

Study 1 of 3: How to live.....Simply

Readings: Sermon Reading- Matthew 6:19-34

Matthew 6: 19-34; 1 Timothy 6: 6-10 & Richard's blog on the church website "*Desire, Don Draper & Me*" (or see copy attached)

Ice-breaker:

Do you remember the popular 1970's TV programme 'The Good Life'? What was it about? What did you think about it then and now?

And/or

Play the famous song by Tony Bennett "The Good Life" as you look at some magazines (e.g. 'Hello'; "Homes & Gardens" etc.) that demonstrate "The Good Life" as our world understands it.

Discuss: What does the good life look like to people today and to you?

Study:

Consider how Jesus lived, admittedly in a different time. He lived "the good life" which was fulfillingly simple. Jesus lived simply to please His Father and to invite others to a personal relationship with the Father through Him in the power of the Holy Spirit. In short, to build the kingdom of God.

We live in an increasingly materialistic society. We live also in a society which is increasingly characterized by worry. Although Jesus lived in a different time, people had the same ambitions and worries. See Matthew 6:25-34. In many ways, life was harder then than it is today. To people then and today, Jesus' advice for the good life is refreshingly simple - *to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness* (Matthew 25:33). To live in a way that honours God and through which His love can be received and transform us to become the people and community that God the Father desires. This is the good life.

Simplicity in the spiritual life is not poverty but contentment. Paul tells Timothy (see 1 Timothy 6: 6-10) that "*godliness with contentment is a great gain*". Godliness is a key theme in the Pastoral Epistles and it means a deep reverence for God - the way of the kingdom.

- 1. Do you agree that Jesus' example of the way of simplicity is the "good life"? Is Jesus' teaching really that simple and good? How then have we made Christianity difficult?**
2. The Christian discipline of simplicity is an inward reality that results in an outward lifestyle. Both are essential. But if we want to live the simple

life, the good life in the abundance of God's blessing, the way of the kingdom, we need to want to. Having done so, we must then choose to develop our relationship with God every day.

- a) **Do we really want to live as Christ teaches? If so, how can we grow in our relationship with God?**
 - b) **Why is particularly important to be committed to the church? How does the Holy Spirit help us?**
 - c) **What can stop us from growing and flourishing as a Christian? How can we overcome these apparent barriers?**
3. The inner reality of simplicity is not a reality until there is outward expression. To experience the liberating spirit of simplicity will affect how we live as followers of Jesus every day.

Read Richard's blog on the church website "*Desire, Don Draper & Me*" (or see copy attached) in which he writes about "desire" in our daily lives.

In our consumer society, here are some practical suggestions to help us to live simply as Christ teaches. What do you think about them?

- a) Buy things based on their usefulness rather than their value and status (e.g. clothes; mobile phone)
- b) Reject anything that may threaten to occupy a disproportionate and unhealthy amount of our time and money. This may be subtle and appear to be innocuous (e.g. references in Richard's sermon to John & Alice). Reject anything that is "unhealthy" from God's perspective.
- c) Develop a habit of giving things away. De-accumulate.
- d) Practice generosity.
Our God is a generous God. What we have is not ours but God's - we are merely stewards. If we accept this and also acknowledge that our heart is to increasingly resemble God's heart, we should relate what we "have" (possessions; skills; time) to what we "see" (others needs) and take action e.g. 1 John 3:17. *"If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him."* How can we practice generosity in action and spirit?
- e) Learn to enjoy things without owning them (e.g. use the library) and share things with others.
- f) Live within our means. Consider buying things only with cash.
- g) Reject anything that enables the oppression of others. Look at source of origin. Be informed and responsible consumers. Be an ethical consumer.
- h) Develop an appreciation of creation. Walk/cycle when you can. Simplicity means to *"discover again that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof"* (Psalm 24:1).
- i) Keep focused on the kingdom of the God. It is easy to lose focus in seeking the kingdom in the pursuit of legitimate and good things e.g. jobs, position, status, family, friends, and security. Remember who has blessed you and our

dependency and relationship to God. As you may recall, this was what let down the Israelites in the Old Testament.

Conclusion:

Draw to a close by asking everyone to share an action point or something that they have learnt from your discussion. Ask if people are happy to give permission to others to inquire how they are progressing in the days to come.

