁶ The word, economy, has its origin in the Greek term, *oikos*-household and *nemein*-to manage. Economy is the rule by which the household is managed for the benefit of the entire family. An economist, then, is one who sees that the household, both the present and future members, has all things necessary to flourish and participate in the broader community of households.

As the One who brings creation into existence, God is the owner of everything. Creation belongs to God! A contemporary of John Wesley, Isaac Watts, expressed this fundamental Christian doctrine in a poem now set to music in our United Methodist Hymnal:

I sing the almighty power of God, that made the mountains rise,
that spread the flowing seas abroad, and built the lofty skies.
I sing the wisdom that ordained the sun to rule the day,
the moon shines full at God’s command, and all the stars obey.
I sing the goodness of the Lord, who filled the earth with food,
who formed the creatures thru the Word,
and then pronounced them good.
Lord, how thy wonders are displayed, wher-e’er I turn my eyes,
if I survey the ground I tread, or gaze upon the sky.
There’s not a plant or flower below, but makes thy glories known,
and clouds arise, and tempest blow,
by order from thy throne;
while all that borrows life from thee is ever in thy care,
and everywhere that we can be, thou, God, are present there.⁷

God is Creator and, therefore, all belongs to God. The whole creation proclaims God’s creativity,

⁶ M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (Augsburg Press, 1989).

⁷ “I Sing the Almighty Power of God,” United Methodist Hymnal, 152.

generosity, beauty, power and goodness. The complex intricacy, vast expanse, awesome beauty, unfathomable mystery and enormous resourcefulness of creation declare the infinite greatness of God. Look at any part of creation, from the microscopic cells to the infinite reaches of the heavens, and we see God's handiwork and presence.

But there is more! God is not a creator who fashions the universe and withdraws from it. God chooses to move into the household called earth. As the hymn affirms:

While all that borrows life from thee is ever in thy care,
and everywhere that we can be, thou, God, are present there.

God's presence in creation is one manifestation of what John Wesley called prevenient grace, the presence and power of God that meets us even before we are aware of it. Because God is present, there is always new possibility for growth, renewal and transformation. The world and all therein is not only God's creation; it is also a realm of God's presence and ongoing creativity.

But there is still more! God, the Creator who is present with creation, has fashioned a creature in God's own image and given that earth-creature a special responsibility. God created human beings, us, with the potential to reflect the qualities of our Creator and to share in the Creator's presence, generosity and ongoing activity in the world (Genesis 1 and 2).

God formed human beings for relationship with God and one another. Further, God shaped and called human beings as participants in God's ongoing life and presence in nurturing, preserving and enabling creation and the human family to flourish. Genesis declares:

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them (1:26-27).

Human beings are created to share in the management of the household created by and dependent upon God. This creature made in the divine image is given dominion within the household. The concept of dominion has been distorted to imply that human beings have the right to dominate and exploit creation. That is a serious misinterpretation of the meaning of Genesis and an abuse of the role of human beings in God's creation.

Dominion, as the expression of our role in God's creation, is related to the relationship a shepherd

has for the sheep.⁸ The shepherd knows the sheep by name and is responsible for protecting the sheep, seeing that they have food, water and shelter and preserving the flock for the future. One who exploits the sheep, however, is a “hireling.” On the other hand, one who has dominion in relationship with the sheep, loves the sheep and even gives his life, if necessary, to preserve the flock.

Douglas Meeks reminds us that the word steward comes from an old Anglo-Saxon word, sty-ward, or keeper of the pigsty.⁹ A steward, then, is one whose dominion is derived from another and expressed in feeding, protecting, caring for and preserving that which is entrusted to him/her by the owner of the household.

God is the creator and owner of the household (creation) who knows the inhabitants intimately and seeks to nurture, care for, protect and preserve the entire household. God creates human beings and empowers them to share in God’s care for and preservation of the household.

God as householder/economist desires that all members of the household have access to resources that enable them to flourish and fulfill their God- intended destiny. God desires that all be welcomed at the household table, where there is always enough when God’s gifts are shared justly and fairly.

The absence of the necessary resources is a sign of injustice and idolatry and failure on the part of human beings to exercise proper dominion and stewardship. God’s response to human beings’ idolatry and failed stewardship is indicative of God’s nature and way of being in the world. God enters the household as a human being! God, the Good Shepherd, exercises divine dominion by coming among the sheep, seeking out the lost lambs and laying down His life for the flock. In Jesus Christ, God establishes a new economy of grace in which God gives humanity God’s own self, in order to reconcile us to our true selves, to God, to one another and to creation itself.

Jesus Christ is the image of what stewardship means! In Jesus Christ, God made known that God is in the world supremely as self-giving love and is forever redeeming, healing, reconciling, restoring and transforming the human family and the whole creation. The Apostle Paul declared:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) p. 32.

⁹ Meeks, *Ibid.*

being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11)

That is the nature and presence of God in the world! That is the heart and soul of Christian stewardship and discipleship.

Wesley and the Good Steward

The understanding and experience of grace as God’s universal presence and power to create, save, reconcile and transform persons and the whole creation is the foundation of Wesley’s concept of stewardship and discipleship. His sermon entitled, “The Good Steward,” captures the essence of what it means to be a faithful steward.

