

Jubilee Lifestyle

How putting relationships
first changes everything

A discipleship course from the Jubilee
Centre based on the Christian lifestyle
book *Free to Live*



Users' guide

Acknowledgements

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Guy Brandon, August 2011

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Foreword

Jubilee Lifestyle is a bold and passionate course looking at how the culture ticks in the society in which we, as Christians, find ourselves. Like Daniel, forced to find a way to be true to his beliefs in an alien land, so many of us struggle not to be overcome by the belief systems around us. And belief systems they are, whether acknowledged or not. This lifestyle course looks at the difficult issues of Consumerism, Money, Sex, Shopping, Environment and Wealth.

The question is, how do we love God and how do we love each other? Life is difficult, and yet rather than simply responding in the moment to challenging situations this course enables us to think things through, journeying with others, towards a coherent way to live in the 21st century. The course is not for the faint-hearted: it requires time, energy and commitment, but will yield an understanding of the absolute relevance of the Bible and the fact that it describes a coherent vision for society that has enduring relevance for Britain. I am pleased to commend this course to anyone who really wants to think through and find God in the tough decisions of everyday life.

– Steve Clifford, General Director, Evangelical Alliance

Introduction: consumer culture

In 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon attacked Judah and forced its king, Jehoiakim, to surrender and pay tribute to him. He carried off some of the treasure from the Jerusalem temple, and took some of the royal family back with him to be trained in the language and culture of Babylon, and eventually to enter his service. A few years later, after Judah rebelled against the Babylonians, the temple would be destroyed entirely and the kingdom of Judah carried into exile.

Daniel, a member of the royal court, suddenly found himself uprooted from his home in Jerusalem and taken to Babylon, where he was forced to engage with an alien culture and religion. The first part of the Book of Daniel describes his struggle to maintain his own religious identity, despite being immersed in this hostile culture.

Christians today face some of the same challenges that Daniel did. We live in an environment that has very different values and expectations to those of Christianity. Although the consumer culture of the 21st century doesn't see itself as religious, and its effects are subtle rather than overt, it has many of the hallmarks of a belief system.

Consumer culture tells us that fulfilment and happiness are to be found not in what or who we already have, but in the acquisition of new things. This goes far beyond simple materialism, the pursuit of stuff. The principle doesn't just apply to our possessions, but to everything: our experiences, our beliefs and even our relationships with others. It's not so much the old materialistic mantra of *Tesco ergo sum*, 'I shop therefore I am', but *Logo ergo sum* – my preferred brands and consumer choices are what make me who I am and connect me to others (or, as the popular translation goes, 'iPod therefore I am'). This is one of the most attractive and dangerous aspects of consumerism. It suggests that the things we acquire aren't just a reason to be happy in themselves; they also carry a promise of relationship, belonging, identity and self-worth. Amongst other things, they are advertised as a short cut to the intimacy and acceptance that is only authentically found in real relationship.

Consumerism is incompatible with real relationship, because it claims that choice is the highest good, and that our identity is to be found in exercising this – in consuming, and in the freedom to try the next thing when the last one stops satisfying us and is no longer useful to us. This means we are always encouraged to move on to something – or someone – better. It is intrinsically me-centred and exploitative of the world around us. It can also be so insidious that we don't recognise its effects on our lives, despite its permeation into all forms of media and advertising. Personal debt is just one way of supposedly extending our range of choices, which consumerism tells us we deserve: 'because we're worth it', as the slogan goes.

But at the same time as telling us that we deserve all this and how to get it, it actually fosters an attitude of self-hatred. It teaches us to be dissatisfied with what we have – earnings, possessions, status, appearance, relationships – to encourage us to acquire the new products on the market, which forever promise to deliver the ultimate feeling or lifestyle that we currently lack. Without us realising it,

consumerism demands our loyalty and heavily influences the way we spend our money and our time – and what we truly value.

Why ‘Jubilee Lifestyle’?

Daniel’s uncompromising faith was based on the *Torah*, the Law that God had given to Moses and all the Israelites several hundred years earlier, after he rescued them from slavery in Egypt. This Law was intended to form the foundation of Israelite society, giving the people principles for how to act justly in every area of life. Jesus would later summarise the Law as having just two purposes: to show the Israelites how best to love God and to love each other (Matthew 22:34-40). Although the way the Law is expressed in action might sometimes look different as a result of Jesus’ coming, those two principles articulate the spirit of everything that the Bible teaches.

Hidden away in a little-read part of the Old Testament, the Jubilee laws in Leviticus 25 encapsulate the radical heart of God’s vision for Israelite life by setting out the economic principles that were supposed to govern how they treated each other in their business dealings. These were not dry and abstract concepts that had no relevance to everyday life, but ones that impacted every person in the land by guaranteeing a measure of justice and equality for all. They ensured that no one would get into long-term debt, set out working conditions and employers’ responsibilities, and provided that everyone would have access to a plot of land and family property forever. As a result, no one would be trapped in poverty without the hope of regaining financial independence. People who fell on hard times would be able to stay with their families and communities rather than having to move away to find work. Debts would never become unmanageable.

