

WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP: BECOMING LIKE CHRIST



Session 3: Becoming like Christ in my priorities: letting Christ be Lord.

How much does Christ deserve to be at the centre of my life and why?

What is wrong with the world?

Is there an explanation for evil in the Bible?

Did Jesus claim to be defeating evil?

How does this help us understand what the atonement means?

What does Jesus' victory mean for us as disciples?

How does this make Jesus Lord?

What does this mean for my life and priorities?

What does God desire for those who call Christ Lord?

Why does Jesus challenge people so much about money and material goods?

How do I have a heart like Christ's towards money?

What lifestyle will help me become more Christlike in a materialistic world?



How much does Christ deserve to be at the centre of my life and why?

One way of thinking about why we might want to 'become like Christ' is to ask: how much of my allegiance does Jesus really deserve?

In this session, we look at why, as well as loving and receiving Jesus as "Saviour" – the one reconciles us to God by who taking our sins upon Himself – Christians have predominantly recognised and obeyed Him as "Lord" – the one who has broken the powers of evil and death through His life, crucifixion and resurrection.

In fact, seeing Jesus as 'victorious' in this way (known as "Christus Victor") can justifiably be said to be the main way Christians have understood God's atonement on the cross.

Lord is the name with which the early disciples responded to Christ and it is why we ask people at baptism, "Do you submit to Christ as Lord?"

As we seek to become like Christ, over these three sessions we explore how Jesus being both Saviour and Lord shapes our priorities in life, affects the way we relate to other people, and frames the way we face life's difficulties, including our own mortality.



What is wrong with the world?



We have seen how the cross covers over the debt (atones) for the fact that human beings are affected by sin – whether that is through falling short of what it means to be made in God’s image, through broken trust, or through being 'bent out of shape'.

God in Christ wonderfully absorbs our sin so that we can be restored and can approach a loving and holy God with confidence.

But the Bible teaches how God wants to do much more than rescue individual people. There is a bigger task to be done.

We have seen how in the Old Testament priests would sprinkle blood over the “land” to symbolise how God needed to cleanse the world from the polluting effects of people’s sin.

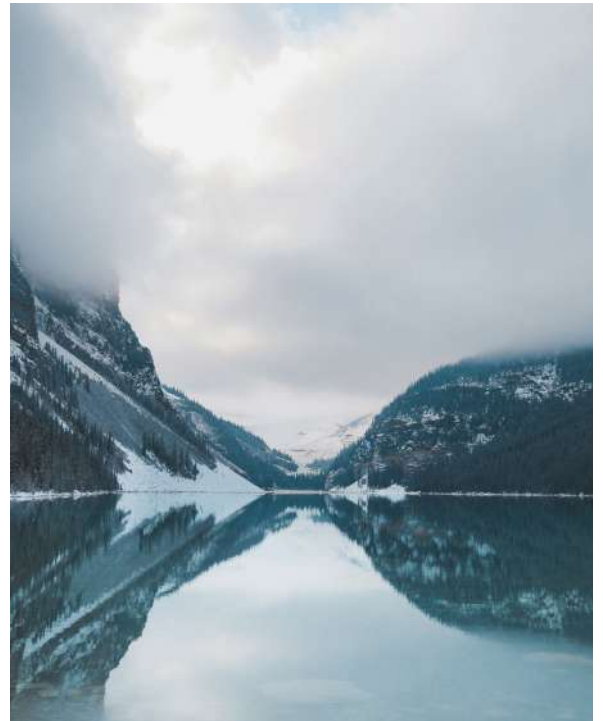
There is no doubt that the origin of much of the pain caused in the world stems from the decisions of human beings, and the harm we do to ourselves, one another and the planet. God wants to deal with evil and oppression.

People in the (perhaps more comfortable) West are used to understanding the cross through the lens of our individual atonement – being set free from guilt or shame.

But as we examine how on the cross Jesus defeats evil and oppressive powers, we will be connecting with an understanding which offers liberation to those who suffer under the weight of evil in the world.

Not surprisingly, this perspective (including an awareness of supernatural powers) is often more emphasised by global majority Christians in countries where the realities of political oppression, poverty and spiritual conflict are more obvious.

Just as we need to be realistic about ourselves, so we need to be realistic about the impact we have.



Archbishop Desmond Tutu says that we can only be healed through this kind of honesty: “This is what healing demands. Behaviour that is hurtful, shameful, abusive, or demeaning must be brought into the fierce light of truth, and truth can be brutal.” (Desmond Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*).

He is realistic about the “random suffering and chaos that can mark human life” and says, “we all experience sadness, we all come at times to despair, and we all lose hope that the suffering in our lives and in the world will ever end.”

But that:

“

Our God is an expert at dealing with chaos, with brokenness, with all the worst that we can imagine. God created order out of disorder, cosmos out of chaos... because God loves us.” (Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*)

Is there an explanation for evil in the Bible?



