

Jubilee Lifestyle

How putting relationships
first changes everything

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



Leaders' notes

Acknowledgements

These Bible studies and *Free to Live*, the book on which they are based, owe far more to other people's work than they do to my own efforts. In particular, Michael Schluter's development of relational thinking for almost 30 years, crystallised in *Jubilee Manifesto* (IVP, 2005), and the work of the Cambridge Papers writing group over the last 20 years, have been fundamental in trying to get to grips with a specifically Christian response to some of our culture's biggest questions.

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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 –

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

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.

Format

The studies will usually take between 90 minutes and two hours in total, although the more time you can allow the better. If you would like extra time for discussion or have a shorter time in which to meet then the studies may be split into two sessions, using exercise 2 as a way to recap at the beginning of the second week.

After the first study, which sets the scene by contrasting consumer culture with the relationships-centred approach of the Bible, the remaining studies can be done in any order. Some may be more or less relevant to your church, or to particular groups of people.

Because the focus of the studies is relationships with God and each other, building relationships within your group is a key part of the process. Although this is not the only way to go about it, we suggest a meal together and discussion in small groups at your tables for each of the sessions. During the meal a speaker can introduce the material and then lead them through the exercises.

For each session, you will need to organise:

- A speaker to lead the group through the material
- Users' manuals, or sheets with the exercises and discussion questions for each table
- A computer for any short film clips (optional)
- Someone to give a brief testimony, or an example story from the news, TV/film or elsewhere if you can't find anyone (optional)
- A copy of *Free to Live* for more detail

These and other resources can be downloaded or ordered from the Jubilee Centre website and the *Jubilee Lifestyle* pages: www.jubilee-centre.org/engage/jubilee_lifestyle.

How to use the teaching material

The numbered points in each section are meant to summarise the central biblical ideas for each topic, to which you can add your own thoughts and experiences to personalise the talk. In practice, you can use as much or as little of this material as you want – it is meant as an introduction to the main themes rather than a script to be read out word for word.

Explore Further

At the end of each study are some suggestions for further resources on the topic, produced by the Jubilee Centre. Broader resources are given at the end of the booklet.

Film clips for illustrations

You might find it useful to illustrate some of the ideas and principles in these studies with stories, pictures, music, film or other media. A number of short film clips related to the different themes can be downloaded from the Jubilee Centre website's Jubilee Lifestyle pages: www.jubilee-centre.org/engage/jubilee_lifestyle.

Study 1. Consumer culture vs Christianity

Leaders' preparation

- Read *Free to Live*, chapters 1 and 2. It might be helpful to pick out some quotes or other illustrations from the book to supplement the material below.
- Organise a testimony from a member of the group.
- You might also like to choose one or two examples from the Bible passages given below to illustrate different points, and ask people to read them out.

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?

Even if our faith is otherwise strong, it can be difficult to see what relevance the Bible has for certain areas of life today because our society is so different to the world of the Bible. More than that, the messages that our culture gives us are unhelpful and often harmful. And, unfortunately, they are encountered more frequently – these are messages we absorb every day from all around us from our friends and colleagues, TV, film and advertising, our work environment and other places.

But Jesus Christ is 'Lord of all or not at all': if Christianity is true, then it applies to every area of our lives. Although we can never hope to know the mind of God fully, we have an obligation to understand as much as possible – making sense of what we believe both to ourselves and to others who do not share our faith. 'Always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.' – 1 Peter 3:15-16. The idea of this study is to look at the framework and principles of our faith in order to help equip us better to apply it to all the different areas of life we may need to and give an answer to the questions of consumer culture.

Exercise 1: A life worth living (5-10 mins, icebreaker)

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 no longer want anything new, we no longer have to buy or acquire anything. The result can be a never-ending treadmill of chasing the next thing to find fulfilment, only to find it doesn't deliver what we hoped.

In contrast, the Bible tells us that we are created 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).

1. 'All the Law and the Prophets...'

Jesus is asked by the Pharisees, 'which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' This was apparently a common debate at the time, and it is possible that they were hoping he would choose one or other popular answer (perhaps Sabbath, circumcision or sacrifice) to cause arguments with different groups. Instead, Jesus quotes the principles on which the whole of the 'Law and Prophets' – the Old Testament – are founded. Every law in the Bible is about one or both of those two things: love for God, and love for neighbour.

2. Matthew 22 gives us a framework for understanding our faith

Everything in the Law and the Prophets was founded on the principles of love for God and neighbour. That is, every one of the 613 laws in the Old Testament is about developing or protecting some aspect of our relationship with God or with other people – whether the law is concerned with family, marriage, community, business, international relations, criminal justice, sacrifice or religious practice. Once we realise that all of the rules and commandments in the OT (including some that sound very strange to modern ears) have this underlying purpose in mind, they start to make more sense, because we know what they are trying to achieve.

3. This helps us grasp God's character

Due to some of the culturally distant laws in the Old Testament, many people assume that God's commandments are arbitrary and unfair. The fantasy writer Terry Pratchett describes God as a dealer in an obscure game of cards with humanity, who refuses to explain the rules but still expects us to play for infinite stakes. However, once we start to understand the Bible through the lens of Love, not just Law, it changes both how we engage with the rules themselves and how we view the character of God – who becomes a loving father rather than a picky, hard-to-please old man in the sky.

4. The Old Testament is still important

Jesus said that his coming did not do away with the laws of the Old Testament. Instead, they were made perfect in him. 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.' – Matthew 5:17-18.

This means that in some cases the way we interact with a particular law will have changed. Temple sacrifice is no longer necessary for us because Jesus was the perfect sacrifice for our sins; this is now the sacrifice through which we seek forgiveness with God. (We are also called to make sacrifices of other kinds, such as time, money or possessions, out of gratitude.) In other cases the law's requirement of our behaviour will not have changed; 'Do not murder' cannot be made any more complete in terms of behaviour, although Jesus does extend the commandment to anger, the attitude of the heart which precedes violence. Either way, the Law's underlying aim of right relationships is unchanged.

Exercise 2: Consumer faith? (10 mins, small groups)

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

Ask someone to give their testimony of coming to faith and the way this has (or hasn't yet – it may still be a 'work in progress') given them a new sense of identity and meaning in Christ, rather than in the values of the world.

Why relationships are important

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

1. God is love

Relationship is in the very nature of God – something that we can understand as we are created in his likeness. The Trinity is a permanent relationship of love between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit that has existed since before Creation. Humankind was made 'in the image of God' (Genesis 1:27), and so this need and desire for love and relationship is built into us too.

2. Love is the only fitting response to God's love

1 John 4:19-21 reads, 'We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.' God first loved us, but our part of Christianity is all about, and only about, loving God and loving others. When we add to this, we unnecessarily complicate our faith.

Money can't buy happiness...?

Research shows that more money and possessions *do* make us happier – but only briefly and up to a certain level of income. We quickly get used to the new level of comfort and start to look for further increases in living standards. We are also likely to decide our level of happiness based on those around us; we tend to compare ourselves with others and feel good if we think we are doing better.