Christians have a tendency to ignore the Old Testament, but Jesus told his listeners that he did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfil it (Matthew 5:17-20). The principles God gave the Israelites in the Old Testament more than 3,000 years ago are still uniquely relevant today. They remain the blueprint for God’s design for society – not necessarily in their specific details of sacrifice, what to wear and what to eat, but in their underlying values based in the unchanging character of God. As American pastor and author Timothy Keller writes, the Law still stands, even though it serves a different purpose. ‘In the life of Christians the law of God – though still binding on them – functions in a completely different way. It shows you the life of love you want to live before the God who has done so much for you. God’s law takes you out of yourself; it shows you how to serve God and others instead of being absorbed with yourself. You study and obey the law of God in order to discover the kind of love you should live in order to please and resemble the one who created and redeemed you, delivering you from the consequences of sin.’¹

Far from being a set of arbitrary rules, irrelevant to life in the 21st century, the Jubilee embodied the fairness, relational wholeness, prosperity and blessing that God desired for his people. The Jubilee Centre (www.jubilee-centre.org) takes its name from Leviticus 25, where the provisions to restore ownership of property to every family every 50th year is treated as iconic for the principles of justice, rootedness and faithfulness which underpin all of OT law. It reflects our intention to explore and communicate the Bible’s enduring relevance for every aspect of modern life, based in the concern for right relationships and the factors which contribute to such relationships being strengthened or undermined. The seven studies in the *Jubilee Lifestyle* series aim to challenge the effects of consumer culture on our Christian faith, by looking at consumerism and then several different areas Christians often find it difficult to engage with: use of time, sex, shopping, the environment, money and how we view our faith itself. These are all a part of the world that God has created, and things with which he has blessed us. Avoiding them altogether – the ascetic approach – is an invalid response. Jesus had plenty of hardships in his life, but he didn’t deny himself for the sake of it (so much so that some of the religious leaders called him a glutton and a drunkard). He recognised and enjoyed God’s material blessings.

However, our view of all these things can become distorted by consumerism’s emphasis on choice and its counterfeit solution for personal fulfilment. In each case, the studies in this booklet seek to encourage discussion around a distinctively Christian response to the threat of consumerism, enabling us to enjoy God’s creation in the way that he intended.

¹ Tim Keller, *King’s Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus* (Dutton Adult, 2011), p. 41.

Study 1. Consumer culture vs Christianity

Welcome/introduction

This is the first session in the series. This study looks more at the overall reasons for our faith and how we understand it, rather than at specific areas of life, which will come over the next six weeks. This week explores how we can start to think about applying the Bible – both Old and New Testament – to the different issues faced by Christians struggling with how to express their faith in a culture that is often hostile towards it, doesn't understand it, and has very different values.

Why is this relevant to you?

- Our worlds are so different it can be hard to see the Bible's relevance for the 21st century.
- The messages we receive from our culture are frequent, pervasive and harmful.
- Jesus Christ is 'Lord of all or not at all': Christianity should affect the whole of our lives.
- We have an obligation to understand as much about the Bible as possible – making sense of what we believe both to ourselves and to others who do not share our faith (1 Peter 3:15-16).
- This study aims to look at the framework and principles of our faith to equip us better to apply it to different areas of life.

Exercise 1: A life worth living

What are the things that you feel make life worth living – what would you least want to lose?

What are the messages that our culture typically gives us about what is important?

Consumer culture vs. biblical relationships

Read Matthew 22:34-40. *'Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'*

Our culture tells us that all sorts of things are important: money, status, appearance, possessions and more. It says that these give us happiness and identity, both in themselves and in the way it claims they connect us with other people. And yet consumerism is driven by choice, and therefore dissatisfaction: we are always encouraged to choose something we are told is better. If we are content, we no longer have to buy or acquire anything. The result is a never-ending treadmill to find fulfilment, only to find that nothing delivers what we hoped. In contrast, the Bible says we are made for right relationships with God and each other, and that this is what gives us true fulfilment – not relationship with or through the things that we ourselves create (which it calls idolatry).

- **'All the Law and the Prophets...'** Every law in the Bible is about one or both of these two things: love for God, and love for neighbour.
- **This gives us a framework for understanding our faith**, because we know what the Bible is trying to achieve.
- **This helps us grasp God's character** as a God of Love, not rules.
- **The Old Testament is still important**, since it was important to Jesus too – even if the way we keep its laws is sometimes different. The ultimate aim of right relationships is the same.

Exercise 2: Consumer faith?

Many writers, Christian and otherwise, have identified consumerism as our culture's most popular ideology: a kind of secular religion that aggressively competes with God for our loyalty. It tells us that happiness and fulfilment are only a choice away – though it always tends to be the next choice, rather than the one we have just made.

Discuss in your group what you think are the major areas in which consumerism affects both the Church and individual Christian life. What appears attractive about that way of living? What are the downsides?

Testimony

Why relationships are important

Understanding Christianity as a religion that is fundamentally about right relationships helps us to engage with it more fully at a personal level in the decisions we make every day.

- **God is love.** Relationship is in the very nature of the Trinity, and we are made in his image.
- **Love is the only fitting response to God's love** (1 John 4:19-21).
- **Relationships are what actually fulfil us**, rather than money or possessions.
- **We have very different technology, but human relationships are the same** – which is why the Bible is still uniquely relevant today.

Exercise 3: Difficult areas of faith

Describe one area of life that you have struggled to understand and apply your faith to in the past, or continue to struggle with. This might be:

→A situation in your own life (e.g. moving house, work, personal life)

→Something in the news (e.g. ethical and moral problems, voting and political issues)

→Particular laws or passages in the Bible

→Areas of church doctrine

How does the perspective of relationships and love change the way you see each of these areas?