The famous American psychotherapist M. Scott Peck was for many years an agnostic believing there was no such thing as evil. But as he came to Christian faith, he began to believe that sometimes people were not simply ill or confused or poorly educated.

In his book 'People of the Lie' he argued that there is such a thing as a force or forces of evil which can appear to take over humans as individuals or, occasionally, complete societies. Importantly the Bible consistently describes how there is also a polluting reality to evil which is bigger than, and has a wider impact than, the actions of human beings.

Whether we are thinking of the 188 million people killed by Hitler, Stalin, or Mao, or the 10 million children in slavery in our era, or the simple ways that lies we believe about ourselves and each other can shape us, the existence of evil far outruns what just referring to human decisions is capable of explaining.

The Bible describes the reality we live in as being an overlap of "spiritual" and "material" realms – what we know as "heaven and earth". This might sound obvious but thinking about "spiritual" realities in a world where what we can see, feel, and hear is seen as the only truth (a materialist view of the world) can feel strange.

So, it is important to know that right from the beginning to the end of the Bible that the battle between good and evil exists not only in human beings, but also between spiritual forces. These are described in various ways, but, like a mosaic, build up a consistent picture of evil which results in sin, brokenness, suffering and death.

There is in Scripture simply more to reality than can be described in materialistic terms. Within the first three chapters of the Bible we see God making the

earth and humans, but we are also introduced to a world in which there are other spiritual beings apart from God. For example, God speaks to other divine powers: "Let us make humans in our own image (Genesis 1:26) and says that "the human has now become like us, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3:22)

A serpent (Genesis 3:1) representing evil, seeks to influence humans with a lie (Genesis 3:1) and a cherubim (angel) is placed in the garden. (Genesis 3:24) to guard it.

From the beginning we see that, just as humans turn from God and choose their own path, some spiritual beings have rebelled in the same way and seek destruction. For example, throughout the Bible there are spiritual forces that God struggles with (often described as God's battling with hostile waters and vicious sea monsters). These forces seek to influence individuals but can also shape whole societies.

Whenever the people of Israel fought a battle on earth they would understand it as also taking place among the gods – they could not win unless God went ahead of them. Isaiah talks about the Babylonian people as being a human and spiritual enemy, who has "been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, '...I will raise my throne above the stars of God...'" (Isaiah 14:12-13)

Evil has a bigger source and impact than human beings. Yet crucially, the first hint we get in the Bible that a 'Messiah' would come to defeat it is right back at the beginning of the story. God promises the 'snake' that a human being would come who will "crush your head, and you will strike his heel". (Genesis 3:15) This is the first promise of the way in which God will deal with spiritual forces of evil decisively.

Did Jesus claim to be defeating evil?



Jesus and His followers saw His mission as being the one who would finally crush evil in this way. The final defeat of evil was at the centre of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Jesus and New Testament writers continue with the Bible's story of the cosmic battle between good and evil.

Jesus names satan the "prince of this world" (John 12:31) a term which meant 'the highest official in a city or a region in the Greco-Roman world'. While God is the ultimate Lord, satan has functional power.

Luke portrays satan as possessing "all the kingdoms of the world" believing he can give authority to rule these kingdoms to anyone he pleases, even to Jesus (Luke 4:5-6).

In later letters John says that the entire world is "under the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19) and Paul names him as "the god of this world". (2 Corinthians 4:4)

So crucially, when Jesus the "Messiah" announces that God's kingdom has come, that He is putting the world right, and heals sick people and drives out spirits, He does it by driving out satan's influence and power as God's kingdom advances. Every one of Jesus' healings and deliverances were diminishing satan's hold on the world and bringing freedom.

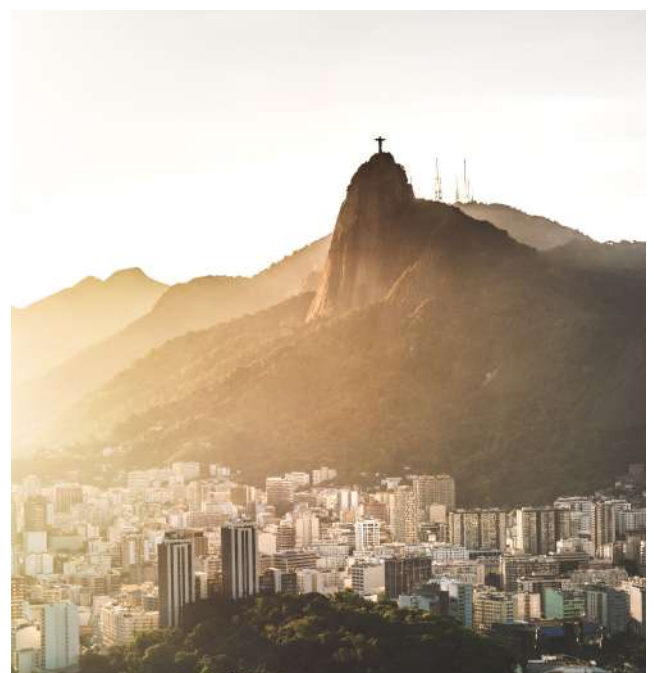
Jesus tells the Pharisees, "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." (Matthew 12:28). Everything Jesus was about was taking hold of the world which satan had grabbed and restoring people to their original calling and identity.