'A whole range of studies shows that people adjust their requirements to their recent experience and that they are constantly surprised by this. People overestimate the extent to which the new house or new car will, once they have got used to it, make them happier... People also adjust their requirements in response to what other people have: keeping up with (or trying to outdo) the Joneses.'²

² Richard Layard, "The secrets of happiness" in *The New Statesman*, 3 March 2003. See <http://www.newstatesman.com/200303030016> (accessed 8 August 2011).

3. Relationships are what actually fulfil us

God created us to live in relationship with him and with each other, and this is what every law in the Bible seeks to achieve. It should come as no surprise that relationships are what make us happy and give us fulfilment – not large amounts of money or high status – as a growing body of research also shows. However, it can be hard to remember this amid all the counterfeit versions of fulfilment offered by consumer culture – each of which promises to fill a gap in some way, whether for intimacy, meaning or identity.

4. We have very different technology, but human relationships are the same

People sometimes argue that the Bible, written thousands of years ago, could not possibly have anything to say to the technologically advanced society of the 21st century West. Though it's true that our cultures are totally different, people haven't changed much at all. The same temptations and weaknesses still exist. There may have been no credit cards, TV or sophisticated advertising in the ancient world, but there was still murder, adultery and covetousness, and Paul still had to warn his readers against greed, lust, idolatry, drunkenness and pride. Because it speaks to the way people relate, not simply a set of behaviours, the Bible is still uniquely relevant today.

Exercise 3: Difficult areas of faith (10 mins, small groups)

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

God designed us to live in relationship with him and with each other. The Cross was God's solution to broken relationships, and this is what every law in the Bible is intended to achieve – right relationships. Strong relationships are also what give us fulfilment. This provides a very different framework for approaching life than the values of consumer culture, which tells us that we can understand ourselves and find happiness in what we acquire.

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.

Explore Further

- 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)

Study 2. Time is money?

Leaders' preparation

- Read *Free to Live*, chapter 3. It might be helpful to pick out some quotes or other illustrations from the book to supplement the material below.
- Organise a testimony from a member of the group.
- You might also like to choose one or two examples from the Bible passages given below to illustrate different points, and ask people to read them out.

Welcome/introduction

Time can be a tricky area to think about. We all feel pushed for time, and most of us have to spend time doing things we may not want to. A lot of people, for example, have to work long hours or at the weekend, when they would rather be spending time with friends and family. Often this is, or can feel, beyond our control – we would love to have more time to spend the way we want! 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, rather than from the unhelpful approach our culture tends to expect from us.

Why is this relevant to you?

Although some of us have more free time than others, all of us are under time pressure – none of us has all the time we need to do everything we want. Our culture teaches us to have an unhealthy approach to time. We talk of 'spending time', but hourly rates of pay, overtime, unpaid holiday, per-minute or per-second phone billing and other factors encourage us to think of time in terms of money. At the very least, consumer culture teaches us to value our time in the sense of ruthlessly budgeting it and deciding how we should be dividing it up. However, time is also the 'currency of relationships' – building up relationships and staying close to those we care most about requires engaging with them on a regular basis. Balancing the two is not always easy.

Exercise 1: Pushed for time? (5 mins, icebreaker)

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 finding time to do everything we want to is so important to us that 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.

1. A time-less society?

Time is a part of Creation, not its context – in Genesis 1 God creates day and night, rather than existing within time. However, with no clocks, biblical cultures had a different relationship with time than our time-obsessed society. It doesn't seem to have been until the New Testament that even the idea of an 'hour' as a twelfth of the day appears, in the parable of the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16). Despite this, we can still learn a lot from the Bible's teaching on time.

2. Using time wisely

The biblical writers stress that time is limited, and should not be wasted. Moses writes: ‘The length of our days is seventy years – or eighty, if we have the strength... they quickly pass, and we fly away.’ (Psalm 90:10) Proverbs is full of warnings to the ‘sluggard’ and encouragements that hard work will be rewarded. In the New Testament, Paul instructs Christians: ‘Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.’ (Ephesians 5:15-16)

3. The purpose of time

Despite this encouragement to work hard and make the most of our time, the Bible does not see work as the highest good and the best or only purpose of time, as our culture often encourages us to believe. Ecclesiastes 3 says that there is an appropriate time for everything, which includes work and rest. We were not created solely for economic productivity – or any one activity – but for relationship with God and each other, which take place in a wide variety of different contexts.

4. A priceless resource?

Although good use of time is important, the Bible does *not* say that it is our most precious resource. In 1 Kings 3, God offers the new king, Solomon, whatever he wants. Aware of his lack of experience, Solomon asks for wisdom to help him rule. ‘The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, “Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself... I will do what you have asked.”’ (1 Kings 3:10-12) Wisdom is more important than long life or wealth – time or money. Proverbs states this a different way, saying that wisdom ‘is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies...’ Here, long life, riches and peace are the fruit of wisdom, not something to be chased in their own right (Proverbs 3:13-18).

5. Jesus was flexible about time

Finally, Jesus had a remarkably flexible approach to time. He worked with individuals, large crowds and small groups, often turning an interruption or disturbance by one of these at an awkward time into an opportunity. On one occasion in Mark 5:21-43, he allows a serious but not urgent case (a woman with a long-term illness) to draw him away from a highly urgent one (a girl who was about to die) – eventually arriving after she was dead. In all cases, he was prepared to work with distractions, knowing that God could bring his glory into the situation, whatever happened.

Exercise 2: Your weekly time budget (5-10 mins, individually or in small groups)

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

Ask someone to give a testimony about the way their Christian faith has impacted their use of time. This could be in terms of how they choose to prioritise different activities and relationships to reflect the Kingdom of God rather than the things our culture tends to value most highly.

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 off from work for most of us, and a chance to relate to God and our family and community, and to rest. 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.

1. Remembering Creation

One purpose of the Sabbath was to honour God's creation of the world. 'By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.' (Genesis 2:2-3) Time is our scarcest resource, and setting this day apart is a way of remembering God's act of creation, consciously placing God before ourselves in our use of time.

2. Freedom

The second reason, given in the Deuteronomy version of the Ten Commandments, is that God rescued the Israelites from Egypt. As slaves under Pharaoh, they did not have a chance to rest. The Sabbath therefore commemorates the Exodus and the freedom it brought from unending and oppressive work. This is a cause for gratitude – we are not to trade this forced regime of work for a self-imposed one. Neither were the Israelites to force anyone else to work on this day – even their animals had to rest! This is something we ideally have to recognise as a whole society, since even if we do not consider something like shopping to be 'work', we are still responsible for the work we cause or expect others to do (including in the course of leisure activities, or perhaps even requiring children to do homework – see exercise 3).