Using Luke 16:2 as the text, Wesley proclaimed that we are indebted to God for all that we have and we are obliged to use everything in accordance with:

“what pleases God.” God has entrusted to us our soul, our immortal spirit, made in the image of God; together with all the powers and faculties thereof, understanding, imagination, memory; will and train of affections...; love and hatred, joy and sorrow, respecting both good and evil; desire and aversion, hope and fear...”¹⁰

Our bodies, our intellect, our time, our relationships, our heritage, our abilities, our speech, our influence, our “worldly goods,” our knowledge, EVERYTHING, has been given to us as a sacred trust.

Wesley declares,

We are not at liberty to use what he has lodged in our hands as we please, but as He pleases who alone is the possessor of heaven and earth, and the Lord of every creature. We have no right to dispose of anything we have, but according to his will, seeing we are not proprietors of any of these things....¹¹

We are to use all that we are and all that we have for the glory of God by employing them in

¹⁰ Albert Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985) 284.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 283.

service to God’s ongoing mission of healing, nurturing, reconciling and transforming the world into the kingdom of God. Being a good steward, according to Wesley, is itself a gift of grace through the Holy Spirit. It is God’s presence and power that enables us to faithfully exercise our stewardship and fulfill the sacred trust.

Wesley proclaims,

It is no small thing, to lay out to God all which you have received from God. It requires all your wisdom, all your resolution, all your patience, and constancy—far more than ever you had by nature; but not more than you have by grace. For his grace is sufficient for you; and ‘all things,’ you know, ‘are possible to him that believeth.’ By faith, then, ‘put on the Lord Jesus Christ;’ ‘put on the whole armor of God;’ and you shall be enabled to glorify him in all your words and works...¹²

This is truly astounding! God is the Giver! God is the Gift! And God empowers us to be givers and gifts to others! Being “a good steward of the manifold grace of God” is our calling as human beings and God’s grace enables us to fulfill that calling.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What are the implications of seeing God as Economist or Householder?
2. When have you been aware of God’s grace, God’s presence and power, in the world around you?
3. What is your response to the definition of dominion as protecting, nurturing and preserving the earth’s resources for future generations? How does that relate to personal stewardship?
4. If everything belongs to God and is to be used to enable all members of the human family to flourish as beloved children of God, how are we to deal with the inequality of access to such necessities as food, shelter, healthcare and education?

Application for Living

Consider how this lesson could assist you in growing into an ever more vital disciple of Christ.

Discuss the following questions:

1. Have you ever considered how your selected purchases impact people in your community and beyond your community?
2. Are you aware of any group of people or any person in your community whose access to food, shelter, healthcare or education is limited?

¹² Ibid, p.298.

3. How can you make a difference?

Closing

Hand out copies of Lesson Four and encourage participants to read the written material before the next meeting. Close with prayer.

Session Four Stewardship of Vocation



Prior to Class

- Make copies of Session Five to distribute at the end of this session. This will allow for more discussion time during the session.
- Preview the Session Four video at vitaldisciples.org/stewardship
- Make arrangements in advance so that you are able to show the video to the group during class.
- Total suggested class time: 60 minutes

Gathering & Opening

- Greet one another and open with a prayer and/or song.
- Hymn suggestion: “Forth in Thy Name, O Lord,” UMH 438.

Video Introduction

Play the Session Four video, then ask the class:

- How is God part of your life?

Discover the Scripture

You may wish to divide the class into smaller groups and assign a passage to each for discussion. When the group reconvenes, invited someone from each group to share the main insights gleaned from the assigned passage.

Scripture selections:

- Luke 16:1-16 Ephesians 2-4

Encounter the Message

Introduction

Stewardship begins, continues and ends in God who is the Economist/Householder who creates and manages the household with love, justice and generosity. God, whose generosity and love created the world, is present in the world as One who heals, redeems, restores, reconciles and transforms creation into the kingdom of God. God’s mission is enabling the whole creation to flourish by the equitable and just sharing of the earth’s resources.

A child asked her mother, “What does God do all day?” When the mother asked, “What do you mean?” the four-year-old responded, “You and daddy go to work every day. Where does God go to work? What does God do at work?” The Bible is the story of the work God does. God’s vocation is that of saving the world and the supreme manifestation of that vocation is Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is God's mission embodied in human experience. As John's Gospel declares, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son...." (3:16). What does God do all day? God gives and gives and gives on behalf of the world.

Stewardship is our vocation rooted in God's mission of the saving of the world. John Wesley's fear late in life that Methodism was becoming "a dead sect having the form of religion but lacking its power" resulted from his observation that the people called "Methodist" were failing to fulfill their vocation as stewards. That led him to repeat the main points of a sermon he preached first in the 1760s entitled, "The Use of Money."¹³ Wesley considered our attitude toward money to be a sign of our spiritual health and our response to God's grace.

Although money is the specific focus of the sermon, Wesley's concern is far more comprehensive. The three well-known principles—gain all you can, save all you can and give all you can—represent a call to a life totally motivated, formed and sustained by God's manifold grace. The following three sessions will focus on Wesley's call to all-embracing stewardship rooted in God's lavish grace and saving mission.

Wesley's Call to Grace-Formed Vocation: "Gain all you can"

We often talk of stewardship as involving the use of the money earned from our vocations or daily work, particularly a percentage or portion that is given to support the church and its ministries. The emphasis is placed on "tithing" our income as the goal of a "good steward." Tithing is, indeed, a Biblical principle and a practice, which sensitizes us to the broader dimensions of stewardship. Yet, it is important that we understand stewardship as including more than a portion of the income received from our labor.