He has come to expel the "thief" who "comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full." (John 10:10)

In Luke 4 Jesus begins His ministry by saying that He is the fulfilment of Isaiah's promise that, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me...to set the oppressed free."

Straight after this announcement, he encounters "a man possessed by a demon, an impure spirit. He cried out at the top of his voice, 'Go away! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are — the Holy One of God!'" (Luke 4: 18-19; 33-34)

When his disciples were later reflecting on Him, Peter summarised Jesus' ministry to Cornelius when he said that Jesus "went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil..." (Acts 10:38) John is even clearer: "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work." (1 John 3:8).



How does this help us understand what the atonement means?



We have seen that the meaning of the cross is like a diamond which can be seen in many ways. With the background perspective of the cosmic conflict throughout the Bible and in Jesus' ministry, we can see the cross not just as the way God reconciles humanity to Himself, but as a cosmic victory through which God finally defeats His enemies.

This is known as "Christus Victor" – the victorious Messiah. By dying and rising from the dead, Jesus was enthroned as the King who freed the whole universe from its slavery to an evil ruler and the power of death. In this victory is included the salvation of people – He is Saviour and Lord.

We can trace this throughout the gospels in the lead up to His crucifixion. In Matthew as soon as Jesus is born, we see evidence of gathering darkness as Herod orders all baby boys under the age of two to be killed (Matthew 1: 16-18) As one writer puts it, "if there are demonic forces, it stands to reason that true goodness and godliness would actually attract and stir up those powers to attack."

In John as Jesus speaks of His coming death He says, "Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out." (John 12:31) In Luke as the end draws near "Satan entered Judas" to prompt him to betray Jesus (Luke 22:3) At His arrest Jesus tells the soldiers, "This is your hour – when darkness reigns." (Luke 22: 53) It is as if all evil is being lured to the cross.

Yet the accounts of Jesus' death make it quite clear that his execution is in fact the beginning of His being lifted up to become the divine king. He is given a robe, a crown, and a sceptre as soldiers bow down to him. A sign is placed on His cross naming Him as a King in different languages.

While the earthly and spiritual powers believe they are mocking and defeating Jesus, in reality they are seeing the fulness of God's victory. Jesus is being lifted up as the cosmic king of the world on a wooden throne, making a 'royal announcement' that God's purpose is to rescue his world by dying for it, allowing sin, evil and death to overwhelm Him.

No one can fully describe exactly how this victory is achieved, but the evidence for it arrives three days later. The only way anyone can rise from the dead is if evil and death have been dealt with. Jesus resurrection is the proof that death, sin and evil are overcome and that Jesus is Lord: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 15: 55-56)

How can apparent defeat lead to victory? A more modern analogy may help. On April 4th 1968 Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on the balcony of his motel room in Memphis Tennessee. King was one of the key leaders of the American civil rights movement and was working tirelessly to bring about racial equality in America.

But while this was a tragic moment in American history, some historians have noted that rather than silencing Martin Luther King his murder had the opposite effect. The very week he was shot the American Government was debating the Civil Rights Act. The waves of protests that swept the country immediately after King's assassination forced lawmakers finally to act. Politicians knew that they had to act to address injustices in American life to fulfill the dream that King had so eloquently preached. President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law on April 11th, exactly one week after King's death.

What does Jesus' victory mean for us as disciples?



As the early Christians experienced the risen Jesus and reflected on His victory, they were able to grasp some life-changing realities:

The power of death is broken.

The full meaning of the ransom ('price of release') paid on the cross was that in Christ God had paid to rescue His creation (including human beings) from slavery to the powers. By becoming one of us, living in defiance of evil, driving out sickness and evil, and ultimately by dying sacrificially and rising victoriously, God has overcome.