3. Justice

The prophets often link breaking the Sabbath with injustice – an idea that may not immediately make sense to us. Amos says, 'Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying, "When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?" – skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat.' (Amos 8:4-6)

One reason for this link is that the kind of obsessive approach to work described tends to distort our priorities. For these traders, the Sabbath was not a time of rest and remembrance. God's blessing had become an inconvenience to be waited out until they could start making money again. Money was more important to them than anything else, so it is hardly surprising that they also began to act dishonestly in its pursuit.

4. Remembering what is really important

Linked to this point, taking a day out of our normal routines allows us to remember what is really important. It is a chance to spend time with God and in fellowship with other Christians, as well as friends and family. It provides an opportunity to have a break from the things which could easily become idols if we let them, including work, consumption and busyness. The question that lies behind this and the last point is, 'Who is your God?'

5. ‘The Sabbath was made for man’

Finally, Jesus stresses that we are not to make an idol out of the Sabbath either. Some of the Pharisees had gone too far the other way, and had built up volumes of complex rules to define what ‘work’ really was. In doing so, they risked becoming cold and legalistic in their Sabbath observance. They kept the Sabbath at all costs, but prevented justice, mercy and freedom – the purposes on which the Sabbath was founded – from being carried out (see Mark 2:23-3:6).

Jesus’ clarification of this law meant that we do not become slaves to the rigid divisions of time, and that another set of problems do not arise from trying to keep the Sabbath at any cost. He said that ‘the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath’ (Mark 2:27) – God has structured our weeks like this to ensure that work and busyness do not overrun our lives and detract from our faith and relationships, not to rule us.

Exercise 3: a typical Sunday (10 mins, in small groups)

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

The Bible has a lot to say about time, much of which is challenging to a culture that encourages us to ‘spend’ our time as profitably as possible and squeeze the maximum value out of it – in work, leisure or even sleep. We can end up frantically rationing our hours and minutes on different activities, but never actually managing to create more time. As Jesus says in Matthew 6:27, ‘Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?’

- Do we feel that we are ‘spending’ or ‘investing’ time?
- Is it ‘time to’ – do the next thing – or ‘time for’ – someone or something?

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.)

Explore Further

- Paul Mills, *A Brief Theology of Time* (Cambridge Papers, 1998)³
- Mike Schluter, *Eight Questions of Faith about Sundays* (Jubilee Centre, 1990)⁴

³ See online at http://www.jubilee-centre.org/resources/a_brief_theology_of_time

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

Notes

Study 3. Selling sex

Leaders' preparation

- Read *Free to Live*, chapter 4. It might be helpful to pick out some quotes or other illustrations from the book to supplement the material below.
- Organise a testimony from a member of the group.
- You might also like to choose one or two examples from the Bible passages given below to illustrate different points, and ask people to read them out.

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 understand or 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. Much of the time it has 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 uncritically 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 personally affected many Christians. Leaders may need to be particularly aware of any pastoral care needs in this respect.

Why is this relevant to you?

We live in a 'hypersexualised' culture. Themes of sex and romance appear across the spectrum of entertainment media – TV, film, magazines, and more – and are used in adverts to sell consumer goods of all kinds. In the process, sexual relationship itself has become consumerised, and often treated almost like the things it is used to sell: as a form of entertainment or a commodity designed to suit the needs of the user, subject to choice and change at our whim. We treat sex in terms of the individual and the couple, rather than any broader context; the guiding principle is 'Sex between consenting adults doesn't harm anyone else.' In popular culture, sex is arguably more important than anything else for determining our identity and finding fulfilment.

It is impossible to avoid taking on board cultural messages about this important aspect of human nature: they are all around us. And yet these messages are often extremely harmful, confused, and opposed to biblical principles. This study aims to reaffirm God's ideals around sex and romantic relationships.

You may disagree with more or less of the detail in this study, particularly around the biblical ideals for sex. The main purpose, however, is to contrast the overall biblical themes and standards with our culture's own ideals, not to get caught up in the details.

Exercise 1: TV and film (5 mins, icebreaker)

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; Jesus says, ‘So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.’ (Matthew 7:12) If we’re not harming anyone else, why does the Bible try to restrict our freedom around sex?

1. One flesh

Our culture encourages us to put ourselves first and make choices for our own benefit. Relationships are often ‘what *I* want now and until further notice, for as long as *I’m* happy with it, because it’s *my* right to exercise *my* choice’ (which is hardly a good premise to start a long-term, stable relationship on). The ‘one flesh’ ideal for sex in Genesis, as understood by Paul and Jesus, is for a faithful, permanent relationship – the opposite of choice and change. In the Bible, therefore, sex effectively means marriage. Ephesians 5:25-32 (which also quotes this ‘one flesh’ verse) suggests that this faithfulness in marriage is a reflection of God’s own faithfulness to us.

2. Understanding ‘harm’

Our cultural assumption that sex between consenting adults doesn’t harm anyone else is a myth; in fact, sexual relationships affect a wide range of people beyond the couple immediately involved, who did not consent to them. We are so used to considering ourselves as individuals, and emphasising our rights and freedoms as such, that we rarely consider the impacts beyond our own lives. The Bible doesn’t see sex in these terms; as in everything, the framework for its thinking is the context of right relationships, with God and with everyone else – not just the other sexual partner. Since we do not live in isolation from each other, there are always consequences: emotional, relational and even financial.

Consenting adults harm no one else?

Sexual relationships have significant impacts on the couple themselves – including on any future relationships – on the nuclear and extended families, on friends, colleagues and the workplace, and on society as a whole. Although there isn’t enough space to discuss it in depth here,⁵ a few examples go a long way to disproving one of our most widespread cultural lies:

→We carry expectations (‘baggage’) forward from previous relationships to the next. This is one reason that couples who have lived with and separated from other people before marrying are more likely to divorce: the experience of previous relationships tends to shape future patterns of thinking.

→After parental separation, four out of ten grandparents lose all face-to-face contact with their grandchildren.

→Absenteeism from work typically rises after a break-up. Alternatively, people are at work but unproductive because they are distracted due to stress, anxiety and depression.

⁵ This subject is dealt with in much greater depth in Guy Brandon, *Just Sex: Is it ever just sex?* (IVP, 2009).

→The financial cost of relationship breakdown (including benefits payments, health impacts, educational outcomes and other areas) is around £42 billion – or £1,350 per taxpayer – per year.

You will be able to think of many more examples. What we really mean by ‘sex between consenting adults harms no one else’ is something more like: ‘sex between consenting adults is such an important freedom to us that it’s worth the collateral damage.’

3. Sexual freedom is anything but

Terms like ‘freedom’ sound like they should be at home in the Bible. But the consumerisation of sex – in TV, film, adverts and pornography – places an implicit pressure on us (and particularly women) to engage in sexual relationships, which are often claimed to be of no great consequence anyway. So choice leads to the expectation that everyone should exercise this choice – meaning the only invalid choice is to refuse. This emphasis on choice also misses the importance of sex in God’s eyes. As well as affecting other people, Paul argued that sex has consequences for our relationship with God (see 1 Corinthians 6:18-20).