Stewardship, according to Wesley, includes the labor itself, not simply the proceeds from the labor. His admonition to "gain all you can" is not an appeal to an obsessive pursuit of wealth or an incessant workaholicism. Rather, Wesley urges the Methodists to gain all they can by contributing to the well-being of others and the world. His sermon is a polemic against earning and gaining wealth by hurting oneself, others and the creation itself.

Wesley says, "...this is certain we ought not to do; we ought not to gain money at the expense of life, nor... at the expense of our health."¹⁴ Neither are we to gain by hurting our neighbors' health or well-being or to profit at the expense of others' suffering and loss.

¹³ "The Use of Money," Albert Outler, ed., Works of John Wesley, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985) 263ff.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.269.

He reminds the Methodists to be diligent in the use of their time and abilities and to constantly grow in their understanding and skill in order to contribute maximally to others. He warned against participating in professions and jobs that hurt others, including gaming, the liquor trade, unfair lending practices and activities that corrupt the moral fabric of society.

The General Rules for the early Methodist Societies provide the guidelines for a Wesleyan practice of vocation. The Methodists were expected “to evidence their desire for salvation,

- “First, By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind...”
- “Secondly, By doing good...”
- “Thirdly, By attending upon all the ordinances of God...”¹⁵

Stewardship requires that we avoid gaining by harming others, the earth and ourselves. Among the activities Wesley listed that are to be avoided are the following:

- “The profaning of the day of the Lord, either by doing ordinary work therein or buying or selling”
- “Drunkenness; buying or selling spirituous liquors”
- “Slaveholding; buying or selling slaves”
- “Buying or selling goods that have not paid the duty.”

The following are included in the ways the Methodists are to do good:

- “By being in every kind merciful...; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all [men].”
- “To their bodies...”
- “To their souls... employing others within the community of faith; helping each other in business...”
- “[Practicing] diligence and frugality...”

The ordinances of God,” which Wesley considered to be means of grace by which persons grow in their character and salvation, include: public worship, the ministry of the Word, Holy Communion, family and private prayer, searching the Scripture and fasting or abstinence.

Stewardship that is faithful to the Wesleyan tradition, therefore, requires that we gain by avoiding doing harm to ourselves, others and the earth; that we contribute to others’ physical, spiritual and economic well-being; and that we engage in practices that enable us to grow in love for God and

¹⁵ The Book of Discipline (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004) 102-104.

neighbor.

Vocational Stewardship as a Means of Grace

While life has become more complex and interrelated than in Wesley's eighteenth century England, the call to vocational stewardship is no less important and relevant today. Vocations are popularly chosen on the basis of the income they produce rather than the service the profession renders to the common good and how it furthers God's purposes in the world.

From our perspective as Christians, life itself is a divine calling. As creatures made in the divine image, we are given responsibility by God to fulfill that image and to cultivate, nurture, equitably and justly manage and preserve the earth's resources. That is our life's privilege and work, whatever the means by which we gain financial resources. Our purpose is to contribute to creation by sharing in God's love for the world and God's redemptive, reconciling and transforming actions on behalf of the human family.

The writer of Ephesians defines our vocation in these words:

...lead a life worthy of the calling [vocation] to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in the love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (4:1-3).

In commenting on these words, Wesley affirmed that everything we are and do - our thoughts, words and actions - are to reflect the mind and spirit of Christ and to be employed on behalf of the love of God and neighbor.¹⁶

But human beings have unique and individual gifts, passions and opportunities, which are to be used in service to God's creation. We employ our gifts through particular vocations from which we earn income. Our jobs are primary expressions of our stewardship of time, talent and gifts.

God is no less interested in calling teachers and social workers, health care providers and political leaders, mothers and fathers, carpenters and plumbers, child care workers and inventors, farmers and manufacturers than preachers and professional church workers. All vocations are means of sharing in God's vocation of saving, healing, restoring, reconciling and transforming the world into the realm of God's reign.

¹⁶ The Works of John Wesley, vol. vi (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House) 397ff.

Wesley considered care for one's own physical, mental and spiritual health as an essential component of stewardship. Therefore, gaining income at the expense of one's own health and well-being or that of the family falls short of the vocational calling to invest oneself in that which gives life. Neglecting and abusing relationships and one's health in the name of gaining wealth violates our Christian vocation as participants in God's saving mission in the world.

Our general vocation as a steward in God's household and our specific work in the everyday world are manifestations and means of the manifold grace of God. It is God's grace that creates us in the divine image and invites us to share in the nurturing, management, distribution and preservation of creation.

But our unique talents, opportunities and callings are also gifts of God generously and freely bestowed. They are also means of grace to others! Being a "good steward of the manifold grace of God" involves being a means of grace to others. Being persons who reflect the divine image and "the mind of Christ" and persons who devote themselves to doing those things that enable others to flourish as children of God—that is Christian stewardship! That is Christian discipleship!

A statement often attributed to Wesley, though such a quote is not found in Wesley's works, does reflect a Wesleyan understanding of and commitment to vocational stewardship:

Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.

Models of Vocational Stewardship

We have all known people who exemplify Wesley's principle of gaining all you can by contributing to the world through their own being and doing. The following are two people whose vocation was motivated, formed and sustained by grace. The identities of the persons have been altered to avoid embarrassing them as they would never admit to being models of vocational stewardship.