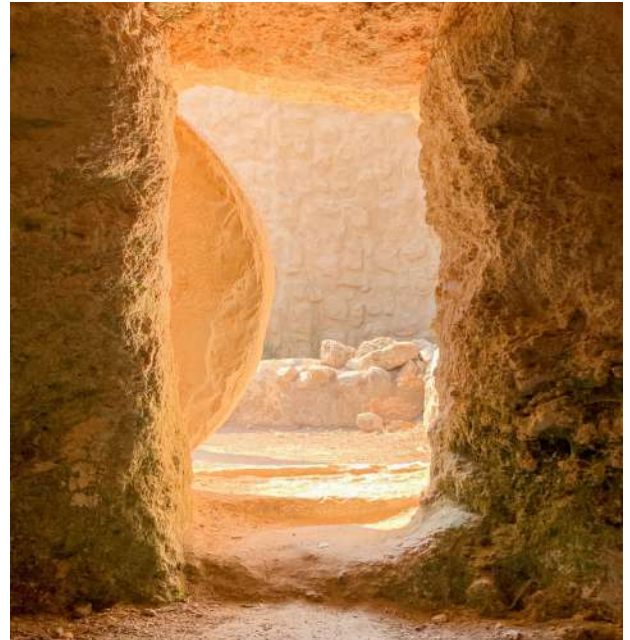
As the writer to the Hebrews put it, "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death - that is, the devil - and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." (Hebrews 2: 14-15).

As Eastern Orthodox Christians (who emphasise Christus Victor) say repeatedly every Easter midnight service, "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and to those in the tombs he has given life."

Evil can no longer have the final word, and we can be who God calls us to be.

Being saved is more than individual forgiveness - it is about being "set free from this present evil age" (Galatians 1:4) and liberated from a time when "we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world." Through Jesus, "you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir." (Galatians 4: 3-7)

We are "enabled ...to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light" by being "rescued...from the power of darkness and transferred...into the kingdom of his beloved Son." (Colossians 1: 12-13)



This affects all of creation.

The suffering of the whole of creation, which is itself somehow in "slavery" due to this cosmic battle (the letter to the Romans says the "whole creation is groaning" in its "bondage to decay"), is dealt with through cross and resurrection.

The writer James Kallas puts it like this, "... since the cosmos itself is in bondage, depressed under evil forces, the essential content of the word "salvation" is that the world itself will be rescued, or renewed, or set free. Salvation is a cosmic event affecting the whole of creation..."



Salvation is not simply the overcoming of my rebellion and the forgiveness of my guilt, but salvation is the liberation of the whole world process of which I am only a small part."



How does this make Jesus Lord?

Our first discipleship question was: why should Christ be at the centre of my life and how much of my allegiance does He deserve?

Through the victory of cross and resurrection, the first Christians recognised that Jesus is Lord. Thomas' response to seeing the risen Christ was to fall down and say, "My Lord and my God."

Sherry Weddell writes that knowing about the "life, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ... leads a person to be able to say Jesus is Lord. Pope John Paul the Second described it as the initial ardent proclamation by which a person is one day overwhelmed and brought to the decision to entrust himself to Jesus."

The very first sermon Peter preached celebrated how complete Christ's victory and Lordship is: "This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses...(He is) therefore exalted at the right hand of God."

Peter then quotes from Psalm 110, saying that Jesus had fulfilled its promise: "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.' Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." (Acts 2: 32-36)

The central thing Jesus did, according to Peter, was to be raised to a position of divine power over his defeated and humiliated enemies (who are now his 'footstool'). Jesus is Lord in bringing the kingdom of God by defeating the kingdom of Satan. Psalm 110 is the most frequently quoted verse in the New Testament to explain what Jesus did and to emphasise repeatedly that He is the one who has defeated God's enemies.

The writer Oscar Cullman says that, "Nothing shows more clearly how the concept of the present Lordship of Christ and also of his consequent victory over the angel powers stands at the very centre of early Christian thought than the frequent citation of Psalm 110 not only in isolated books, but in the entire New Testament."

A strong image Paul uses demonstrates the completeness of Jesus' victory. He describes Jesus as a conquering ruler, bringing His defeated enemies in a humiliating procession behind Him: "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." (Colossians 2:15)



What does this mean for my life and priorities?



The most common statement early Christians made to describe discipleship was that “Jesus is Lord”. Today these three words are the motto for the World Council of Churches.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor who was executed by the Nazis for resisting Hitler, said that to celebrate Jesus as “personal Saviour” but not as Lord is “Christless Christianity”.

When we are baptised we are asked, “Do you submit to Christ as Lord?” For early Christians to call Jesus Lord was to acknowledge both that He is God, and that, having overcome the powers, He has “all authority in heaven and on earth”. (Matthew 28: 18) Paul writes that one day every knee will bow “and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:11)

To declare someone is Lord is to say they have power and authority over your life. Yet to say they are Lord without doing what they say is a self-contradiction. This is why Jesus asked, “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do the things that I say?” (Luke 6:46)

As we have said, we do not earn our salvation by what we do. But the logic of being a disciple who is becoming like Christ is that we demonstrate He is Lord through our willing discipleship and obedience.

As Bonhoeffer put it, “Only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.” The Franciscan writer Richard Rohr makes this even more clear: “The Word of God is telling us very clearly that if you do not do it, you, in fact, do not believe it and have not heard or understood it...We do not think ourselves into a new way of living as much as we live ourselves into new ways of thinking.”