Conclusion

End the session by summarising any points of particular interest in your groups, as well as areas of doubt or uncertainty to come back to. Finish with a brief time of prayer about any specific issues raised in your groups.

Homework

Write down all the areas of your life where you would like to engage your faith but currently feel you do not. Which are the most important? Come back to this list over the coming weeks of this course as you explore different topics, and ask yourself how you might address them.

Study 2. Time is money?

Welcome/introduction

Time can be a tricky area to think about. We all feel pushed for time, and most of us spend time doing things we may not want to. This study won't solve all of those problems, but hopefully it will give you some ideas to start thinking about your time from a biblical perspective.

Why is this relevant to you?

- All of us are some under time pressure – no one has time to do everything they want.
- Our culture encourages us to think of time in terms of the money it earns or costs us.
- But time is also the 'currency of relationships' – we have to invest time in people too.

Exercise 1: Pushed for time?

Discuss in small groups the pressures on your time. What are the things that:

- 1) you would like to have more time for, and
- 2) the things you would like to spend less time on?

A brief (theological) history of time

We take a lot of effort to manage our time, but we rarely question *how* we think about time in the first place. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Bible has a very different view of time than we do today.

- **A time-less society?** There were no clocks and biblical cultures had a very different relationship with time, but we can still learn a lot from the Bible's teaching on this subject.
- **Using time wisely** – time is limited and should not be wasted (Ephesians 5:15-16).
- **The purpose of time.** We were not created solely for economic productivity – or any one activity – but for relationship with God and each other in a wide variety of contexts.
- **A priceless resource?** The Bible does *not* say that time is our most precious resource. Wisdom is considered more valuable than long life or wealth (1 Kings 3:11-14).
- **Jesus was flexible about time.** He turned interruptions and disturbances into opportunities, knowing that God could bring glory from any situation (e.g. Mark 5:21-43).

Exercise 2: Your weekly time budget

There are 168 hours in a week. Count up how many hours a week in total you spend in different activities (use a pie chart to represent them if you like). Some suggestions are:

- | | |
|------------------|-------------------------------|
| →Sleep | →Work |
| →Watching TV | →Using internet/email |
| →Shopping | →Cooking/eating |
| →Sport/exercise | →Church/home group/quiet time |
| →Meeting friends | →Others (describe) |

To what extent does your use of time reflect your priorities? Are there any surprises here?

Testimony

Sabbath people

Read Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15.

We tend to think of the biblical Sabbath the same way we think of our Sundays – ideally a day to rest from work for most of us, and a chance to relate to God and our family and community. In reality, the Sabbath was much more than that. It was one of the ways that God structured time, and its significance was far more important than just a 24-hour period of inactivity. It was also about justice, balance, honouring and trusting God and putting him first. The biblical Sabbath has a lot to tell us about God's purposes for his Creation.

- **Remembering Creation.** One purpose of the Sabbath was to honour God's creation of the world (Genesis 2:2-3). Time is our scarcest resource, and the Sabbath shows that we consciously place God before ourselves in our use of time.
- **Freedom.** The Sabbath rest also commemorates the Israelites' freedom from slavery in Egypt. We are not to trade this forced regime of work for a self-imposed one – or impose it on anyone else by expecting them to work (however we define 'work' – see below).
- **Justice.** The prophets often link breaking the Sabbath with injustice. An obsessive approach to work and putting money ahead of everything else distorts our priorities.
- **Remembering what is really important.** Taking a day out allows us to spend time with friends and family, and to make a regular space to worship God.
- **'The Sabbath was made for man.'** God has structured our weeks like this so that work and busyness do not detract from our faith and relationships – not to rule us.

Exercise 3: A typical Sunday

Think of some of the activities you might do – or expect others to do – on a typical Sunday (or your day off if you are in a profession where you have to work on a Sunday). For example:

- | | |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| →Paid employment | →Household chores, maintenance, etc |
| →Homework/college work/other study | →Shopping |
| →Spend time with friends, family | →Go to church |
| →Other (explain) | |

Which of these do you consider 'work' and why? How do each of these fit with the purpose of the Sabbath described above?

Conclusion

End the session by summarising what you have discussed, and spend a short time praying about any specific issues raised in your groups.

Homework

Choose one of the areas in exercise 1 where you realise you would like to spend more or less time. How can you achieve this? (In practice, this will mean adjusting one of the other areas.)

Study 3. Selling sex

Welcome/introduction

This is probably the most controversial area of Christian teaching as far as consumer culture goes – and for many Christians themselves. There have been major shifts in society's norms for sexual behaviour since the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s, and now the Church finds itself sharply at odds with the wider culture, which doesn't see the relevance of the Bible's teaching on sex and relationships.

The Church itself has not reacted well to the changes of the last 50 years. It has often been harshly critical of the sexual standards it sees around it, but has not explained biblical teaching properly – meaning it is typically seen as judgmental or prejudiced. Alternatively, the lack of clear teaching means it has taken on the values of the culture around it, so that there is little distinctive about the Church on this subject. Consequently, this is also an aspect of life which will have affected many Christians.

Why is this relevant to you?