Pray together

Study 2 of 3: How to live.... Carefully (The Environment)

Readings: Sermon Reading - Genesis 1: 26-31; 2:15

John 3:16; Genesis 1: 26-31; 2:15; Romans 8: 19-23; Matthew 22:38-40

Watch a 2 minute video on the exploitation of minerals and people in the Congo for the mobile phones industry see www.bloodinthestone.org

Ice-breaker:

Share your views on the environment and how you try to be "green"? Given what we can do is so small, does it matter?

Study:

1. John 3:16 is a well known verse. **What difference does it make to you to realize that the Greek word that is translated as "life" in this verse is better translated as "cosmos"?** The same word is also translated in John's gospel as "the whole created order".

Reflecting on this, if Christians are to love what God loves, would you agree that we are to love God's creation?

2. **What then is to be our attitude to creation?**

Allow me to share some thoughts to help. I hope that by offering a succinct theological foundation, our innate agreement to support caring for the environment will be deepened. Four questions are contained within the following paragraphs – you may want to consider one or two?

Firstly, we are to enjoy creation with gratitude not guilt. Genesis 1:31 says 'God saw all that he had made and it was very good.' From Colossians 1:17 we learn that the whole universe was made through Jesus, by Jesus and it was made for Him. In 1 Timothy 4:4 we read that "...everything God created is good..." and 1 Timothy 6:17 says, "God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment." And God loves it when we enjoy His creation *but* in a way that honours Him.

Secondly, to love God is to love what He loves. This includes creation. We are then to want to care for creation, not just because we are part of it, but because creation matters to God and He has put mankind in creation to enjoy and care for it. See Genesis 2:15.

Thirdly, God has entrusted stewardship of His creation to us (see Genesis 1:28). The word "Dominion" that is used here can easily be misinterpreted. What many people forget is that this dominion is immediately qualified in the following chapter of

Genesis (2:15) where God instructs Adam to “*work and take care of the Garden of Eden*”. We are to look after, to care and work to preserve God’s gift of creation.

Interestingly, in earlier translations it reads “*till and keep the Garden of Eden.*” Significantly the only other time this phrase “*to till and to keep*” or “*to serve and preserve*” is used is in the Book of Numbers where it describes the ministry of the priests in the temple. Just as the Levites were to serve God by ministering within the temple so Adam is called to serve God by caring for the earth in the garden. Since Christian disciples are the image bearers of God, our care, our stewardship of creation must reflect God’s character and purpose – humble selfless service to secure redemption not selfish exploitation that leads to destruction.

How then can and ought Christians to be involved in caring for our environment?

What do you think about getting involved in the “big picture” of political activism to support care for the environment?

Thirdly, *as part our stewardship of God’s creation, humanity is invited to develop God’s creation – not out of greed but for God’s glory.* In other words, we should develop creation in a sustainable way. In Genesis 1:28, God told us to “*subdue the earth.*”

John Stott has written, “*What God has given us is nature. What we do with it is culture. We are not only to conserve the environment but also to develop its resources for the common good. It is a noble calling to co-operate with God to transform the created order for the pleasure and profit of all.*” (‘The Care of Creation’ R.J. Berry publisher: IVP)

What do you think about this? How can humanity honour this instruction in our daily lives? (e.g. recycle; reduce consumption.)

Fourthly, we are to care for God’s creation because it is an integral part of God’s redemption (making things new as He purposes).

One popular view of Christianity is that redemption means to escape from the world into a purely spiritual Heaven. This is far from the biblical picture of “the end.” When we study the doctrine of redemption we learn that some form of ongoing bodily existence is integral to what we will be when the kingdom of God is completed. For example, in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul discusses at length the importance of physical resurrection, and we see a picture of the similarity and difference that will mark our resurrection bodies.

Similarly the promises of the Bible point to a “*new heavens and new earth*” (Isaiah 65:17; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1) – a renewal and transformation of this creation. Romans 8 tells us that creation waits “*with eager longing*” for the time when it will be “*set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*” At that time the desert and the wilderness will blossom and praise

God, rivers and streams will flow in the desert; all creation will rejoice. In Jesus' ministry we see God's promised future breaking into the present as Jesus heals and feeds people as well as forgiving their sins.