4. Striking a balance

In the Corinthian church, there seem to have been two groups of people. One thought that sex was of no consequence and they could do what they liked (1 Corinthians 6:12-13); another thought it was intrinsically wrong and should be avoided even within marriage (1 Corinthians 7:1-5). Our culture often makes the first mistake. However, we can also place too much emphasis on sex, this time by assuming that it is more important than anything else. The Bible maintains the significance of sex, but doesn’t overstate it. Sexual sin is not worse than any other sin (as you might be mistaken to think, when listening to some Christians), and neither is sex so fundamental to our lives that we cannot possibly go without it.

Exercise 2: Christian culture (10 mins, small groups)

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

Ask someone to give a testimony about how they have approached their romantic relationship(s) differently since becoming a Christian, and why.

Singleness

Alongside the medical and cultural changes of the last few decades, sex has come to mean something different. Previously, there was a far closer link between sex, childbirth and family. Effective contraception has meant that this link has (in theory) been reduced; sex is now not intrinsically connected with family, responsibility and stable relationship. Instead, it has shifted to being more about personal identity, and the benefits to individuals and couples. Because we can

have sex without pregnancy resulting, the message is that we should. Sex is now seen as so important to our identity as humans that voluntarily celibate singles can be viewed as incomplete, unfulfilled, struggling with their sexuality, just plain strange, or even worse.

1. Sex and intimacy

TV and film often depict sexual relationship as the best kind of relationship there is, and the one way you can find fulfilment and intimacy with another person. Sex is treated as a short cut to intimacy, rather than being a part of an already intimate relationship. For this reason, there is the sense that sex improves a lesser relationship – that being ‘just’ friends is not enough, and that when we first meet someone of the opposite sex we assess them as a potential partner to determine the grounds on which we approach getting to know them.

The Bible teaches that intimacy and belonging are to be found across a wide range of relationships, with God, family, friends, fellow Christians – as well as within marriage. It has a far broader understanding of intimacy than our culture does, and does not emphasise sex or romance over every other kind of relationship. Love, belonging, and identity can and should occur in many different contexts.

2. 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. We do not find our security in another person but in Christ. Colossians 3:11 reads, ‘Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.’ Paul was breaking down the cultural barriers of the ancient world, making sure his readers understood that it was not their earthly circumstances that determined their salvation. Today, we might say the same for job, income, couple status or other outward factors – but it can be just as hard for us to remember this as it was for Christians in Paul’s time.

3. We haven’t got this right

This is an area that the Church has got wrong in many ways, but also in which there are many opportunities for witness. Even in church there may be an undue emphasis on couple relationship, perhaps in the way we tend to value marriage or being in a couple above singleness and friendship, or the way that we interact with each other (perhaps in the way and reasons we treat the opposite sex) – or even in sermon illustrations. Many single Christians are lonely, in part as a result of this.

4. The Church has to be countercultural in this area

One reason why sex has become so important is because our society does not provide the intimacy and sense of belonging that people need, and for which we are created. Family breakdown, long working hours and moving for work and study all mean that people do not have the same kinds of networks of belonging that they might once have done; aloneness and loneliness are often the result. Sex or a romantic partner can be seen as an antidote to this loneliness.

The Church has an opportunity to be a counter to this harmful trend, by providing the kind of relationships that people really need. One of the reasons that some courses for those seeking to learn more about Christianity have been so successful is because it provides an opportunity for people to talk and get to know each other for several weeks – something that many people don’t consistently get anywhere else.

Exercise 3: Being a relational church (10 mins, small groups)

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 encourage 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.

Towards the end of the discussion time, draw the small groups back together and ask each one to share their ideas with the others.

Conclusion

Consumer culture tells us that sex between consenting adults doesn't harm anyone else, and is of no wider significance. But it also tells us that finding the right sexual partner is more important than anything else, since this is the one way to find intimacy and belonging. The Bible tells us that sex is important enough to guard, and keep within marriage, but it also says that it is not the only way to find our identity or a sense of belonging in the world. Intimacy comes in many forms, and can be found with friends, family and other Christians, as well as within a romantic relationship.

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.

Explore Further

- 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

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)

Notes

4. Just shopping

Leaders' preparation

- Read *Free to Live*, chapter 5. It might be helpful to pick out some quotes or other illustrations from the book to supplement the material below. This is particularly true for the section on Fairtrade, organic and locally-produced goods – the material below is just a starting point, and there is much more to draw on in the book if you need to.
- If you are sharing a meal as part of your session, it might be an idea to think particularly carefully about the ingredients you use this time!
- Organise a testimony from a member of the group.
- You might also like to choose one or two examples from the Bible passages given below to illustrate different points, and ask people to read them out.

Welcome/introduction

Our shopping habits are one of the easiest places we can start to make a difference to the world we live in, and one of the best ways to start really thinking about the issues that matter the most to us as Christians. There are so many different 'ethical' choices available in the shops, whether in terms of food, clothing or other goods: organic, Fairtrade, local, and GM-free, to name a few. But this huge choice also means we can receive lots of different and often contradictory messages about what it is most important to achieve. The purpose of this study is to begin to look at the opportunities and problems this poses from a distinctively Christian perspective. It does not claim to offer all the answers, but intends to open up discussion to help you make a decision based on your faith, rather than an agenda set by another person or company, or any other grounds.

Why is this relevant to you?

Although this study could be about shopping of many different kinds – such as clothes, electronics, entertainment and other areas – it's easiest to start by focusing on food. This is probably one of our most regular categories of spending: it's likely that all of us shop for food, and certainly all of us eat! This is also one of the biggest ways in which we exercise consumer choice. How many of us would be satisfied eating the same dish over and over again, day in, day out, for weeks on end? Although we may not think about it too hard, we usually eat three different meals a day, plus snacks and drinks in between. Even if we have the same breakfast most days, and possibly the same lunch, this is still around a dozen dishes a week, with many more ingredients.

We are blessed with a huge array of choice in our shops and supermarkets. Some of these choices will have good implications and some bad, but none are likely to be entirely neutral. Despite the confusing number of options on offer, this is actually a great opportunity. We have to eat, so every time we buy food, we have a chance to make a difference somewhere. The question is, exactly *what* difference are we trying to make – and how can we most effectively make it?

Exercise 1: Ethical consumers? (5 mins, icebreaker)

Most of us include ethical grounds in at least some of our purchasing decisions, rather than making them on price and quality alone. Discuss in your groups 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

When we shop, often choosing between so many seemingly good alternatives, it helps to have in mind what we are really trying to achieve through our purchases. Jesus summarised the Law in terms of right relationships; it is useful to start by using this as the lens through which to judge all of the different and competing claims that the various 'ethical' brands make. Note that we won't be able to help everyone, and we may need to choose between two good options – in the same way that there are many good causes to give our money to, but we cannot support every charity.