Biologist refuses to exploit gift

James is a biologist with a Ph.D. from a prestigious university and a high-level research position with a major scientific laboratory. He is quiet to the point of shyness and seldom speaks in a public setting. He is more comfortable peering through a microscope and composing and reading scholarly reports of emerging biological data than leading a group or serving on a committee.

He and his wife faithfully attend the local United Methodist Church where she sings

in the choir. They have raised two sons who have moved away and assumed their own professions. James and Doris live modestly and quietly, with their leisure activities limited to walks in the local park, attending concerts and plays by the local choral society and community amateur playhouse and celebrating special occasions with friends from church and work.

James requested an appointment with his pastor to discuss a “personal crisis.” The manager of the laboratory had informed him that he was being transferred to another department, where he would be working on biological weapons. With sadness in his eyes, he said, “I became a biologist because I wanted to help heal people and I have devoted my life to finding cures for disease.” His most recent research had focused on Alzheimer’s disease and the biological changes in the brain. He added, “Now I am being asked to devote my research to ways of killing people. I don’t know what I’m going to do. I am 58 years old and I can’t find another job. Maybe I can teach at the university, but I just can’t change my vocation from healing to killing people.”

True witness is humble

Ida and her husband, Clyde, were the custodians of their mid-sized church. In addition, they farmed a small parcel of land near the river where they grew vegetables and flowers. They had no children and a nephew and niece were their only surviving relatives. They were in the early 60s. Ida was legally blind, although she could see well enough to clean, cook and perform everyday tasks. Clyde suffered from high blood pressure but he maintained a full schedule of chores at home, church and for the neighborhood. They were kind, diligent, frugal and always available to perform whatever menial tasks needed to be done.

Ida stopped by the church office every day as a break from the dusting, mopping and cleaning the classrooms. She was comfortable with herself, self-assured without arrogance, and unpretentious. She took great pride in her work and smiled broadly when someone commented on the shiny floors and dusted furniture. She treated everyone with respect and politeness, but she bristled when anyone “looked down on” Clyde and her. A prominent member of the church was overheard saying to Ida, “You are the custodian, after all.” Ida replied firmly but kindly, “I am first of all a child of God and so are you, even though right now you don’t act like one.”

Ida’s response to compliments about her work or the flowers she brought from her garden was, “It’s a gift to God! After all, we’re supposed to make the world more

beautiful, aren't we?" Little wonder when she died a few months after her beloved Clyde, the church was filled to overflowing with people who had experienced the manifold grace of God through Ida's life and work. A frequently-heard comment was, "She was a gift of God to the world." And the pastor chose as the text for the funeral sermon, "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful in much..." (Luke 16: 10).

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What is your response to the notion that the vocation of human beings is to share in the nurturing, management, distribution and preservation of creation?
2. What motivated you to enter the vocation you have chosen?
3. What would you include as vocations (work) that should be avoided as doing harm? What would you include as means of doing good?
4. Who are people you consider to be models of grace-formed vocation?

Application for Living

Consider how this lesson could assist you in growing into an ever more vital disciple of Christ. Discuss the following questions:

1. How is God a part of your vocation?
2. How could God be a bigger part of your vocation?

Closing

Hand out copies of Lesson Five and encourage participants to read the written material before the next meeting. Close with prayer.

Session Five

Stewardship as Living Simply

Prior to Class

- Make copies of Session Six to distribute at the end of this session. This will allow for more discussion time during the session.
- Preview the Session Five video at vitaldisciples.org/stewardship
- Make arrangements in advance so that you are able to show the video to the group during class.
- Total suggested class time: 60 minutes

Gathering & Opening

Begin your session with a prayer or a hymn.

- Hymn suggestion: “O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee,” UMH 430.

Video Introduction

Play the Session Five video, then ask the class:

- How could you live life more simply?

Discover the Scripture

You may wish to divide the class into smaller groups and assign a passage to each for discussion. When the group reconvenes, invited someone from each group to share the main insights gleaned from the assigned passage.

Scripture selections:

- 2 Corinthians 8
- 2 Corinthians 9

Encounter the Message

Introduction

Stewardship is a way of living our identity as human beings made in the image of God and as disciples of Jesus Christ. Stewardship begins, continues and ends in God who generously brings creation into being and graciously invites us to share in the cultivation, nurture, management and preservation of the earth and its abundant resources. Our vocation as human beings is that of sharing in God’s mission of enabling the whole creation to flourish as the realm of God’s reign of justice, compassion, generosity and joy.

Within that broader vocation, each person has a unique contribution to make to the flourishing of God's world. Whatever our specific work in the world may be, our primary responsibility is to be stewards of God's manifold grace, by contributing to the well-being of others and the world about us. As parents, teachers, health care providers, construction workers, scientists, politicians, laborers, whatever our daily activities, we are called to "gain all you can" by preserving, enriching and sharing in God's good gifts to the world.

John Wesley's sermon, "The Use of Money," provides a framework for considering our own stewardship. Though the focus is on money, the implications are more far-reaching. As we saw in the previous session, his challenge that the Methodists are to "gain all they can" is a call to contribute to others by avoiding vocations or work that harms oneself, others and the world.

The second means by which the Methodists are to avoid permitting wealth to diminish their sense of grace and religious vitality, is "to save all you can." Let us examine the meaning and implication of Wesley's advice for our own stewardship.

Wesley's Call to Simple Living: Earn All You Can

A speaker at a civic club began his presentation on principles of entrepreneurial investment, "What I know about being an entrepreneur I learned from John Wesley who said we are to gain all we can and earn all we can. Abide by those principles and you will succeed."