The good news that Jesus proclaims is for all creation. His promise is of the redemption of all things. Although we live now in the time in between the first and second comings of Jesus when all is not yet as it will be, the New Testament makes it clear that our role in this "now and not yet" time is not simply to wait passively but to work to bring God's kingdom to earth whilst recognizing that it won't fully arrive until Christ returns. So we are to care now for God's creation that will be made new as intends when the Kingdom of God is completed.

Finally, we are to care for creation because it is an issue of justice. Justice is integral to God's work of redemption. In Matthew 22:38-40, Jesus summarizes God's will like this: "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength*" and "*love your neighbour as yourself*"

In other words, the sum of the will of God for us is that, through Christ, we are to enjoy perfect relationships with God and with others. The desire and freedom to live in right relationship with God and others is foundational to Christianity.

As the parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us, having right relationships with our "neighbours" means that we must take care of their bodies as well as their souls. In order to do this we must take care of the earth, with which we are all interconnected and upon which our wellbeing depends. Environmental destruction has consequences for people both around the world – the poorest and most vulnerable are most at risk from environmental devastation – and down the generations – the call to love our neighbour extends to our children and grandchildren, and on into the future.

This focus upon the concerns of others is also captured in the biblical concept of justice (the Hebrew word is *mishpat*). Far from being some abstract concept of fairness, *mishpat* is about the way we conduct each and every relationship. It is about meeting the obligations of our relationships. It highlights our duties and responsibilities towards others, and is particularly invoked in the Bible in the context of oppression of the poor and vulnerable. This is where our care of the environment comes in.

Are we looking after God's world in order that the needs of neighbours can be met fairly? Are we meeting our obligations to "the poor" ?

Or do we need to re-examine our habits of consumption because they are actually based on people being treated unjustly and natural resources (e.g. minerals; oil; wood) are being used "poorly"?

So a failure to care for creation is a failure to conduct our relationships in the way God wants us to; it is a failure of justice; it is a failure of love. For the gospel is

holistic. It is good news. Christian hope for the future is not an excuse for apathy but the motivation to engage positively with our communities, in the expectation that God will be faithful to his promise to one day "*reconcile all things to himself*" (Colossians 1:15-23). In the meantime, God delights to use us His people as the agents of His redemptive activity - and care for creation is an integral element.

Study 3 of 3: How to live... Generously

Scripture: Sermon Reading - Psalm 112

James 1:16-17; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15; Psalm 24:1; Psalm 112; 1 John 3:17; Proverbs 11:24-25; Proverbs 22:9; 1 Timothy 6: 17-18

Ice-breaker:

Richard writes *"I remember going to a large Christian conference a few years ago. On the first night, Jo and I ate in a local restaurant. As I waited for my credit card to be processed, I continued my conversation with the waitress. In my reply to my question as to whether the famous conference would help business, she replied, 'Yes but the tips are lousy. We always know who the Christians are because they don't tip!" and she continued" ...they are often unappreciative."*

Recall and share an occasion when you have been the recipient of generosity? How did you feel? Did it affect the way that you regarded the giver?

Study:

- 1. Is generosity part of the character of God? (see James 1:16-17)**
- 2. How is God generous to us? Take a moment to think and list how God has blessed you?**
- 3. As we see in the character and action of God, true generosity stems from a generous spirit which is one of love (see 2 Corinthians 9:5). What are the characteristics of a generous spirit?**
- 4. Why can it be hard to be generous? Should we set limits on generosity?**
- 5. If we accept that all that we enjoy are gifts from God, and that ultimately everything is His (see Psalm 24:1; 1 Corinthians 10:26), how may this help us to be generous?**
- 6. Read 1 John 3:17. What do you think about this? How can we live this out in our situation? Is there the danger that we regard these commands as hard and oppressive? If so, why?**
- 7. Would you agree that generosity is a good antidote to selfishness and helps us to live spirit filled lives because it introduces the needs of other people and pleases God who is generous?**
- 8. Generosity (of heart; time; skills; resources and money) is to be defining characteristic of every Christian. Read Psalm 112 which is a eulogy to a godly person. What strikes you as you read this Psalm?**

Conclusion:

Consider 2 ways that you can choose to practice the gift of generosity as part of your daily life? And then in the words of the Nike commercial, "just do it."