1. God wants justice and compassion

So often our consumer choices are available at the expense of the most vulnerable on the planet. Again and again, the Old Testament prophets criticised those who grew rich and enjoyed wealth at the expense of the poor and needy. God is concerned with the most marginalised people in the world. 'He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free, the Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.' – Psalm 146:7-9

2. Our privilege brings responsibility, not licence

Even if we do not feel wealthy, there is no question that, globally speaking, we are among the most privileged on the planet. Jesus compared his listeners waiting for the kingdom of God with a servant temporarily put in charge of his master's household – a position of responsibility he could either fulfil or abuse. The same is true of us; we have been given more choice and abundance than almost anyone else in the world, or throughout history. 'From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded' – Luke 12:48.

3. Keeping the Spirit, not the Letter of the Law

Jesus criticised those, particularly some of the Pharisees, whose practice was a series of legalistic decisions rather than the right attitude of the heart (e.g. Matthew 23). The danger in this area is that we can do the same, latching onto certain brand names or labels, assuming that they solve all the problems we need to, and thinking no more about it as we have already done our bit. But we need to take time to evaluate our decisions, not treat different brands like a rubber stamp to ease our consciences. This is highly challenging to a cash-rich, time-poor culture! Unfortunately, however, the area is not amenable to a quick fix (though the homework at the end of the session gives you an opportunity to make it a little easier for everyone).

Counterintuitive choices

It is often tempting to treat certain brand names and labels (Fairtrade, organic, etc) as rubber stamps to ease our consciences when we buy food or other goods. However, this risks becoming a legalistic approach that overlooks the attitude of our hearts. In addition, it can reduce our decisions to a single criterion – a logo or phrase – meaning 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

4. The good can be the enemy of the best

In Mark 7:11-12 Jesus criticises the Pharisees' practice of declaring a gift 'Corban' – that is, dedicating it to the Temple, a vow which took irrevocable precedence over any other recipient, meaning that the gift could not be used to support their parents. Giving to the Temple was not wrong in itself; it was just that in these circumstances it denied a prior claim and meant they broke the commandment to honour their father and mother.

In our case, we are unlikely to see our shopping decisions in quite this way. Often, the problem will be choosing between good alternatives. However, there will be circumstances where one advantage clearly does come with too high a price. (For example, it is probably not worth buying organic blueberries if they have to be flown across the globe to get to us.) Incidentally, there may be occasions when the best option is not to buy a particular product at all – especially the luxury items which can often have a disproportionately high impact – but to do something else with the money.

Exercise 2: Integrated lives (10 mins, small groups)

When we buy 'ethical' products (assuming we have thought about our decision and are not using it as an excuse to disengage) we are 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 our everyday lives? How might we support them in other ways, or else reassess our priorities?

Testimony

Ask someone to speak for a few minutes about the ways in which they try to live out their Christian faith in how they shop. Ideally this should be a more nuanced and thought-through decision than simply buying a certain brand name or label.

A broader picture

This section briefly discusses some of the most common ethical labels and the scope of what they do and do not achieve. There are many other schemes and certifications available (some of which are given at the end of the study). However, since these are among the most well known, it makes sense to start here.

1. Fairtrade

The Fairtrade certification aims to ensure that growers receive fair prices for their produce, are supported by social and environmental projects and have some stability in their contracts – all principles supported by the Bible.

However, there are many ways to trade fairly that are not Fairtrade, and there are other certifications (though no independent ones). Many producers cannot become eligible for Fairtrade status for one reason or another – or have no reason to do so. This polarises the debate, since anything without a Fairtrade logo can appear 'unfair' – even if it is an equally good cause.

2. Organic and GM-free

Many Christians like the idea of organic food, since it appears more respectful and caring of Creation not to eat meat that has been heavily treated with antibiotics, and fruit and vegetables that have not been sprayed with pesticides or genetically altered.

Against this, we have to note that although caring for the land is a biblical concern, a specific command for organic farming is harder to justify. An 'organic' label also requires a certification process, but this means that uncertified goods may equally well be organic or otherwise show concern for the environment, yet not have gone through this process.

3. Local

All things being equal, locally-produced food is likely to have a lower carbon footprint than food grown further afield. Buying local can also help support the local economy and strengthen relationships within the community.

On the other hand, we need to weigh up these benefits with the chance to help those more disadvantaged than ourselves in low-income countries. Also, just because something is locally produced does not mean that it is always more environmentally friendly. We need to factor in the total energy costs of producing it (perhaps in a heated greenhouse), processing and packaging it and transporting it to the shop – as well as our own journey to the shop and the habits we display in the rest of our lives.

Exercise 3: Making a difference (10 mins, small groups)

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

'Ethical' brand names and labels do help – they are useful signposts to particular qualities, and they often do a lot of good in their respective areas. However, the danger for Christians is that we use them not as tools to help us engage with the different root issues, but instead as a series of instantly-recognisable boxes to tick, allowing us to go about our business and avoiding the need for further engagement.

Jesus warned that true faith is not expressed legalistically, but involved real repentance and a more profound change in our habits. If we are serious about global trade justice and environmental issues, we need a holistic and heart-felt approach.

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 and 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. Some ideas are given below, but these are only intended to be a starting point. Briefly explain why you made each suggestion. Bear in mind

that you are unlikely to be able to solve all the problems inherent in 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 the people in your group a small number of products so that they can make an informed decision more easily.

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.

Explore Further

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

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

Some suggestions to get you started...

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

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)

Notes

5. Social footprint: our environmental impact

Leaders' preparation

- Read *Free to Live*, chapter 6. It might be helpful to pick out some quotes or other illustrations from the book to supplement the material below.
- Organise a testimony from a member of the group.
- You might also like to choose one or two examples from the Bible passages given below to illustrate different points, and ask people to read them out.

Welcome/introduction

Thanks to news reports about pollution, the loss of natural habitats, climate change and the increasing scarcity of renewable and non-renewable resources, the environment has never been a more high-profile issue. To a certain extent, we all have to play our part – for example, recycling is compulsory in many areas now. But most of our efforts are still voluntary – how and if we travel, what we buy, how much power we use – meaning that we have to choose how to act. With so much information out there, and so many different approaches, it can be hard to know how to engage with environmental issues from a specifically Christian perspective.

Why is this relevant to you?

If ever there was a subject that was relevant to everyone, this is it! No one can claim that environmental issues don't affect them, or that our choices now won't have an impact for us in years to come, on our children and for future generations.

From a Christian point of view, there are further reasons to care. If God is the creator of the world, surely the respect with which we treat his Creation is a part of how we honour him? In addition, how we treat the environment has enormous consequences for how we treat each other – the two cannot be disentangled. Our attitude towards the environment reflects our attitude towards our neighbours – whether the ones that live next door, in our church or community, on the other side of the world, or the ones who will share our planet in the future.

Exercise 1: Created – in God's image (5 mins, icebreaker)

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.

1. Gratitude

The first reason that we should care for the environment is simply that God created it. This was partly – though not entirely – for our benefit. 'Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground – trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food.' (Genesis 2:8-9) Making the earth was an expression of creative love by God, as was the culmination of his work, the

creation of humanity (see Genesis 2). Gratitude and the right use of the world in which he placed us are the appropriate response to this act of generosity.