He got the words of the first two points of Wesley's sermon correct. However, his appeal to diligence in earning all the money possible with no reference to Wesley's warning against destructive ways of gaining wealth was the first hint that the speaker had not read Wesley's sermon. His use of "save all you can" as an endorsement of aggressive acquisitiveness and accumulation of wealth and his failure to mention the third point, "Give all you can," indicated that the respected businessman had twisted Wesley's sermon to support the very notions which Wesley considered major threats to spiritual vitality and authentic Christian stewardship.

As his first point, "gain all you can," was a polemic against destructive ways of gaining resources. Wesley's challenge to "save all you can" is a warning against opulence, waste, extravagance and self-serving acquisitiveness. He cautions,

Having gained all you can, by honest wisdom, and unwearied diligence, the second rule of Christian prudence is, 'Save all you can.' Do not throw the precious talent into the sea: Leave that folly to heathen philosophers. Do not throw it away in idle expenses, which is just the same as throwing it into the sea. Expend no part of it

merely to gratify the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eye, or the pride of life.¹⁷

Wesley considered expensive tastes in food, clothing, furniture, ornamental objects and even gardens as fueling sensuality and vanity and an unnecessary waste of resources. He cautioned that satisfying such appetites only increases them. He further advised against accumulating in order to satisfy the selfish desires of children or leaving them an inheritance. He asked that the Methodists avoid “throwing away money on your children, any more than yourself, in delicate food, in gay and costly apparel, in superfluities of any kind. Why would you purchase for them more pride, or lust, or vanity, or foolish or hurtful desires?”¹⁸

The criterion for leaving money to the children is their commitment to practice a simple lifestyle and willingness to share with the needy.

Providing necessities for one’s family, however, was a priority for Wesley; and he moderated somewhat his austere interpretation of necessities. Yet, he maintained a commitment to frugality and a simplified lifestyle and he expected the same of the Methodists. Included in the General Rules

as harm to avoid are “...putting on of gold and costly apparel,” “...Softness and self-indulgence,” and “Laying up treasure on earth.”¹⁹

Wesley’s counsel to “save all you can” by avoiding opulence, extravagance and acquisitiveness is related to his understanding of God’s relationship with the poor and the interrelatedness of the human family.

He had a lifelong commitment to ministry and presence with the poor. Douglas Meeks summarizes Wesley’s attitude toward the poor this way, “God has a soteriological* claim upon the poor, for it is in them that the glory of God’s power for life appears. They belong to God.”²⁰
*in this context, as means and recipients of salvation

The poor, for Wesley, were special recipients and means of God’s grace. Regular visitation of the poor was a spiritual discipline, which he would no more neglect than regular participation in worship or personal devotions.

¹⁷ Albert Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, 273.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 275,

¹⁹ See General Rules, *The Book of Discipline* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004) p. 73.

²⁰ “Sanctification and Economy: A Wesleyan Perspective on Stewardship,” in Randy L. Maddox, ed., *Rethinking Wesley’s Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1998) 87.

The poor were at the center of his vocational and evangelical mission and they comprised the majority of the members of the classes and Societies.²¹ The poor were his friends and his relationship with them was inseparable from his relationship with Jesus, who so closely identified with the poor that whatever is done to them is done to Jesus. (Matthew 25:31-46)

Since God has chosen the poor as special recipients and means of grace and they are our brothers and sisters, ministry to and with them is an indispensable part of Christian vocation and stewardship. We are, therefore, responsible for caring for the poor as members of our own family.

Herein is the primary rationale behind Wesley's admonition against extravagance and opulence and his advocacy on behalf of a simplified lifestyle. In Wesley's view, whatever we have beyond necessities is possessed at the expense of the poor. God desires that all people have access to adequate food, shelter, clothing, healthcare and education; and Wesley considered it a sin to accumulate excess and indulge in opulence when the poor do not have basic necessities.

The depth of Wesley's personal conviction on this matter is illustrated in an incident that occurred when he was at Oxford. A young girl who lived in poverty visited him one winter day. She looked cold and hungry. "You seem half-starved," he said. "Have you nothing to cover you but that thin linen gown?" When she said that was all she had, Wesley put his hand in his pocket and found he had scarcely any money left, having just purchased some framed pictures for his rooms. He later wrote of this incident with self-accusatory sarcasm:

It immediately struck me, will not thy Master say, 'Well done, good and faithful steward? Thou has adorned thy walls with the money which might have screened this poor creature from the cold!' O justice! O mercy! Are not these pictures the blood of this poor maid?²²

As we can see, then, Wesley's counsel that as good stewards the Methodists are to "save all you can" is a call to live simply so that others may simply live. It is a declaration of solidarity with the human family and commitment to the God who "defends the orphan, the widow, and the sojourner (the immigrant)." Stewardship that is faithful to the Wesleyan tradition, therefore, challenges the contemporary emphasis on consumerism, opulence and acquisitiveness.

²¹ Ted Jennings, *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* and Richard Heitzenrater, *The Poor and the People Called Methodist*.

²² From Wesley's Sermon, "On Dress," and quoted in Richard Heitzenrater, *The Poor and the People Called Methodist*, 26.