- We live in a 'hypersexualised' culture – sex and romance appear everywhere in the media.
- Sexual relationship has become consumerised and is often treated as a form of entertainment.
- Sex is assumed to have no wider context than the 'consenting adults' directly involved.
- Our culture's messages around sex are confused and often harmful.

Exercise 1: TV and film

Discuss in your groups the ways that sex and romantic relationships are typically presented in some of the most popular TV programmes and films. To what extent do you think this reflects reality? How does this contrast with some popular older films and TV programmes?

'Consenting adults'

Read Genesis 2:24, Matthew 19:3-9 and 1 Corinthians 6:15-20.

Although there is much more to unpack about 'one flesh' from the Creation account in Genesis, the way that Jesus quotes this verse in Matthew's gospel and the way that Paul uses it in 1 Corinthians show that the biblical ideal for sex was that it should be a permanent relationship: the one flesh bond was not to be broken lightly. In contrast, our culture claims that consenting adults should have the freedom to have sex with whoever they want to since it doesn't harm anyone else. But this 'harm principle' also appears to have some support from the Bible (Matthew 7:12) If we're not harming anyone else, why does the Bible try to restrict our freedom around sex?

- **One flesh** (Gen. 2:24) – the Bible's ideal for sex is a permanent, faithful relationship, rather than the temporary arrangement it can often be in our culture.
- **Understanding 'harm'**: our cultural assumption that sex between consenting adults harms no one else is a myth; sex affects a wide range of people beyond the immediate couple.
- **Sexual freedom is anything but**. The consumerisation of sex places an implicit pressure on us (particularly women).
- **Striking a balance**. The Bible doesn't trivialise sex *or* overstate its importance – two distortions our culture often creates.

Notes

Exercise 2: Your church's culture

How can we, as churches and individual Christians, remain distinctive given our culture's messages about sexual relationships? This could be in the way we act and the way we think, for example:

- Specific biblical teaching – or lack of it – about sex and relationships
- Views about the value of singleness or marriage, implicit or explicit
- The way small groups are structured (mixtures of singles, marrieds, male and female), and whether this is helpful or unnecessary in those circumstances
- Activities for and general interactions of singles, including the church's unspoken dating culture

Testimony

Singleness

Alongside the medical and cultural changes of the last few decades, sex has come to mean something different. Effective contraception has meant that the link between sex and family has (in theory) been reduced; sex has shifted to being more about personal identity, and the benefits to individuals and couples. Sex is now seen as so important that voluntarily celibate singles can be viewed as incomplete, unfulfilled, struggling with their sexuality, just plain strange, or even worse.

- **Sex and intimacy.** TV and film often depict sex as the best kind of relationship, and the one way you can find fulfilment and intimacy with another person. The Bible teaches that intimacy and belonging are found across a wide range of relationships with God and others.
- **In Christ there is no...** Our identity as Christians does not depend on our relationship status – either as a single person or as part of a couple (Colossians 3:11).
- **We haven't got this right.** Christians have not always engaged well with this subject.
- **The Church has to be countercultural in this area,** providing the relationships and intimacy that people lack in a fragmented, consumeristic society.

Exercise 3: Being a relational church

The Church has a great opportunity to be an antidote to our culture's assumptions about sexual relationships and the deficit in intimacy that underlies much of its approach.

What practices and values would you ideally like to see displayed amongst Christians in your church that encouraged real intimacy in fellowship, as a counter to the sexual norms and relational deficit of wider culture? What might be the dangers of some of these, and how could you address this? Write a 'relational charter' that you would like to see adopted among Christians in this area.

Conclusion

Summarise what you have discussed in your groups, and spend some time praying about any questions that the study has raised.

Homework

Returning to the idea of a relational charter, start to think about some ways that you could make personal changes to the way you think and act in this area, and extend this to the way you interact with people more broadly at church and throughout the week.

4. Just shopping

Welcome/introduction

Our shopping habits are one of the easiest places we can start to make a difference. But the huge range of 'ethical' choices available in the shops (food, clothing or other goods; organic, Fairtrade, local, and GM-free, to name a few) means we can receive lots of different and contradictory messages about what is most important to achieve. This study doesn't claim to offer all the answers, but it will hopefully encourage you to ask questions from a distinctively Christian perspective.

Why is this relevant to you?

- Almost all of us shop, and all of us eat! (Food shopping is a good starting point in this area.)
- This is one of the biggest ways in which we exercise consumer choice.
- We have access to a huge array of products of all kinds in our shops.
- There is a great opportunity to make a difference. The question is, what difference and how?

Exercise 1: Ethical consumers?

Most of us include ethical grounds in at least some of our purchasing decisions, rather than making them on price and quality alone. Discuss some of the choices you make, and what you are hoping to achieve by buying these products. How do the principles you use fit in with your Christian faith?

Biblical shopping

Jesus summarised the Law in terms of right relationships. This is a useful lens through which to judge all of the different and competing claims that the various 'ethical' brands make.

- **God wants justice and compassion.** So many of our consumer choices come at the expense of the most vulnerable on the planet.
- **Our privilege brings responsibility, not licence.** 'From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded' – Luke 12:48.