2. ‘...and it was good’

Read Job 38:4-6. Although we enjoy the good qualities of God’s creation, we need to remember that the earth was not made solely for our benefit. The repeated phrase ‘and it was good’ in Genesis 1 occurs even before the creation of men and women: Creation existed before us and was good in its own right, without humanity.

Similarly, in the book of Job (chapters 38 and 39), God makes it clear that the earth exists apart from mankind, who does not fully understand it and cannot grasp or control its physical processes. There are aspects of Creation that exist totally apart from us and will go on with or without us. The earth is the context in which we have been placed to live out our lives and give glory to God, but – in the words of Psalm 24 – ‘The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.’

3. Stewardship is our God-given job

‘The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.’ (Genesis 2:15) God placed Adam in the beautiful garden he had created, and instructed him to look after it. Although we may understand the nature of this task slightly differently after the Fall – in terms of restoration rather than maintenance – there is never any indication that God cancels his commandment to humanity to care for his Creation.

4. There is a link between environmental damage and sin

Read Leviticus 26:3-5 and Hosea 4:1-3. There are many places throughout the Bible where either keeping God’s commandments is linked to the health and productivity of the land, or where rebellion against God is linked to crop failure and environmental disaster. In the Old Testament, these often appear to be a direct blessing or punishment. Today, the intrinsic link between the two is easier to understand; environmental disaster, whether on a short-term, acute scale like an oil spill or a long-term, ongoing scale like the impact of fossil fuel usage, is often down to human carelessness or selfishness.

Exercise 2: How green are you? (10 mins)

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?

Testimony

Ask someone from your group to say a few words about how their Christian faith has affected the way they engage with environmental issues.

Consumer culture, the environment and justice

This series has been about the way that the values of consumer culture compete for our loyalty and undermine our faith in different areas of life. The environment is no different; the way that we live has an enormous impact on the world around us, which in turn affects others – whether we recognise it, or not.

Read Psalm 65. The God who forgives us is the same God who created the earth. How do you understand the link between these two things?

1. Our choices have consequences

Consumer culture places an emphasis on our choices. It says that choice and change are fundamental, because this is how we find our place in the world, express ourselves, and shape our identities. This means we are encouraged into high levels of consumption. But every time we make a choice – buy something new, take a journey, decide on a meal – we also have to be aware of the vast number of processes and people this involves along the way. We are not individuals making isolated decisions: our choices impact other people and the environment at every stage.

2. The cost is more than the price tag

We have to recognise that the impacts of our choices extend further than our wallets. Consuming natural resources to excess damages the environment, and the effects of this fall disproportionately on the world's poorest. Those in low-income countries are already vulnerable to drought, floods, crop failure and other natural disasters. Further pollution, climate change, conflict and interruption of the natural resources on which they rely, in the interests of our short-term gain, are injustices for which we are responsible. This responsibility is not a welcome admission for consumer culture, which sees such choices as rights: it says the only real question I have to answer before taking such a decision is whether I can afford it.

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'^{8,9}

3. Financial wealth can undermine relational riches

Although we are financially richer than ever before, this seems to have come at the expense of the things that really make us happy. God has built the need for relationship into us, as part of his own image in which we are created. However, both the environment and our relationships can be joint casualties of consumer culture: relational and environmental damage tend to go hand in hand.

We live in smaller and smaller units – more people than ever before live alone, which is proportionately more harmful to the environment. We travel further for work, and we frequently prefer to drive alone in our own cars, or sit on the train without interacting with anyone else. We

⁸ 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 8 August 2011).

⁹ Richard Layard, "Happiness is Back", *Prospect Magazine*, 17 March 2005.

often eat alone, and consume quick convenience meals with lots of packaging and ingredients shipped from abroad. We can be stubbornly protective of our individuality, which comes with a financial, environmental, relational and spiritual cost.

Exercise 3: Environmental and relational solutions (10 mins, groups)

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

We need to start understanding environmental issues as questions of justice – not technology, politics or economics. The problem ‘is not one vast, impersonal challenge, but rather billions of tiny, personal ones. It is your full boiling kettle in the morning, your daily drive to work, your weekly supermarket shop, your bi-annual holiday. It is a thousand things we do without thinking: everyday behaviour that we assume, quite wrongly, is a normal part of life and therefore sustainable.’¹⁰

Once we accept that 1) stewarding Creation is our God-given task, 2) environmental issues are about our personal decisions, and 3) they are matters of justice, then Christians cannot legitimately avoid making a response. Looking after the world God has given us is not an optional extra for Christians – it is an unavoidable aspect of Jesus’ interpretation of the Law as promoting love for God and our neighbours. Fortunately, the solution to these problems also comes with a blessing: the answers to environmental harm are also answers to the isolation and relational poverty that can result from the ways we use our material wealth.

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?

Explore Further

- 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)¹¹

¹⁰ Nick Spencer and Robert White, *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living* (SPCK, 2007), p. 49.

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

Notes

6. Worship with wealth

Leaders' preparation

- Read *Free to Live*, chapter 7. It might be helpful to pick out some quotes or other illustrations from the book to supplement the material below.
- Organise a testimony from a member of the group.
- You might also like to choose one or two examples from the Bible passages given below to illustrate different points, and ask people to read them out.

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 everyone, though some of it will be significant to everyone. Money affects all of us, whether we think we have a lot of it or very little. Everyone, now and in the course of their lives, will have to steward some combination of: cash, bank accounts, overdraft, credit card debt, unsecured loans, mortgage, savings, pensions, shares, property and other assets. How we do so is relevant to our faith.

In some ways, we live in very different times from those when the Bible was written. The biblical economy was based on land and agriculture, unlike our modern, technologically-driven and debt-based economy. Some of the things we take for granted may look very different through biblical eyes. But human nature hasn't changed in 3,000 years, and many of the challenges of dealing with money are the same. It's no coincidence that Jesus spoke so much about money – people were as obsessed with it in his time as they are now.

Exercise 1: Are you wealthy? (5-10 mins, icebreaker)

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

Leader: (after a few minutes) Typically, we decide this question by comparing ourselves with other people. Given the choice between a job where you get £50,000 per year and your colleagues £30,000, or a similar one in which you receive £60,000 and your colleagues £80,000, most people would choose the first.

The median salary for full-time employees in the UK is around £25,000 (that is, half of people earn more than this, half earn less). In London, this rises to nearly £33,000. But someone who earns £25,000 is among the top 2% richest people in the world. Even someone on minimum wage is among the top 11% in the world.

Does this change the way you answer the question?

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. This section briefly looks at some of the biblical principles about money.

1. Money is not bad in itself

Christians can sometimes keep their finances 'at arms length'. Perhaps they seem irrelevant to our faith, or perhaps taking too much interest in money and investment seems distasteful to us. But the Bible tells us that it is the *love* of money that is the problem – money is not bad (or good) of itself. 'Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.' (1 Timothy 6:10). Jesus was supported in his ministry by wealthy men and women, and rich people were not all required to give up their wealth when they came to faith (e.g. Nicodemus in John 3, or Joseph of Arimathea in Matthew 27:57).