Simple Living in a Consumerist World

Wesley's counsel to the early Methodists that they are to "save all they can" is, indeed, a prophetic word for contemporary heirs of Wesley. We are immersed in a consumerist culture where we are inundated with advice to have more things. Our economy is based on expansion of consumer products. In such a consumerist culture, everything becomes a commodity to be purchased, consumed and discarded. Goods, services and relationships are valued in terms of their exchange value in the market place. Even personal worth and identity are related to one's possessions. Personal security, identity and worth are sought through the accumulation of things and financial holdings.

Grace runs counter to consumerism as the foundation for living and the use of resources. While consumerism tends to reduce everything to a commodity to be exchanged in the market, grace sees everything as a gift to be gratefully received and shared. Consumerism relies on competition, grace fosters cooperation and community. Consumerism values ownership; grace values trusteeship.

Consumerism appeals to self-interest; grace appeals to self-giving love. Consumerism depletes resources and threatens the environment; grace preserves resources and the environment. Consumerism presumes scarcity; grace presumes God's manifold, abundant grace.

While the distinction between necessities and luxuries may vary from context to context, the existing and growing economic disparity within our own country and the world is a serious ethical and theological problem. The failure to practice Wesley's advice to the Methodist to "save all you can" threatens the very lives of millions of people, contributes to the depletion of the earth's finite resources and endangers the ecological system itself.

Stewardship that is faithful to the Wesleyan tradition requires disciplined actions by individuals, congregations, institutions and governments. According to the Bible's concept of justice and Wesley's understanding of stewardship, every action, decision and policy must be considered in light of the impact it will have on the poor, the powerless and the most vulnerable.

Stewardship in the 21st century requires solidarity with the world's people and the earth itself. Our vocation as participants in God's management and care for the earth's household involves choices of what not to have, as well as what to have. "Save all you can" by living simply, so that others may simply live, is an appropriate response to "our Lord Jesus Christ, who though he was rich for [our] sake became poor" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Models of Stewardship as Living Simply

The following are two examples of efforts to be faithful stewards of God’s manifold grace that reflect Wesley’s advice that the Methodist “save all you can.”

Couple’s choices exemplify spirit of giving

Hugh and Edith grew up in a rural community near a midsize southern city. He was a mail carrier and she a schoolteacher. They had no children of their own but they both loved children and became friends to the kids in the neighborhood, their local church and the school. They were able early in their marriage to purchase twenty acres and build a comfortable but modest house. The city began to expand westward and farm after farm was transformed into subdivisions. Hugh and Edith held onto their parcel of land, even when they were surrounded by lavish homes, commercial development and condos. They retired from their daily work but continued their involvement with children, as well as their local church’s mission outreach programs. Their land took on the appearance of a spacious garden in the midst of sprawling subdivisions.

But they advanced in years and Edith died at age 85 and Hugh followed her in death four years later, at age 92. They had always been generous in their contributions to the church and the education of children and youth. But they were even more generous in their deaths. Their land was now to become a public park for children and a “community garden” where families could grow vegetables.

In addition, the remainder of their savings and pensions, which amounted to more than a million dollars, went for an endowment for the local church’s outreach ministries with the poor and for scholarship of under-resourced children.

Legacy of congregation looks to the future

A church in a large urban community faced a difficult decision. It had been one of the largest and strongest churches in the city, but with the changing urban demographics the area surrounding the church was occupied with commercial buildings. Members of the congregation moved into other neighborhoods. They commuted to the historic and beautiful church until, one by one, their age and infirmity made the commute impossible. The church had been able to accumulate an endowment. As the membership declined, the expenses of the congregation became dependent on the endowment for survival.

While still averaging almost a hundred in attendance, the congregation entered a discernment process around their future. After months of Bible study, prayer and conversation they made the decision to close the historic church with its beautiful architecture and noble heritage. They voted to contribute the stained glass windows and furniture to other churches. The remaining funds from the endowment were being divided between a rural ministry within the conference that was devoted to the well-being of the rural poor and an urban ministry among the poor. The church

building was sold and the proceeds given toward establishing new churches, including a congregation among the urban poor.

A service of “death and resurrection” was held on Pentecost Sunday in the old sanctuary. The people remembered the past and celebrated the promise of a new future. One long-time member shared this statement in the service: *“We have received much over the years from this church. We could have held on until our deaths and continued to be blessed. We have always tried to be good stewards of the resources God has given us. We think it would be poor stewardship to merely try to accumulate more in order to survive. We want to give what we have saved so that others might be blessed.”*

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How do you distinguish between what is a necessity and what is a luxury?
2. What is your response to Wesley’s notion that extravagance is at the expense of the poor?
3. Discuss the distinction between consumerism and grace. How can we avoid being motivated by consumerism?
4. Where have you seen examples of Wesley’s principle of “save all you can”?

Application for Living

Consider how this lesson could assist you in growing into an ever more vital disciple of Christ. Discuss the following questions:

1. How can you live life more simply?
2. How could a simpler lifestyle make a difference in someone else’s life?

Closing

Hand out copies of Lesson Six and encourage participants to read the written material before the next meeting. Close with prayer.

Session Six

Stewardship as a Call to Strategic Generosity

Prior to Class

- Preview the video at vitaldisciples.org/stewardship
- Make arrangements in advance so that you are able to show the video to the group during class.
- Total suggested class time: 60 minutes

Gathering & Opening

- Greet one another and open with a prayer and/or hymn.
- Hymn suggestion: “Take My Life, and Let It Be,” UMH 399.

Video Introduction

Play the Session Six video, then ask the class:

- What is your current strategy for giving?