Counterintuitive choices

Using ethical labels alone to make shopping decisions risks becoming a legalistic approach that overlooks the attitude of our hearts. It can also mean we miss out on information that might have enabled us to make a better choice. Some examples you might find surprising are:

- New Zealand lamb is up to four times more carbon-friendly than UK-reared lamb
- Starbucks typically pays its producers more for a pound of coffee than Fairtrade does
- Roses air-freighted from Kenya have around a sixth of the carbon footprint of Dutch imports
- Organic meat often has higher rates of salmonella and other dangerous parasites

- **Keeping the Spirit, not the Letter of the Law** – 'ethical' labels are not rubber stamps we can use to ease our consciences and stop engaging.
- **The good can be the enemy of the best** (see Mark 7:11-12). Sometimes, one advantage comes at too high a price in other areas – like organic fruit air-freighted across the world.

Notes

Exercise 2: Integrated lives

When we buy 'ethical' products we are usually doing so for a reason. Brainstorm in your groups and list what some of these reasons might be. For example:

- Ensuring producers are paid a living wage
- Avoiding destruction of the rainforest
- Supporting your local economy

To what extent are these ideals important in other aspects of our everyday lives? How might we support them in other ways, or else reassess our priorities?

Testimony

A broader picture

This section briefly discusses some of the most common ethical labels and what they might achieve.

- **Fairtrade** ensures that producers are treated fairly by buyers. However, anything without a Fairtrade logo can appear 'unfair' by implication, which is not always the case (see below).
- **Organic and GM-free** seem more caring of the environment; however, a producer may have shown this concern but just not have gone through the certification process.
- **Local produce** does not always have a lower carbon footprint, and we need to balance its benefits with the chance to help disadvantaged producers in low-income countries.

Exercise 3: Making a difference

Spend some time thinking about particular areas in which you would like to make a difference every time you buy something. These might be broad causes (like providing clean water, or trade justice) or specific places – perhaps supporting your local area and community, a region your church has sent missionaries to, or somewhere you otherwise have a personal link with.

Discuss how you might be able to focus your efforts on these areas in your shopping, and support each of these causes by your regular spending habits. You might like to explore this further in the coming week (see also homework).

Conclusion

Summarise what you have discussed in your groups, and spend some time praying about any specific issues this has raised.

Homework

Allocate one specific area of purchasing (e.g. coffee – ground or ready to drink; chocolate; fruit; clothing; hygiene and beauty products, etc.) to different people in your group. Each spend some time researching your area during the coming week, and suggest three alternatives that contribute to justice in the way you spend your money in that category. Bear in mind that you are unlikely to be able to solve all the problems of that particular product's journey to you! The idea is not to pick the one perfect solution (there is no such thing) but to narrow down the huge variety of choices and give your group a small number of products so they can make an informed decision more easily.

Notes

Some suggestions to get you started...

(Details are deliberately limited to encourage you to research the benefits of these yourselves.)

Make a commitment to pursue justice by living by these spending choices, but also to re-evaluate them regularly to ensure that they do not become legalistic 'rubber stamp' decisions.

Tea and Coffee

- Good African Coffee (www.goodafrican.com)
- Ethical Addictions (www.eacoffee.co.uk)
- Union Hand Roasted (www.unionroasted.com)
- Kingdom Coffee (www.kingdomcoffee.co.uk)
- See also 4C Association (www.4c-coffeeassociation.org), Utz Certified (www.utzcertified.org/), Rainforest Alliance (www.rainforest-alliance.org)

Other food

- The Waitrose Foundation (www.waitrose.com/food/originofourfood/foundation.aspx)
- Stop the Traffik's 'Good Chocolate Guide' (www.stopthetraffik.org/chocolateDownloads/chocolate_guide_uk.pdf)
- The Assured Food Standards' Red Tractor mark (www.redtractor.org.uk/)
- See also the Ethical Consumer (www.ethicalconsumer.org/)

Clothes and household

- Kuyichi (www.kuyichi.com/)
- Spirit Of Nature (www.spiritofnature.co.uk/) and similar eco-companies

Further ways to engage

- Kiva (www.kiva.org)
- Five Talents (www.fivetalents.org.uk)
- Shared Interest (www.shared-interest.com)
- The Trade Justice Movement (www.tjm.org.uk)

5. Social footprint: our environmental impact

Welcome/introduction

Thanks to news reports about pollution, the loss of natural habitats, climate change and the increasing scarcity of resources, the environment has never been a more high-profile issue. But how can we make a specifically Christian response to different environmental concerns?

Why is this relevant to you?

- Environmental issues will inevitably impact us, our children and future generations.
- The respect with which we treat Creation is a part of how we honour its Creator.
- How we treat the environment has consequences for our neighbours now – next door, in our church or community, across the world, or the ones who will share our planet in the future.

Exercise 1: Created – in God's image

In small groups, go round and each tell the others about something you are particularly proud to have created. (With some advance notice people could bring these things, or a photograph, with them to the meeting.) This could be something you have made, drawn, painted, written, sewn or built. Say what makes you so pleased with it.

A Christian perspective on the environment

For some Christians, the question remains about why we should care for the environment at all. Some even believe that, since this world is only temporary, it doesn't matter how we treat it. Others believe that we should concentrate our efforts on evangelism, and that everything else is secondary. Neither of these perspectives is supported by the Bible itself.

- **Gratitude** – God created the environment, partly for our benefit (Genesis 2:8-9) and as an expression of creative love for us. Gratitude and the right use of the world in which he placed us are the appropriate response to this act of generosity.
- **'...and it was good.'** God was pleased with Creation in its own right – even before he made humans (Genesis 1).
- **Stewardship of creation is our God-given job**, and always has been (Genesis 2:15).
- **There is a link between sin and environmental damage**, which is often down to human carelessness or selfishness.