2. However, wealth does come with clear spiritual warnings attached!

For all this, money *does* present problems to many people's faith. In the gospels, money is often a barrier to the Kingdom of God. The rich young ruler in Luke 18:18-30 chose his wealth over following Jesus, and the rich fool in Luke 12:13-21 futilely devotes his life to accumulating riches, without thinking about what will happen to him or them. In the Old Testament, the prophets frequently accuse the rich of oppressing the poor (e.g. Amos 2:6-7, Isaiah 3:14-15).

James writes that, although we are saved by what we believe and not what we do, how we act is still a measure of how seriously we take our faith (James 2:14-26). What we do with our money is a good example. Martin Luther talked about three levels of conversion: the conversion of the mind, the conversion of the heart, and the hardest: the conversion of the wallet. How we save, spend and invest can be seen as a barometer of our faith.

3. Money and work are about stewardship

How we think of money will be connected to how we think about work – what we do to earn money. In Genesis 2:15, God puts Adam in the Garden of Eden to 'work it and take care of it'. Work is primarily about stewardship of Creation, and so is money. We can be good or bad stewards of what God gives us. We can use (or not use) wealth to further justice and healthy relationships, or to hinder them. Rarely can money be used neutrally – there is always someone on the other side of the transaction, even if we can't see them.

4. We are responsible for what and by whom our savings are used

The way we use our money has real consequences for other people. It can either help people or harm them. Sometimes, we give control over this to others (for example, many people do not know what their bank does to generate interest on their balance, or the choices that their pension fund manager makes on their behalf). In many cases, decisions will be taken solely to maximise the interest or return on the money. However, just because we do not know what is being done with our money does not mean we are not responsible for its effects.

Exercise 2: What is the purpose of money? (5 mins, individually/small groups)

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.

Testimony

Ask someone to give a testimony about how they decided to make changes in the way they deal with money (ideally beyond tithing or other charitable giving) as a way of working out their faith. This might be either in their job or in their personal finances.

Dealing with money as a Christian

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

1. Justice

Jesus requires justice in all our financial transactions. The master in this parable is ‘a hard man. You take out what you did not put in and reap what you did not sow.’ (v. 21) ‘Reaping where we haven’t sown’ – collecting a return that our money hasn’t really earned by producing anything useful – might stretch to a number of activities financially. At the extreme end of the scale, it might include gambling; short-term speculation in shares or commodities may be a less obvious example.

Note that just because another party consents to an exchange doesn’t make it fair. The point of many such transactions is to saddle someone else with a loss so that you can gain. Buying low and selling high are not wrong in themselves – the Bible does not limit the amount of money we are allowed to make. But it *is* interested in the relationship between buyer and seller.

2. Interest

In the case of the parable of the minas, this injustice is applied to collecting interest. The Old Testament banned interest in almost every case. It was seen as a form of injustice, a way by which the rich extracted money from the poor (e.g. Proverbs 28:8). In this parable, Jesus confirms that collecting interest is just the kind of thing a ‘hard man’ might do, reaping where he hasn’t sown.

This is an enormous and impossible challenge for us today! Our whole economy is based on debt and interest, and so it is practically unavoidable (especially with inflation, which was not a factor in biblical times). However, we must still remember that financial returns have to come from somewhere. They are not just the product of an impersonal market: somewhere, at the other end of the chain of transactions, there are real people. For example, we often shop around for the best rate on bank accounts and credit cards, without even asking what the bank is doing to produce that level of interest.

3. Playing an active role

This parable suggests that we should take an active role in what is being done with our money. The master, a self-confessed ‘hard man’, argues that the lazy servant – one who plays no part in managing his master’s money well – should still have put his mina on deposit to collect interest.

Just as his response is in character for a 'hard man', since collecting interest is something a hard man might do, it is in character for the irresponsible servant, who need take no further action.

This ongoing management is linked to responsibility. In terms of biblical principles, there is a huge difference between, for example, investing in buy-to-let housing and short-term stock market speculation. In the first case, the owner assumes overall responsibility of the building (e.g. for any damage, maintenance and perhaps a mortgage), which is rewarded by the tenants' rent payments. In the second case, there is no benefit to the company, its employees, customers and other investors – quite the opposite, since the purpose is effectively to remain at a distance, skimming value off the company and leave someone else with a corresponding loss. (There are other arguments around this idea that you might want to weigh up, such as that some of these practices help give a more realistic picture of the worth of a stock; the challenge is assessing these objectively rather than using them to confirm what you would like to believe!)

4. Hoarding

With all the biblical requirements, it might seem easiest to do nothing with your money and keep it under the mattress... but unfortunately, hoarding isn't an option either! The master in the parable instructs his servants to 'Put this money to work' – not to hide it in the ground. The point was not just to make money, but to learn how responsible each of his servants was. When he returns, the first two servants are each put in charge of several cities, because they proved trustworthy and capable with the amount they had been given. The message is that God expects us to act responsibly with what he gives us. (Note that just because the master in the parable is a 'hard man' doesn't mean that God is too – not all of their characteristics have to be the same. Parables tend to make an overall point rather than a detailed analogy – just think of Jesus comparing the Kingdom of God to yeast or a mustard seed in Luke 13:18-20.)

Exercise 3: Mapping your finances (10 mins, individually)

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

This is one of the most challenging studies in the series. The Bible tells us that money is not inherently bad, but does come with clear spiritual warnings. We have a responsibility to steward our money well, and cannot ignore this by entrusting its care to others who may not share our concerns. How we spend and invest can never be neutral; it can either bring about justice or harm others. Finally, the Bible is critical of ‘reaping where we haven’t sown’ – something extremely challenging in our modern economy.

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 – especially for after retirement, when many people find their networks of relationships shrink – 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.

Explore Further

- Paul Mills, *The Bible and Money: managing one’s money in the end times*. Eight Bible studies (Jubilee Centre, 2009)¹²
- Paul Mills, *The great financial crisis: a biblical diagnosis* (Cambridge Paper, 2011)¹³
- Nick Spencer, *The Measure of All Things* (Jubilee Centre, 2003)¹⁴

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

¹³ See online at http://www.jubilee-centre.org/resources/the_great_financial_crisis_a_biblical_diagnosis

¹⁴ See online at http://www.jubilee-centre.org/resources/the_measure_of_all_things

Notes

7. Spiritual health

Leaders' preparation

- Read *Free to Live*, chapter 8. It might be helpful to pick out some quotes or other illustrations from the book to supplement the material below.
- Organise a testimony from a member of the group.
- You might also like to choose one or two examples from the Bible passages given below to illustrate different points, and ask people to read them out.

