

Introduction and sample study



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Why the theme ‘stewardship’?

As I am writing this China’s stock market is falling, thousands of refugees are fleeing war and famine for the peace and prosperity of Europe and, closer to home, brothers and sisters in Polynesia are anxious about rising sea levels. In many countries a debate rumbles about ‘austerity’ as a means to deal with national debt. Yet as that political argument meanders, the rich are getting richer, the poor remain poor, and inequality increases. It is not hard to see that if humans were better stewards of the resources of our bountiful earth we would not be facing these crises.

As Christians we tend to limit the idea of stewardship to time, talents and money given to support the church’s ministry and mission. But a text like Genesis 2:15 reminds us that a biblical vision for stewardship encompasses the whole world, and challenges all people preserve its goodness and share its resources equitably. In the message we proclaim and the life that we live we as God’s people we have a unique contribution to make. Since God is revealed throughout the biblical narrative as both generous and kind, ‘austerity’ is actually the opposite of stewardship.

Mark’s gospel tells an exciting story of God’s kingdom springing to life as Jesus teaches and transforms lives by healing, delivering and feeding people. Along the way people work with Jesus, bringing a friend to him, offering a few loaves and fishes, or burying him with dignity in a tomb. This is stewardship in action. But the gospel also gives us glimpses into a new world in which people are set free from oppression, hunger and illness. In this world—God’s kingdom—all share in God’s blessing. Our role as disciples, then, is to spread the blessed kingdom through ourselves doing what Jesus did: preaching the gospel in word and in deed. This is how we become stewards of God’s grace.

This kind of stewardship, seen through the eyes of Mark as he tells us about Jesus and his encounters with people, is both challenging and inspiring. Challenging, because the stories of suffering humanity confront us with a world crying out for better stewardship of its resources. Inspiring, because Jesus takes the smallest act of stewardship and through it performs a miracle. So how do we respond? Do we look beyond ourselves to the countless needs around our globe? Inspired by these readings, dare we limit in our imaginations what God can do in our day?

As we shall see in this study series, the greatest challenge of stewardship comes down to personal generosity. Through Mark we meet some people who are generous, and others who are not. What is the secret behind generosity? That is for each of us to discover. But a helpful question to address along the way is this: In what sense do we ‘own’ the things we have? Are we really the owners—or are we entrusted with possessions as stewards of God?

A brief introduction to Mark

Mark’s Gospel may not be the first Gospel we find in our New Testament, but it is the shortest, and probably the earliest. It provided the narrative framework that was used by Matthew and Luke in writing their Gospels. Mark was, therefore, creating a new type of document when he produced his Gospel; nothing else quite like it existed in the ancient world. ‘Gospel’ simply means ‘good news’: it is not a title but the announcement of a completely new way of seeing the world. A ‘gospel’ is not just words on the page, it is a life-changing message.

No surprise then, that discipleship is vitally important to Mark. He is writing out of his own relationship with Jesus, and he wants us to have this relationship too. The Jesus in Mark's gospel addresses each of us directly, calling us to share in a radically new state of affairs. Mark's story is not just a story, it is good news for everybody.

It also travels at a fast pace. The word 'immediately' is used frequently. But while Mark seems to be in a hurry to tell us the story, he also crafts it like a master storyteller—for example slowing down the pace to describe the events of Jesus' final week in detail. In those final days we see Jesus increasingly isolated, until at the end he is utterly alone on the cross.

The resurrection changes that of course; though Mark's account of that is surprisingly brief. (While there are at least two other suggested endings to the Gospel in the tradition, the oldest manuscript evidence brings the story to a close 16:8.) Perhaps Mark intends to drive us back to the beginning, and, as disciples, re-read the whole narrative in the light of the resurrection.

Each of the passages from Mark that we will look at provides insights into the nature of stewardship as practised by true disciples. With freshness and energy, Mark invites us to rethink not just who we are, but the implications of *whose* we are. We belong to God, and that changes everything.

Study 1

Mark 2:1-12 Joining together to find a miracle

Over many summers as a teenager and young adult, I worked on a market garden. One summer the team of workers got on particularly well with each other. We worked hard and managed to have a lot of laughs together. It was a joyful, positive summer experience. I often recall that one of the workers, who normally struggled with health issues due to allergies, said at the end of the summer that she was amazed to have experienced no bad health while working with this happy gang. What was going on for her? Was there some kind of healing in which laughter was a good medicine for her? Did the positive atmosphere of the workplace contribute to a 'mind over matter' thwarting of allergies? We'll never know the answer to those questions, but the fact that we ask such questions reminds us that sometimes healing and wholeness is catalysed by something which is about our state of minds and not about the prescriptive medicines we take in.