Exercise 2: How green are you?

List all of the different 'green' options you can think of that people take, whether in terms of shopping, habits or lifestyle choices. For example:

- Walking or cycling to work instead of driving
- Buying fruit that hasn't been air-freighted across the world
- Regularly giving to a charity that helps protect the rainforest
- Filling the kettle only with the water you need at the time, rather than to the top

Which of these have you actually adopted, and why? Why have you avoided others?

Notes

Testimony

Understanding happiness

'People in the West have got no happier in the last 50 years. They have become richer, they work much less, they have longer holidays, they travel more, they live longer, and they are healthier. But they are no happier.'

'If we want a happier society, we should focus most on the experiences which people value for their intrinsic worth and not because other people have them – above all, on relationships in the family, at work and in the community. It seems likely that the extra comforts we now enjoy have increased our happiness somewhat, but that deteriorating relationships have made us less happy.'

– Richard Layard, 'Happiness Economist'^{2,3}

Consumer culture, the environment and justice

The way that we live has an enormous impact on those with whom we share our world.

- **Our choices as consumers have consequences**, which consumer culture often ignores.
- **The cost is more than the price tag** – and the world's poorest are most affected.
- **Financial wealth can undermine relational riches** and go hand-in-hand with environmental damage. We work longer, travel further and consume more in the process.

Exercise 3: Environmental and relational solutions

Brainstorm in your groups some changes to your lifestyle that would both benefit the environment and lead to closer and stronger relationships. For example:

→Arranging lifts to work or other engagements, or meeting to walk together

→Sharing a house rather than living alone

→Eating at the table or meeting for a meal together rather than eating dinner in front of the TV

→Making available a pool of resources (tools, cars, baby clothes) to your church or group, instead of expecting everyone to buy their own

Pick one or more of these to implement over the coming days and weeks.

Conclusion

Summarise what you have discussed in your groups, and spend some time praying about any questions this has raised.

Homework

Spend some time on your own trying to identify the areas of your life that are most damaging to the environment. Look at ways of addressing these. How many of your answers might involve building closer friendships and relationships with those around you?

² Richard Layard, "Happiness: Has Social Science a Clue?" Lionel Robbins Memorial Lecture, 2003. See <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/events/lectures/layard/RL030303.pdf> (accessed 2 June 2010).

³ Richard Layard, "Happiness is Back", *Prospect Magazine*, 17 March 2005.

Notes

6. Worship with wealth

Welcome/introduction

This is probably the most challenging study of the series. Money is always a difficult and personal topic. In addition, some of the biblical ideals presented in this session will actually be impossible to meet in practice! However, that doesn't excuse us from making an effort. The point is to help you think through financial issues from a biblical perspective.

This session comes with a disclaimer: it is not intended to constitute financial advice. Neither is it supposed to present you with a strict list of rules – it is meant to help you explore the issues, not tell you exactly how to order your finances.

Why is this relevant to you?

- Not all of this study will apply to you, though some of it will be significant to everyone.
- All of us have/will have some combination of: cash, bank accounts, overdraft, credit card debt, unsecured loans, mortgage, savings, pensions, shares, property and other assets.
- Our economy is very different from the Bible's, but human nature is the same. Jesus often spoke about money, and people were as obsessed with it then as they are now.

Exercise 1: Are you wealthy?

Do you consider yourself wealthy? Discuss how much money you think makes a person 'rich', and how we tend to make the judgement.

A theological introduction to money

Christians can have many assumptions about money – not all of them correct. Alternatively, we may not have thought too hard about money in the past, except perhaps for what we give to charity.

- **Money is not bad in itself** – it is the *love* of money we are warned against (1 Timothy 6:10)
- **However, wealth does come with clear spiritual warnings attached!** It is often a barrier to the Kingdom of God (see the rich fool in Luke 12:13-21 and the rich young ruler in Luke 18:18-30), and how we use money can be seen as a barometer of our faith (James 2:14-26).
- **Money and work are about stewardship.** We can use money to further or to hinder justice and healthy relationships. Rarely can money be used neutrally.
- **We are responsible for how and by whom our savings are used.** Giving control of our money to others (banks, pension fund managers) doesn't absolve us of that responsibility.

Exercise 2: What is the purpose of money?

Money may serve many different purposes for different people. What does your money/income mean to you? Score each of the options below out of ten to indicate their importance to you.

→To enable you to support yourself/your family

→To give you self-esteem

→To allow you to pay for a certain lifestyle

→To give you security

→To enable you to give to church and charity

→Other (explain)

Note: there are no right or wrong answers; several of these may be important or unimportant to you. The point is to explore how you relate to money.

Notes

Testimony

Dealing with money as a Christian

Read the Parable of the Minas (Luke 19:11-27)

- **‘Reaping what you haven’t sown’.** Jesus warns against making unjust profits – collecting a return that our money hasn’t really earned in any useful way.
- **This injustice includes collecting interest** – an enormous and impossible challenge for us! However, we need to remember that real people are affected by the returns we receive.
- **Investment should ideally mean we take an active interest** in the company, rather than simply putting our money in and taking it out when we want.
- **Hoarding...** isn’t an option either, since it reduces our trust in God and doesn’t allow the money to be ‘put to work’ for good.