Discover the Scripture

You may wish to divide the class into smaller groups and assign a passage to each for discussion. When the group reconvenes, invited someone from each group to share the main insights gleaned from the assigned passage.

Scripture selections:

- Luke 16:1-13;
- 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Encounter the Message

Introduction

Stewardship is a way of being in the world in response to God’s manifold grace. It is another way of describing what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, who is the embodiment of God’s presence, purposes and power. Stewardship is sharing in God’s presence and mission in the world, as God calls human beings to participate in creating, nurturing, distributing and preserving the earth and its resources. Through God’s grace, each person is called and empowered to exercise his/her stewardship in everyday life and work.

While stewardship has to do with far more than money, the way we earn and use financial resources is a window into our spiritual health and our response to God’s lavish grace. John

Wesley warned “the people called Methodist” that increase in riches is a serious threat to spiritual health and commitment.”

He, therefore, devoted consistent attention throughout his long life and ministry to the use of money. His well-known and often quoted sermon, “The Use of Money,” represents a distillation of what it means to be a faithful steward, a devoted disciple of Jesus Christ.

“Gain all you can” is an invitation to accept our vocation as participating in God’s mission to transform the world into the realm of Christ’s reign of compassion, justice, generosity and joy. We are to gain all we can by investing in the well-being of others and the world, and by avoiding gain at the expense of others and the earth.

“Save all you can” is a summons to live frugally and simply and to avoid extravagance, opulence and squandering resources which satisfy selfish and harmful appetites and desires. As members of God’s global household, our solidarity with the poor and under-resourced demand that we avoid the consumerist philosophy of acquisitiveness and accept a lifestyle based on grace/gift.

Now we turn to the heart of Wesley’s advice to the Methodists on the use of money, “Give all you can.”

An Invitation to Strategic Generosity: Give All You Can

John Wesley warned the early Methodists that following the first two principles and ignoring the third one was to distort the meaning of Christian living. He declared:

But let any [man] imagine that he has done anything...by gaining and saving all he can, if he were to stop here. All this is nothing if a man goes not forward, if he does not point all this at a further end. Nor indeed can a man properly be said to save anything if he only lays it up...Not to use, is effectively to throw it away. If indeed ‘make yourselves friends of the mammon of righteousness,’ add the third rule to the preceding. Having first gained all you can, and secondly saved all you can, then give all you can.²³

More than 25 years after the sermon first appeared, Wesley was troubled by the failure of the Methodists to handle their increasing riches by following his third rule, “Give all you can.”

The venerable leader of the Methodist movement, now in his 80s, expressed his concern with

²³ Albert Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 2, 276.

great pathos:

Of the three rules, which are laid down... you may find many observe the first rule, namely, 'Gain all you can.' You may find a few that observe the second, 'Save all you can.' But how many have you found that observe the third rule, 'Give all you can?' Have you reason to believe that five hundred of these are to be found among the fifty thousand Methodists? And, yet, nothing can be plainer than that all who observe the first rule without the third will be twofold more the children of hell than ever they were before.²⁴

It is the third rule that gives meaning and purpose to the first two. We are to gain all we can and save all we can, so we can give all we can. Wesley urged the Methodists to provide the necessities for their families and to share resources in a manner that reflects Christian integrity and character and "as a sacrifice to God through Jesus Christ." Prayerful discernment and careful attention to what glorifies God and advances God's mission should guide our giving.

Wesley admonished,

Render unto God, not a tenth, not a third, not half, but all that is God's...; by employing all of yourself, your household, the household of faith and all mankind, in such a manner, that you may give a good account of your stewardship....²⁵
Employ whatever God has entrusted you with, in doing good, all possible good, in every possible kind and degree, to the household of faith, and to all [people].²⁶

Wesley was strategic in the exercise of his own use of money. He personally gave from his own resources and he never took money directly for himself. He was supported by a quarterly allowance from the London steward, as were the other preachers. This protected him from any charge of becoming rich from the collections, gifts and proceeds from the extensive publishing enterprises.

His quarterly allowance, according to Dr. Richard Heitzenrater, was twice the poverty level and five times that of many of the preachers.²⁷

In addition to providing structures of accountability for his use of money, Wesley was strategic in

²⁴ "Thoughts upon Methodism," The Works of John Wesley, vol. xiii (Grand Rapids: Baker House Books, 1979) 258-261.

²⁵ Outler, op. cit, 279

²⁶ Ibid, 279.

²⁷ See Richard Heitzenrater, The Poor and the People Called Methodist, chapter one.

investing the money received from the Methodists in institutions and ministries that reflected his concern for the poor and disadvantaged. Kingswood School provided education for children. He established the first free health clinics in the preaching houses in London, Bristol and Newcastle. He provided minimal pension support for “tired and worn-out preachers” and their families; established cooperatives and a lending program to distribute seed money for struggling merchants and manufacturers. And, he lent mission support for the emerging and rapidly growing Methodist movement in America.

Dr. Heitzenrater reminds us that Wesley practiced what he preached about “giving all you can.” Wesley tells the story of one of the Oxford Methodists [likely himself] who, though his annual income ranged from 30 pounds to 120 pounds, lived on 28 pounds and gave away the remainder. He is reported to have said that if he died with more than ten pounds in his possession, he may be considered to have been a thief.