For many Christians today, and for early Christians under Roman rule, to say “Jesus is Lord” a pledge of allegiance which puts their lives on the line. Roman citizens had to say, “Caesar is Lord”.

Lots of Christians lost their lives because they refused to do so – after the resurrection there was only one Lord they could submit to. (Fascinatingly, Rome had a tradition that whomever an eagle settled on would be the emperor- so when early Christians read about a dove descending on Jesus at His baptism one of the things they would have realised is that this was God’s choice to be king – though with a dove-like power totally the opposite of the emperor’s).

In this context Christians saw their baptism as an oath (the original meaning of sacrament) to serve the Lord and forsake all other false rulers. (A Roman soldier would pledge a sacramentum to serve Caesar).

Rather than serving the empire’s kingdom, they were serving God’s.

To be baptised and say Jesus is Lord was a complete change of priorities. If Jesus is our Saviour we seek to become like Him because He is the one “who loved me and gave himself for me”. If He is Lord we place Him at the centre of our priorities because He deserves nothing less.



What does God desire for those who call Christ Lord?



Jesus' death and resurrection defeats the powers and rescues those in slavery. But He does so in order to bring about what God had wanted for a humanity all along – a covenant relationship with Him in which we are restored to bring about His purposes in the world (Module 4: Knowing the Story will explore this in greater detail).

An early saint, Irenaeus, described this in amazing terms: "Jesus became what we are so that we could become what He is". He is not claiming that we can be "gods". But he is saying that through His life, death and resurrection Jesus has made it possible for us to be covenant-partners with God, putting Him at the centre, sharing in His work in the world, and being loved in the same love that Christ shares with the Father and Spirit.

It also means that we can take on the character of Jesus. As we have seen, Paul longed for us to be "mature in Christ" and that "Christ would be formed in us".

Does this mean disciples are made perfect by Jesus' victory, or can expect to be able to achieve perfection? Jesus' death and resurrection deal with the barrier of sin – reconciling us to covenant relationship with God as His children. His victory over the powers of evil and death is decisive. Yet is clear that we live in a time when, while the power of evil (or the "sting of death") has been defeated, the effects of it remain – throughout the world, and in our own lives. We await the day when God's plan will be completed. (We look at this more in future sessions.) And we await the day when we will be fully like Christ.

For Paul, writing to early Christians, the expectation is not perfection, but that, as disciples, they will be in a process of becoming more Christlike – embracing for themselves the new self God offers.

Because He is love, God does not force obedience on anyone, even when we submit to Him – we still have the ability to choose. "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." (Ephesians 4: 22-24)

This amazing view of human potential reflects three senses of what it means to be made whole (or saved). The nineteenth century scholar, Bishop Westcott was once asked, "Are you saved?" The Bishop replied,

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Do you mean that I have been saved, or I am being saved, or that I will be saved?"

The biblical picture is that through the cross we have been saved from **the result of sin**. As we grow as disciples, submitting to God's work in us, **we can be set free from the power of sin**. But we are still waiting for the time when the world, and everyone in it, will be set free from **the presence of sin**. The 'powers' have been defeated, but not yet destroyed. They still have influence through the power of lies.





Peter acknowledges the struggle continues saying, "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings." (1 Peter 5: 8-9)

Paul counsels disciples that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

Yet they need to "take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one." (Ephesians 6: 12-16). (In session 5 of this module we look at how we deal with testing in our own lives, and in Module 3: Joining in with the Spirit we look at how we resist evil and brokenness in the wider world.)

As we grow in becoming like Christ, our expectation is that while we cannot be perfect while sin remains present in the world, we will be being transformed into His image. As John Newton put it,



I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am."

Every Lent, Christians are encouraged to intensify the practices which lead us to "grow in holiness", yet the purpose of the season is to shape our whole lives. It is a time when we remember that obedience to Christ as Lord is not so much about our external behaviours, but about our willingness to live in ways that draw us into relationship with God.

As we do so, we allow the grace of God to change our inner selves to become like Christ - shaping our thoughts, feelings and choices. We change not only because we have the right information or inspiration, but because we are in right relationship.

Practices grow our relationship - enabling us to experience a change in our minds so that we see the world as God sees it, and a change in our hearts as we allow God's Spirit to change us from the inside out.