Exercise 3: Mapping your finances

Draw a pie chart or table of where your money goes in an average month – particularly the amount that is left over after all the bills and other basic expenses are paid (both amount and percentage of discretionary spending). For example:

→Giving

→Debt repayment

→Investment (where, and what is being done with your money?)

→Clothes, fashion

→Alcohol, entertainment, etc

→Holiday and travel

→Electronics, luxury goods, etc

Are there any surprises? If you feel able to, discuss some of your choices with others in the group.

Conclusion

Summarise what you have discussed in your groups, and spend some time praying about any specific issues this has raised.

Homework

Consider the idea of a ‘relational pension’. Who are the people you would like to invest in for the future – particularly for after retirement – and are you currently doing that? Think about ways you could use your money to plan your life and your future in terms of your relationships, as well as financially, perhaps using exercise 3 as a starting point. Are there changes you would like to make? If so, pick one actively to explore further in the coming days.

Perhaps there are relational ways you could avoid debt or making unnecessary purchases, such as by pooling or sharing resources with others. Other people may want to consider issues around the way they earn money, and whether there are adjustments they would like to make in their approach to their work.

Notes

7. Spiritual health

Welcome/introduction

The final study is around the theme of our faith itself and the way that our culture can distort what we believe. This, in turn, affects how we act and express our faith in practice.

Why is this relevant to you?

- The cultural values we absorb every day play a major part in shaping our faith.
- We are used to exercising choice, tailoring the world around us to fit our needs.
- This can be true of our faith as well as our shopping and other areas of life.
- The result can be 'consumer Christianity' – Christianity shaped around our own desires.

Exercise 1: Consumer faith?

Discuss in your small groups the messages you think that Christianity has taken on from our wider culture. This may include the Church in general, Christian conferences or courses (including this one – the point of the study is to engage critically with the problem!), the Christian music and entertainment industry, or other areas.

Consumer Christianity

The values of consumer culture can easily become a part of our faith, and we can end up discarding bits we don't like. It also puts us and our fulfilment at the centre of it, rather than God – the idea is that it is supposed to serve me.

- **The Bible doesn't promise us an easy life.** This is something we can overlook, and then feel let down when things go wrong – but also reluctant to express doubts.
- **The biblical authors often express their pain and even anger at God.** We may be reluctant to do this, because it doesn't fit what we think our faith has promised us.
- **Suffering was an integral part of Jesus' ministry,** and might be part of our lives.
- **Suffering occurs not only despite our faith, but because of it.** C. S. Lewis wrote, 'The real problem is not why some pious, humble, believing people suffer, but why some do not.'

Exercise 2: Suffering servants

Many Christians experience suffering at one point or another in their lives, despite or because of their faith. Some find this can draw them closer to God, whereas others find it is a barrier to their faith.

What do you think are the differences between these two groups of people? Discuss how you respond to the fact of pain in the world, both as an idea and as a reality of life.

Notes

Testimony

Spiritual and emotional health

Consumer culture teaches us to hate ourselves. It tells us to be dissatisfied with what we have, what we earn, and how we look, and teaches us to envy others instead. (If it didn't, we wouldn't need anything new and wouldn't chase more of what we do have.) In other words, it tells us that we cannot be content as we are because there is always something missing, and always more to gain. These values are corrosive to a Christian faith, because they undermine its fundamental premise of God's love – how can he love us when the world tells us we are unlovable unless we acquire the next big thing? However, the answer to the challenges posed to our faith by consumerism is not to withdraw completely, but to question it critically – being 'in the world but not of the world' (see John 17:16 and 18).

- **Love your neighbour as yourself** (Matthew 22:39). This presupposes a degree of self-love, because we have to understand that we are all valued and forgiven by God.
- **God is constant.** If we have experienced imperfect, temporary and painful earthly relationships, we may forget that God approaches his relationship with us very differently.
- **In the world, not of the world.** We shouldn't withdraw entirely from consumer culture, but we should engage with it carefully and critically.
- **What we consume shapes our character.** We cannot expect to remain unchanged if we consume what our culture offers uncritically. 'Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life' (Proverbs 4:23).

Exercise 3: Thinking differently

What practical ways can you think of to loosen the grip that consumer culture has on your life? This may be in the way you treat your:

→Money

→Possessions

→Work

→Relationships

→Faith

→Leisure/entertainment time

Choose at least one area in which to make a conscious change over the coming week, with the intention of helping you to live out your faith more deliberately.

Conclusion

Summarise what you have discussed in your groups, and spend some time praying about any particular issues this has raised.

Homework

Continue exercise 3 by looking at the ways that consumer culture affects different areas of your life. List the things that you think define you – work, relationships, money, appearance, entertainment, and other things – and then list the things that you would like to define you. Compare the two lists and look at ways of moving towards the second. This may mean shifting your priorities and taking some hard choices, so it may be a good idea to arrange to meet and pray with other Christians in the same position for encouragement and accountability.