Welcome/introduction

Whereas the previous studies have been around specific issues and the way that our faith impacts how we act in these areas, 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 the way we express our faith – which obviously also has a further impact on other areas discussed in these studies. How we engage with the world around us and the assumptions and values we take on board can therefore have an enormous effect on how we live out our Christian faith.

Why is this relevant to you?

The values we absorb every day play a major part in shaping the way we engage with our faith. We have become used to exercising choice, which is the highest good in consumer culture. If we don't like a TV channel – even for as long as an advert break – we change it and watch something else. We shop around for the service providers who are best going to suit our needs. We pick from a vast range of goods at the shops to find anything from toothpaste and coffee to sandwiches and electronics to fit our requirements. If one of our favourite products changes its recipe or format, there are plenty of other options on offer. To a large extent, we can tailor the world around us to our own desires.

Although there is nothing wrong with this when you are choosing a tube of toothpaste, the same principles can easily be transferred to other areas of life, including our faith. If there are aspects of Christianity that we would prefer not to engage with, we can always focus on something else or switch them off, like an unwanted TV programme. The result is a kind of 'Consumer Christianity', a version of the faith that has been fine-tuned to our own desires and shaped around our principles, rather than one that we allow to challenge us and change us.

Exercise 1: Consumer faith? (5 mins, icebreaker)

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. For example, we may be able to choose the church we attend, especially if we live in a big city. Some people spend weeks 'shopping' for the best experience of church, perhaps never settling anywhere properly. Worse, we exercise the same choice with aspects of our faith itself; if we don't understand a particular area (like sex, suffering, or the resurrection), we may simply discard it.

The 'try this and find fulfilment' messages of our culture presents a neatly packaged version of the Christian faith that is close to the truth but that turns out to be a lie. Consumer Christianity claims something like, 'Jesus loves you and wants to bless you. He can take away your problems and give you success in all you do and in all you hope for from life.' No wonder that so many Christians struggle silently with depression; when the neat salesman's pitch they have accepted appears not to work, they believe that they have failed.

1. The Bible doesn't promise us an easy life

Because we have built a faith around ourselves, we can often feel that either we or God are at fault when it doesn't 'work' – when things go wrong. This common theme also means that we can feel reluctant to voice doubts, for fear we won't be accepted. But Jesus doesn't promise a trouble-free life – quite the opposite. He actually says, 'In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.' The Bible doesn't promise that faith will take away all our pain and problems. It warns of trouble, because the World does not understand our faith, but offers ultimate hope and security in God.

2. The biblical authors often express their pain and even anger at God

We often feel reluctant to express our true feelings for God – especially in front of other people – partly because they may not fit the expectations raised by the version of faith we have accepted. But throughout the Bible there are examples of people who have freely recorded their unhappiness, pain and anger towards God, as well as their gratitude and joy. Perhaps most noticeably, in Psalm 73, Asaph – effectively the Temple's worship leader in the time of king David – openly admits that he envies the wicked for their prosperity and resents his own obedience to God. Such emotion is part of the full experience of faith.

3. Suffering was an integral part of Jesus' ministry

This expression of pain and anxiety even extends to Jesus. Although for most of his life Jesus experienced close relationship with his father, there were times towards the end when he felt sorrow, fear and abandonment. In Gethsemane he pleaded with God, 'Take this cup from me.' (Mark 14:36) Near to death on the cross, he shouted 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34) Earlier in Mark's gospel, after predicting his death, Jesus warned his listeners that they too could expect suffering. 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.' (Mark 8:34)

4. Suffering occurs not only despite our faith, but because of it

We can often end up believing that faith should prevent all suffering or misfortune. The reality is that many people in the world experience suffering and persecution *because* of their faith. As C. S. Lewis wrote, 'The real problem is not why some pious, humble, believing people suffer, but why some do not.' This was often true of the biblical prophets, whose messages to their countrymen were not always welcome. Jeremiah clearly hated being a prophet, and was persecuted throughout his ministry. On several occasions he complains to God, who corrects, encourages and even rebukes him, but never suggests that those feelings are invalid (e.g. Jeremiah 12:1-5).

Exercise 2: Suffering servants (10 mins, small groups)

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.

Testimony

Ask one of your group to give a testimony about how they have come through a time of suffering, and how this affected their faith.

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 16:16 and 18).

1. Love your neighbour as yourself

Consumerism teaches us to draw our self-esteem from the world around us: what we earn, what we own, how we look, where we work. The Bible, on the other hand, tells us to draw our self-worth from the fact that we are redeemed children of God, who loves us despite our sin. These two worldviews are utterly opposed: consumerism can only survive if it convinces us of a deficiency in our identity.

When Jesus summarises the purpose of the Law, he reiterates the Old Testament command to 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (Matthew 22:39/Leviticus 19:18). Although it is not a core part of his message here, being able to love others does presuppose a degree of self-love, because we have to understand that we are all valued and forgiven by God.

2. God is constant

The fact of God's steadfast love can be difficult to believe in an environment where relationships are typically imperfect and conditional. If our relationships with our earthly parents have been bad, it may be hard to accept the existence of a loving heavenly father. In addition, consumerism's emphasis on choice tends to extend to all of our relationships: friends, partners and workmates can be seen almost as service providers, and we continue the relationship only as long as it is of benefit to us. When a relationship reaches the end of its useful life to us, we find another one that will serve us better. If this is how we assume all human relationships work, do we assume that God approaches his relationship with us any differently?

3. In the world, not of the world

The tension between Christianity and consumer culture does not mean that we should withdraw entirely from it – after all, it is probably where the majority of our friends, relatives and colleagues live. We should, however, be careful how we engage with it and do so carefully and critically. The Israelites were not commanded to avoid all contact with foreign cultures, only to avoid the practices that risked compromising their religious identity. Similarly, Paul kept a strong sense of his Christian identity whilst immersing himself in different groups, in order to be 'all things to all people' to further the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

4. What we consume shapes our character

This care in engaging with the world around us is important because it has such a significant influence on us. We cannot expect to remain unchanged if we consume our culture uncritically. Paul warned the Philippian church to take care of their thought-habits: 'whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.' (Philippians 4:8) Similarly Proverbs warns, 'Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life' (4:23).

Exercise 3: Thinking differently (10 mins, small groups)

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

Consumer culture can seriously affect our faith by giving us false expectations about what Christianity promises. It can be easy to see it as another path to happiness, like another product in an advertisement. But the Bible suggests that faith will often come with suffering, either despite or even because of it. If we believe the lie that our faith will protect us from all pain, we will assume that our hope is false when things go wrong.

In addition, consumer culture encourages us to pick and choose our relationships, including aspects of the one we have with God. As a result, it can be very difficult to keep a strong sense of our identity in him as well as engage with the world around us.

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.

Explore Further

- John Coffey, *Engaging with cinema* (Cambridge Paper, 1999)¹⁵

¹⁵ See online at http://www.jubilee-centre.org/resources/engaging_with_cinema

Notes

Selected further resources

Books

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

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

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

Dale Kuehne, *Sex and the iWorld* (Baker, 2009)

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

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‘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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