According to the records, when he died in 1791, six paupers who were paid one pound each, thus depleting his personal resources, carried him to his grave. He had directed that all the draperies used in his funeral services be taken down and sewn into clothing for poor women.²⁸

Strategic Generosity for Contemporary Methodists

Generosity from a Wesleyan perspective involves more than the impulse and practice of giving. It means to be intentional and strategic in the use of resources. Structures and policies that insure accountability and transparency in the use of resources are necessary at all levels from our personal income to the institutions of which we are a part.

Accountability is a hallmark of the Wesleyan movement and we must provide structures of support and accountability for one another in how we gain, save and give.

Tithing our income is a long-established biblical practice and a means of grace. By setting aside a percentage of our resources to be given for the ministries of the church, we establish a pattern of generosity that affects how we view all resources. The practice of tithing is a means of grace by which we are blessed and we become a blessing to others. It reminds us that all resources belong to God and we are responsible to God for their use.

But tithing is only one part of strategic generosity. We have opportunities to extend our gifts far beyond those available to Wesley and the early Methodists. Thanks to the strategic generosity of

²⁸ Ibid, 27ff.

Methodists over the centuries, many educational, health care, social service, child care and other institutions exist and are contributing to the health, wholeness and well-being of millions of people around the world. Our denominational connectional structures and agencies provide accountability and avenues for generous ministry throughout the world. The Arkansas Tithe Initiative enables these structures of accountability and ministry and represent a continuation of Wesley's strategic generosity.

Sustaining and strengthening denominational structures and agencies and the institutions devoted to proclaiming in word and deed the good news of God's saving and transforming grace is integral to our stewardship and discipleship. Additionally, local congregations, conferences and institutions must continuously determine what new institutions and ministries need to be initiated and supported as means of sharing in God's mission on behalf of the world.

Strategic generosity also involves taking advantage of the many instruments available for maximizing our gifts. Multiple opportunities for such strategic generosity exist. Our tax laws encourage generous charitable giving. Various means exist to give wisely and generously, including gift annuities, trusts, estate planning, matching funds, etc. Your conference foundation and the various institutions within the connection have people available to assist in discerning ways to maximize the sharing of your resources.

Wesley's words remind us of the importance of the strategic use of money:

[Money] is an excellent gift of God, answering the noblest ends. In the hands of his children it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked. It gives to the traveler and the stranger where to lay his head. By it we may supply the place of a husband for a widow, and of a father to the fatherless; we may be a defense for the oppressed, a means of health to the sick, of ease to them that are in pain. It may be as eyes to the blind, as feet to the lame; yea, a lifter up from the gates of death.²⁹

Widow as model of strategic generosity

Elizabeth is a widow whose husband was a prosperous businessman. He died in middle age, leaving a significant estate. They had no children and few other relatives. Elizabeth is a devoted Christian and a lifelong Methodist who values the Methodist heritage and her local church.

²⁹ Albert Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 2, 268.

Although she has sufficient financial means to live opulently and extravagantly, Elizabeth has chosen a lifestyle of simplicity and frugality. She lives on 10 percent of her income and gives ninety percent away! She buys a new car about every 10 years, lives in a comfortable but modest house and enjoys entertaining friends and other guests either in her home or at a local restaurant. She is meticulous in following appropriate etiquette and protocol, but always makes everyone feel as a special guest.

While her charitable interests are wide-ranging, Elizabeth has a special commitment to education, including the education of pastors and other church leaders. She has served on the board of trustees of more than one United Methodist college. She has quietly and without fanfare endowed several scholarships at United Methodist seminaries. Each year, she attends the ordination service at the annual conference session “to see my students ordained or commissioned.”

Many individuals and institutions solicit Elizabeth for gifts. She takes each request seriously enough to evaluate the merits of the project and the viability and integrity of the institution or agency requesting the contribution. One professional development officer described her as “the most thorough and insightful donor I have ever met. She is not swayed by flattery and she will hold us accountable for the use of her gift.”

During a time of a significant economic downturn several years ago, Elizabeth visited her pastor. Tearfully she said, “I am very upset. My income has plummeted and it is hard going.” The pastor attempted to console her by commenting that living on a reduced income is hard. She responded, “Oh, don’t misunderstand me. How I live isn’t the problem. I don’t need any more to live on. I’m upset because I have less to give away!” She proceeded to share the new projects she wanted to support and her grief for having to delay her giving.

While she has grown frail and infirm, Elizabeth’s strategic generosity continues. Through her following the rule, “Give all you can,” scores of dedicated and skilled pastors are sharing the good news of God’s manifold grace; many educational, child care and health care institutions are contributing to the wholeness and well-being of thousands of people; conference and denominational agencies are providing urgent ministries and structures of accountability; and her local church flourishes in its mission and ministry.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Why do you think Wesley considered the failure “to give all you can” a serious threat to the spiritual health of the individual and the vitality of the Methodist movement?

2. How would you interpret what it means to be “strategic” in your generosity?
3. Do you think Christians should hold one another accountable for their stewardship and their use of money? Why or Why not?
4. What institutions do you and your church support? What new institutions are needed?
5. Who do you identify as examples of those who practice strategic generosity and “give all they can”?

Application for Living

Consider how this lesson could assist you in growing into an ever more vital disciple of Christ. Discuss the following questions:

1. John Wesley worked out a strategy for giving. He first determined what he needed for life’s basic necessities and then he gave away the rest. Do you have a strategy for giving?
2. How could you modify your strategy for giving?
3. What difference would such a strategy for giving make in your life?

Closing

Close with prayer, naming each participant, claiming them as vital disciples of Jesus Christ.