Notes

Selected further resources

General

Books

Guy Brandon, *Free to Live: Expressing the love of Christ in an age of debt* (SPCK, 2010)

Mark Greene, *The Best Idea in the World: How putting relationships first transforms everything* (Zondervan, 2009)

Mark Powley, *Consumer Detox* (Zondervan, 2011)

Michael Schluter and David Lee, *The R Option: Building relationships as a better way of life* (Relationships Foundation, 2003)

Ruth Valerio, *L is for Lifestyle* (IVP, 2008). See also <http://www.lisforlifestyle.com/>

Websites

Breathe network (<http://breathenetwork.org>)

Ethical Consumer (<http://www.ethicalconsumer.org/>)

Jubilee Centre (<http://www.jubilee-centre.org>)

Jubilee Lifestyle pages: www.jubilee-centre.org/engage/jubilee_lifestyle

L is for Lifestyle (<http://www.lisforlifestyle.com/>)

Living Lightly (<http://arochalivinglightly.org.uk/>)

Introductions to Christianity

The Alpha Course (<http://uk.alpha.org/>) and Nicky Gumbel, *Challenging Lifestyles* (Kingsway, 1996).

Christianity Explained (<http://www.christianityexplained.com/>)

Christianity Explored (<http://www.christianityexplored.org/>)

Other discipleship courses

Discipleship Explored (<http://www.ceministries.org/de/>)

Freedom in Christ (<http://www.ficm.org.uk/>)

God at Work: Living Every Day with Purpose, Ken Costa (Continuum, 2007)

Gospel in Life, Tim Keller (http://timothykeller.com/study/gospel_in_life/)

Lifeshapes, Mike Breen (<http://www.lifeshapes.com/>)

Simplicity, Love & Justice, James Odgers (Alpha International, 2004)

The World We All Want, Tim Chester and Steve Timmis (Authentic, 2005)

Further reading for studies

1. Consumer culture vs Christianity

Mark Greene, *The Best Idea in the World: How putting relationships first transforms everything* (Zondervan, 2009)

Michael Schluter and David Lee, *The R Option: Building relationships as a better way of life* (Relationships Foundation, 2003)

2. Time is money?

Paul Mills, *A Brief Theology of Time* (Cambridge Papers, 1998)⁴

Mike Schluter, *Eight Questions of Faith about Sundays* (Jubilee Centre, 1990)⁵

3. Selling sex

Guy Brandon, *Just Sex: Is it ever just sex?* (IVP, 2009)

Dale Kuehne, *Sex and the iWorld: Rethinking relationship beyond an age of individualism* (Baker Academic, 2009)

1 Corinthians 5-7: three Bible studies and leaders' notes to supplement *Just Sex* (Jubilee Centre, 2009)⁶

4. Just shopping

Paul Mills, *Globalization and the world economy – for richer for poorer, for better or worse?* (Cambridge Paper, 2005)⁷

5. Social footprint: our environmental impact

Nick Spencer and Robert White, *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living* (SPCK, 2007)

Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living: five Bible studies (Jubilee Centre, 2008)⁸

6. Worship with wealth

Paul Mills, *The Bible and Money: managing one's money in the end times*. Eight Bible studies (Jubilee Centre, 2009)⁹

Paul Mills, *The great financial crisis: a biblical diagnosis* (Cambridge Paper, 2011)¹⁰

Nick Spencer, *The Measure of All Things* (Jubilee Centre, 2003)¹¹

7. Spiritual health

John Coffey, *Engaging with cinema* (Cambridge Paper, 1999)¹²

⁴ See online at http://www.jubilee-centre.org/resources/a_brief_theology_of_time

⁵ See online at http://www.jubilee-centre.org/resources/eight_questions_of_faith_about_sundays

⁶ See online at http://www.jubilee-centre.org/resources/three_studies_1_corinthians_57 (studies) and http://www.jubilee-centre.org/resources/leaders_notes_1_corinthians_57 (leaders' notes)

⁷ See online at http://www.jubilee-centre.org/resources/globalization_and_the_world_economy_for_richer_or_poorer_for_better_or_worse

⁸ See online at http://www.jubilee-centre.org/resources/five_bible_studies_christianity_climate_change_and_sustainable_living

⁹ See online at http://www.jubilee-centre.org/resources/the_bible_and_money_managing_ones_money_in_the_end_times

¹⁰ See online at http://www.jubilee-centre.org/resources/the_great_financial_crisis_a_biblical_diagnosis

¹¹ See online at http://www.jubilee-centre.org/resources/the_measure_of_all_things

¹² See online at http://www.jubilee-centre.org/resources/engaging_with_cinema

‘A bold and passionate course... I am pleased to commend this course to anyone who really wants to think through and find God in the tough decisions of everyday life.’

– Steve Clifford, General Director, Evangelical Alliance

About the Jubilee Centre

The Jubilee Centre is a Christian social reform organisation that offers a biblical perspective on issues and trends of relevance to the general public.

We believe the Bible describes a coherent vision for society that has enduring relevance for Britain and the world in the twenty-first century. At the heart of this social vision is the concern for right relationships, expressed by Jesus in Matthew 22:34-40 – ‘love God, and love your neighbour’. We seek to study, disseminate and apply this vision in order to provide a positive response to the challenges faced by individuals, communities and policy makers.

About *Jubilee Lifestyle* and *Free to Live*

Jubilee Lifestyle is a series of seven Bible Studies based on the book *Free to Live* (SPCK, 2010), which looks at some of the main areas in which consumer culture can affect our Christian lives. The book and studies explore how the me-centred values of consumerism contrast with the Bible’s relationships-based worldview, and how this impacts our choices in terms of how we spend our time, how we approach sexual relationships, shopping, the environment, money and investing, and how we view our faith itself.

www.jubilee-centre.org

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