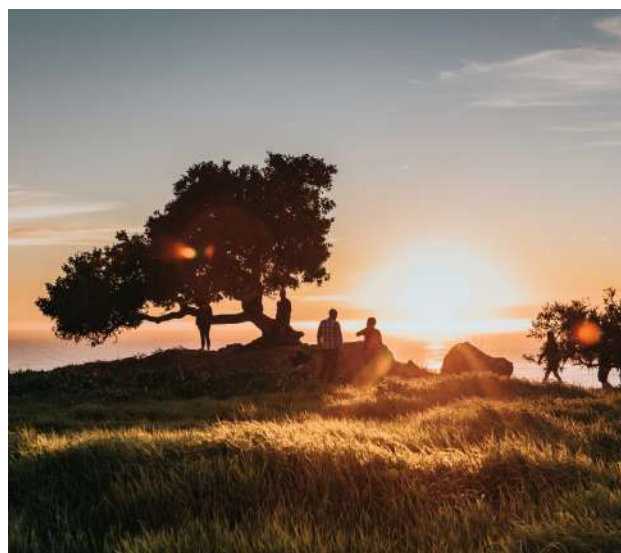
We have looked at Christ through the different lenses of being Messiah/Lord - the one who fulfils God's purposes, Emmanuel/God the Son - Jesus as the one who is 'God with us'. Son of Man - Jesus as the one who reveals who we can be. Jesus - meaning 'God saves'. As we look at Him our minds can be renewed to see the world and ourselves in the light of Christ.

As we continue the module we will begin to look at the practices and choices that enable us to become more like Him in our priorities - specifically in three areas in which every human being needs freedom:

Being free from the distorted desires of materialism/other gods through becoming like Christ in generosity and simplicity.

Being free from the hopelessness of 'worldly' power through becoming like Christ in self-giving love. (Session 4)

Being free from the despair of suffering, temptation and spiritual conflict through becoming like Christ in eternal hope. (Session 5)



Why does Jesus challenge people so much about money and material goods?



Discipleship is essentially about what is at the centre of our lives – for Christians the reason we want to be with God, become like Christ and join in with Him is because He is Lord. Whatever or whoever we submit to is our lord.

Every human being is 'religious' in the sense that we are all 'meaning-hungry' creatures who will always place something at the centre of our lives, and worship it.

God always knows that His love, shown in Jesus Christ, is the only place in which our foundational need for worth and security can be found. But we can only be truly free to submit to Jesus as Lord if other things which claim our attention are not.

Healthy discipleship is both placing Christ at the centre and resisting the pull of 'imitation-gods' which the Bible calls idols. The story of the Bible shows how if God is not at the centre, human beings will quickly turn to other things to fill what only God can fill. This is the meaning of idolatry.

It is when human beings try to establish our foundational security on our own. The commandment on which everything else in life rests is: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them..." (Exodus 20:3-5)

God is not forbidding idols for His benefit, but for His covenant people's.

He is the one who has brought them out of slavery – He does not want them enslaved again.

One of our deepest reasons for turning something into an idol is the urge to get control of life. But ironically by giving ourselves over to something that is less than God, we turn away from what can truly give us life, becoming less than we are made to be. In these circumstances the idol usually ends up controlling us.

Indeed, idols can be one of the spiritual powers which Jesus came to defeat through His life, death and resurrection. Our common idols such as money, power, reputation, ambition (or even religious ritual or status) will always fail because they cannot fill that "eternal hunger".

They leave us disappointed or worse, and our response to that lack of fulfilment can lead to behaviours in which we try and numb painful emotions by trying to find our identity through distraction (overwork, too much TV, obsessive political power) or even addiction (alcohol, drugs, pornography). We end up far from home.

This is why the biggest challenge to discipleship, according to Jesus, was the idolatry of making money a "lord". Christ says it explicitly: "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." (Matthew 6:24)





He taught, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." He told a story of a man who was a fool because his money had made him blind to the reality of life – saving as if this is the only life that counts. (Luke 12) For these reasons "...it is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 19:24)

In the Gospels, an amazing one out of ten verses (288 in all) deal directly with the subject of money. The Bible offers 500 verses on prayer, less than 500 verses on faith, but more than 2,000 verses on money and possessions. Paul writing to Timothy describes where the idolatry of money can lead: "Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." (1 Timothy 6: 9-10)

The issue is not having money – we are physical beings who express ourselves through physical things – Paul does not command people to give all their money away. The issue is placing our hope in it. Rejecting money as a god and putting it in the right place can help bring freedom, contentment, and give an eternal perspective to our lives.

Freedom. The writer of 'Fight Club' describes how consumerism, built on advertising which always makes us want more, has led to a 'depressed' society: "You have a class of young strong men and women, and they want to give their lives to something. Advertising has these people chasing cars and clothes they don't need. Generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don't really need. We don't have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we do, we have a great war of the spirit. We have a great revolution against the culture. The great depression is our lives. We have a spiritual depression."

The alternative, as described by Mark Powley in 'Consumer Detox' is to find freedom. Freedom isn't when our possessions mean nothing to us....But the way we use our possessions can become something different: Less about finding an identity and more about expressing an identity we've been given. Less about excluding others and more about welcoming them. Less about outdoing others and more about empowering them. Less about having and more about being free to give away. Now that is an identity. That's what I want."