At a different period in my life, 'mind over matter' seemed to work in a different way. Weighed down by a burden of guilt, I found my body to be in pain. At one point the pain seemed to grip my body in such a way that it felt like it was shutting down. While paralysis was a long way off (thankfully), I found myself thinking about the story in Mark 2:1-12. The words of Psalm 32:3-4 also were apt, 'When I kept silence, my body wasted away ... my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.' What helped me out of this personal darkness? It was finding a confidante to whom I could bare my soul. Healing could not come without the gift of another's time and care-full listening.

Stewardship involves the sharing of resources. While we should never shy away from understanding that 'resources' often includes money, the two stories above remind us—as the passage from Mark's Gospel for this study also does—that important resources include time, love and even laughter.

Speaking of 'resources' and 'stewardship,' we could also say that our passage, Mark 2:1-12 makes the point that stewardship can also involve *resourcefulness*: four friends, determination, a bright idea, and some rope.

Read the passage: Mark 2:1-12

Initial Questions

- (1) List the different individuals (e.g. the paralysed man) or groups (e.g. the man's friends, the crowd) in the story.
- (2) What does Jesus do?
- (3) How do each of the people or groups in (1) react to what he does?
- (4) How do you react to what Jesus does?

Some reflections on the passage

Jesus became rapidly popular in his new home town of Capernaum (v.1). Mark sets the scene for the incident he is about to recount. Jesus' popularity meant the house he was staying in was so crowded that no access was possible through the front door. Why were they there? Mark says, 'he was speaking the word to them' (v.2). It is worth pondering what it was about 'the word' which drew such a large and attentive crowd.

'Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them' (v.3). Jesus healed lots of people (see 1:34), and here we find Mark is choosing to tell us about one healing, with lots of detail and in a narrative manner which enthralls us. With just this one sentence we want to know more. Who were 'the people'? Were they all friends of the paralyzed man, or were they a mix of friends and curious onlookers? Why was the man paralyzed?

So we read on through verse 4 and marvel at the ingenuity and determination of the friends. We also ask ourselves what kinds of roofs houses had in Capernaum that they could be 'dug through'. We might wonder how much roofing material fell through to the crowd below, listening intently to Jesus. But Jesus ignores all this (v.5). He sees beyond the hole in the roof to the faith of the friends which has brought the paralyzed man to him and refused to be turned away because of the crowd at the front door.

Then Jesus turns to the man himself: 'Son, your sins are forgiven' (v.5). This is not what we expect! In the light of preceding stories in Mark 1, we expect that Jesus will simply stretch out his hand to the paralyzed man, and ask him to stand as a sign that healing had taken place (see 1:31, 41).

The absolution Jesus offers the paralyzed man is not only unexpected to those looking on, it is directly controversial. Some scribes were sitting there, 'questioning in their hearts' (v.6). They are theologically correct in their questions. Only God can forgive sins. Who then is this blasphemous fellow speaking as though he were God? (v.7)

Jesus has seen through the friends' actions to discern their faith. He has seen beyond the presenting symptom of paralysis to diagnose the cause of unforgiven sin. Now Jesus 'perceives in his spirit' the questions the scribes are wrestling with (v.8). In passing we might note that, along with the power to forgive sins, such perceptive abilities also belong to God.

The verbal response Jesus gives in verse 9 may be so familiar to us that we do not think much about it. Effectively Jesus says that whether we ask who can forgive sins or who can heal paralysis, the answer is the same. The one authorised by God to do so is the one who can both forgive sins and heal paralysis. To underline the point Jesus tells the paralytic to stand up, take

up his mat and go home (vs. 10-11). The man does what he is told: who wouldn't with such an amazing offer! The crowd's response further underlines the point Jesus is making: 'they were all amazed and glorified God' (v.12).

The scribes were nearly right. A man claiming to forgive sins and to heal diseases is making a claim about God working through him. What they couldn't see was that Jesus was not a blasphemer because he was in fact God's Son (1:1), the Holy One of God (1:24). The crowd were wholly right: they were amazed by this demonstration of God's power, and they glorified God because it was God at work in and through Jesus, forgiving sin and healing paralysis.

If stewardship is making wise and generous use of resources granted to us, we see first of all in this story that Jesus has been granted a home to use for his ministry. This may well have been because of the generosity of Simon and Andrew (1:29). Then we see that a group of friends of the paralyzed man offered time, energy and ingenuity to ensure that their friend encountered Jesus. In contrast we see the scribes, whose role (so to speak) was to be stewards of the Law, misunderstanding what that role entailed. The Law was designed to bring life to Israel and steer it away from death. But the scribes, in this story, seemed more concerned to uphold minor details of the Law than to rejoice in seeing Jesus give life to the paralytic.

Further Questions

- Has the resourceful and resource sharing stewardship of friends ever helped you in a crisis? How has their example influenced your own stewardship?
- All the friends could do was to bring their friend to Jesus. It was the words of Jesus that set the man free. What would you like Jesus to set you free from at this time?
- Who are the people you could be stewards towards, bringing them—at least in prayer if not through other actions—to Jesus?