Contentment. "But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that." (1 Timothy 6: 7-8) Consumerism is an issue that cannot be solved through human means alone – it is a religious question because it is all about the meaning and purpose that makes us happy.

Contentment comes when we are free from chasing 'gods' that cannot fulfil us. Instead we are living with God as Lord at the centre of our lives – the only one who can truly satisfy us for ever. The real measure of our wealth is how much we would be worth if we lost all our money.

Eternal perspective. Rather than focussing on material wealth in this life which does not last, Jesus advised His disciples to "store up for yourselves treasure in heaven" (Matthew 6:20) Paul explains, "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life." (1 Timothy 6: 17-19)

"The only thing that counts at the end of life is what we can take with us at the moment of death, which is I myself as I was in the ultimate depths of my own heart – a heart that was either full of love, or full of spite and hidden selfishness." (Karl Rahner)



How do I have a heart like Christ's towards money?



How can we not let money have the power of a 'god' in our lives and instead let Christ be Lord?

As we have seen, change only happens as we are able to turn away from things (repentance) – and so the first step is always becoming aware of something we need to resist. But genuine change occurs as we step into a different way of living – showing what we trust in through the choices we make.

We have seen that in the practices we adopt we can grow into being with God. But practices also over time shape who we are, so that we become the people God is calling us to be. As we seek to let Jesus be Lord and turn away from placing our hope in money, we finish this session by looking at two transformative practices which not only give Him the place He deserves in our lives, but over time can change us to become the kind of people who live in freedom and contentment. These two practices are **generosity** in giving and **simple living**.

They are the key to being freed from any 'idolatrous powers' and putting Christ at the centre. Desmond Tutu says a generous heart is the way to life: "The Dead Sea in the Middle East receives fresh water, but it has no outlet, so it doesn't pass the water out. It receives beautiful water from the rivers, and the water goes dank. I mean, it just goes bad. And that's why it is the Dead Sea. It receives and does not give. In the end generosity is the best way of becoming more, more, and more joyful." Generosity is the way to break the hold of money in our lives. John Wesley said, "When I have money, I get rid of it quickly, lest it find a way into my heart."

In an atmosphere of generosity it is easier to sense God's presence. Jennie Appleby describes a community where, although people had little, "Life amongst this new community was transformative and there was never a dull moment.



Frequent sights of furniture being moved between houses (usually on foot), early morning police raids and unconventional offers of cheap electrical items were everyday occurrences...I discovered a sense of the tangible presence of God. I could imagine Jesus himself walking the streets with me and I experienced signs of God's kingdom: people sharing their lives and possessions together – not out of a sense of Christian love or duty but because they had so little themselves. I had never witnessed people sharing on this level before – they were teaching me lessons about how to live the Christian life."

community.sharetheguide.org/views/joiningthe-marginalised

Generosity can be expressed in many ways – through the giving of time, friendship, hospitality or service. But, as the area of our lives most likely to be like a 'god', the Bible has some clear teachings on how we approach giving financially to those in need.

Financial giving is a response to God's love, and not a rule to obey. Paul writes to the early Christians who were collecting for those in the church who were in need, "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." (2 Corinthians 9:7)



Financial giving comes freely, cheerfully (the Greek word is more like hilariously – in other words shockingly extravagant!) and from the heart. The question is not, “What is the minimum I can get away with?” but, “How much can I show love for God in my extravagance?”

Financial giving which breaks the power of money will always be sacrificial in this way.

When we can give at cost to ourselves we are placing our trust in God’s wealth and provision, rather than our own. The story of the widow’s mite demonstrates how Jesus saw generosity not in what people gave, but in the amount they had left over. “As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. ‘Truly I tell you,’ he said, ‘this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.’” (Luke 21:1-4)

In financial giving a tenth of income (tithe) is a useful principle. The first biblical story about tithing comes from 4600 years ago Abram gave a tenth of his goods to the priest in thanks for God’s protection in a battle. (Genesis 14:20)

Moses then gave the people a law of God telling them to bring all their tithes to the priests. “I give to the Levites all the tithes in Israel as their inheritance in return for the work they do while serving at the tent of meeting.” (Numbers 18:21)

Through the prophet Malachi God accused the people of robbing Him. “But you ask, ‘How are we robbing you?’ ‘In tithes and offerings.’” (Malachi 3:8) In Proverbs we read how the tithe was a way the Israelites offered the first and best parts of their harvest to God. “Honour the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.” (Proverbs 3: 9-10)

Yet the tithe was never intended to be a rule, but a springboard for generosity. It is a useful guide – for some it may be an aim, for others a minimum. The Israelites’ tithes often amounted to 23% of their income – when temple, widows and orphans, and thanksgiving tithes were factored in.

Jesus came to “fulfil the Law” – including tithing, (Matthew 5:17) yet He was much more concerned that people pursue “justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things.” (Matthew 23:23)

For Jesus, the tithe was a useful principle, given originally to people who lived by laws. But if disciples, for whom financial giving comes from the heart, rightly understand that all they have is God’s, then God could easily ask them to give more than ten percent.

Financial giving expresses love. In a very practical way, the early church showed their love for other parts of the church through taking an offering. Similarly, today the only people who should financially support the work of the church are disciples.

For this reason, the Church of England offers an aim of 5% of income as a realistic amount for giving financially to the church community.

The story of Zacchaeus shows how the practice of generous, consistent and sometimes spontaneous financial giving sets us free, changing us into people who are increasingly able to make Christ Lord.





The story of Sheelah Ryan, a lottery winner, who won \$55 million in 1988 (see handout) demonstrates that freedom. Just before she died she said: "I thank God every day that I have the ability to help others, not that I won."

Someone said, "We don't think we can live generously because we have never tried. But the sooner we start the better, for we are going to have to give up our lives finally, and the longer we wait the less time we have for the soaring and swooping life of grace."

A content and generous heart, able to place Christ at the centre, is worth more than any bank account contains.

"A certain woman had a vivid dream. In it she saw a man with untidy long hair and bare feet sitting on a bench outside the post office. A voice said to her that if she were to ask this man, he would give her something which would make her rich forever. She woke and shrugged the dream off.



But the next day while walking through town, she saw the man from her dream sitting on the bench outside the post office. Feeling somewhat foolish, she approached the man and explained her dream. He listened, and then reached into his rucksack. He produced an enormous gold nugget, saying,

'I found this beside the road. Here, it's yours if you want it.' She looked longingly at the nugget. It was huge, sufficient to make her wealthy.

That night she could not sleep, tossing and turning in her bed. At dawn she set off to find the tramp, who was sleeping under a tree in the park.

She woke him and said, 'Give me that wealth that makes it possible for you to give this treasure away.'



What lifestyle will help me become more Christlike in a materialistic world?

A further practice which can shape us in turning away from the 'gods' which cannot satisfy is to develop simple living. This is sometimes called the discipline of simplicity.

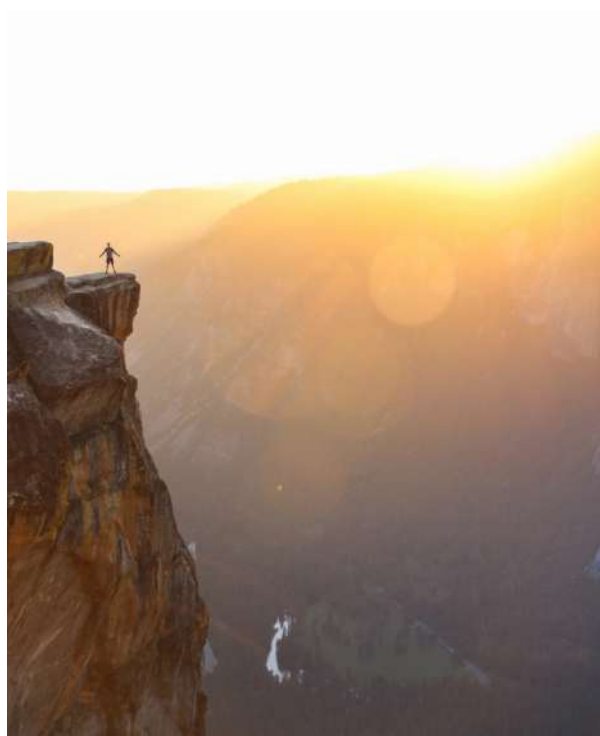
Like generosity, simplicity gives birth to contentment because it helps us be free of false gods, while making room for the only God who can fulfil us. It is deliberately choosing not to need, get or buy 'more' to be happy - to organise our lives around what is enough, rather than what our society, or our greed, tells us we want.

We will consume only what we need. It is not about having 'no possessions' or turning our back on things. (This is called asceticism and some disciples have chosen to practise this). It is about setting things in their proper perspective so that we can enjoy owning possessions without them 'owning' us.

Jesus' most famous statement which reflects this is "Seek the kingdom of God first, and all these things shall be added to you." (Matthew 6:33)

Because of strength of the pull in our society to live as consumers, this practise requires real intention, and challenges many of the ways of thinking we can find it so easy to fall into.

Richard Foster says living simply occurs through our ways of thinking and our outward behaviours. (A full summary of his suggestions is on a handout).



Ways of thinking:

Everything we have is a gift from God, and not ours.

It is God's business, not ours, to care for what we have.

All that we have can be available to others.

Things we can do:

Foster suggests ten (see handout), but these three are a good place to start:

Buy things for their usefulness, rather than their status.

Learn to enjoy things without owning them.

Develop a deep appreciation for God's creation.