

Introduction to Christian Ethics
Course Developed by Ron Habinski

Unit #7 Key Ethical Themes in the Teaching of Jesus
7G Slavery, Freedom and Stewardship

- In the unit we have just finished, we examined Jesus' teaching on the subject of forgiveness and reconciliation.
- He taught that refusal or failure to forgive others was completely unacceptable.
- Our Father is the supreme Forgiver and Reconciler, and wants us to be the agents of His forgiveness in this world.
- The task of helping others to see their need of God's forgiveness and request that forgiveness is ours.
- Our personal lives are also required to demonstrate the merciful and forgiving aspects of God's character.
- **Jesus says that I am responsible for initiating attempts at reconciliation with fellow believers whether I am offended, or the offender.**
- Our attempts to help others see their improper actions as God sees them must be gentle and helpful, rather than harsh and condemning.
- A harsh approach is likely to stir up anger rather than insight into God's point of view.
- We must also work to avoid anger and let go of it quickly when it begins.
- This can be difficult, but sustained anger leads to an unforgiving spirit, and no one can afford to be unforgiving.
- Jesus said very clearly and bluntly that ***the unforgiving will not be forgiven by God.***

Slavery, Freedom and Stewardship

Our culture places a very high value on personal liberty, freedom, enjoyment, entertainment, doing your own thing, developing your potential and accomplishing your personal ambitions and dreams.

- Christians sometimes adopt this kind of language, but the Scriptures seem to assign little importance to such highly-esteemed self-centred pursuits.
- The Bible emphasizes duties and responsibilities to God rather than personal rights and the pursuit of pleasures.
- Real joy and fulfillment are the by products of a life devoted to doing worthwhile things, but those who devote themselves to personal satisfaction

often find life empty and unsatisfying.

- Both Old and New Testaments teach that we are to love God with all our being, but the two testaments *explain how we are to do this somewhat differently*.

- The Old Testament places great emphasis on giving things to God, specifically prescribed tithes and offerings.

- These we owe to God and must give to Him.

- In Malachi chapter 3:8f God says, “*You rob me. But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’ In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse – the whole nation of you – because you are robbing me.*”

- This passage is often quoted by people speaking about how we are obliged to give God a tenth of our income, plus additional free will offerings.

- They quote this passage in Malachi because there isn’t a passage in the New Testament that makes this point.

- Malachi is a prophetic book written for people living under the Mosaic Law.

- In previous units of this course we have seen that the Law does not apply to followers of Jesus.

- Tithing is a part of the Law of Moses that is not taught to the Church in the New Testament, so this rule is no longer God’s will for our ethical guidance.

- The idea of *tithes and offerings* is usually explained as requiring us to give God 10% of our *financial income only*, plus voluntary money gifts over and above that 10 percent.

- ***But this interpretation is a complete misrepresentation of Malachi’s meaning.***

- The principle of giving 10% to God was never applied to financial income in the Old Testament.

- The day labourer who worked for wages was not required to tithe them.

- ***Tithing was only applied to farm income of two types: income derived from agricultural crops and income derived from the reproduction of livestock.***

- In other words, only growing plants and multiplying animals were tithed.

- The rationale for this was that the growth of crops and livestock was God’s gift, and this fact was to be recognized by returning a portion to Him for the support of His servants and the needy.

- Scripture passages that talk about tithing make quite clear that tithing was limited to crops and livestock.

- **[READ Dt 14:22f; Lv 27:30-32; 2 Chr 31:4-6; Neh 10:37** (Cf. Dt 26 12f for the tithe for distribution in local towns)].

- In these portions and others the word “**tithe**” is usually used in the plural.

- This is because every kind of agricultural crop and livestock had to be tithed separately.
- It is also important to note that the **offerings** that the Old Testament taught God's people to present to Him were not, for the most part, voluntary gifts that they could give to Him or not give, as they chose.
- If offerings other than tithes had been purely voluntary gifts, would God have said through Malachi, "***You are robbing me in offerings***"?
- Let's see what some of these offerings were. **[E.g. READ Dt 12:6, 11; Amos 4:4]**.
- ***Over and above the obligatory tithes, most types of offerings were prescribed gifts that had to be given to God at various times of the year and on special personal occasions, and these were not gifts of money.***
- If Malachi, the prophet, were here today and heard one of us asking God to ***bless our tithes and offerings*** he would likely say, "***I don't understand. Where are your animals and your garden produce, and why are you giving money?***"

- **Jesus did not teach that it was our duty to give a God a fixed percentage of farm produce and a series of prescribed offerings.**
- Jesus referred to the principle of tithing in only three passages in the Gospels.
- In each of these passages Jesus mentions tithing to point out that ***God is not satisfied with the spiritual leaders who are careful to give God a tithe of their agricultural produce*** (Mt 23:23; Lk 11:42; 18:9-14).
- **[READ Lk 11:42]**
- Jesus' point here was that dutifully giving God a fixed percentage could become a substitute for warm loving hearts.
- **[READ Mt 23:23f]**
- In this passage Jesus is saying that a person can tithe scrupulously and yet neglect more important requirements of the Law such as justice, mercy and faithfulness.
- **[READ Lk 18:9-14]**
- Here Jesus teaches that the scrupulous giving of a tithe may help to produce in a man the kind of pride that makes him unacceptable to God.
- The careful giving of a tenth to God is something that cold unloving people can hide behind while serving only themselves in all the other important areas of their lives.

- ***Jesus often spoke of our duty to God, but He did not explain our duty to God in terms of giving Him things.***

- **Instead of explaining it in terms of giving Him gifts, Jesus spoke about giving ourselves to God and giving our lives to His service.**

- *And when He spoke about such self-giving to God and His service, He spoke in terms of slavery and stewardship.*

- **First let's examine what Jesus said about slavery.**

- **[Read Mt 6:24; Lk 16:13]** (re God and mammon)

- Note the connection that these two passages make between loving God and serving Him.

- Incidentally, Jesus made the same point about our service to *Him* when He said, ***“If you love Me, keep my commandments.”***

- Jesus taught that loving God with our all is God's most important commandment, and what God wants to flow from our love is faithful service.

- A person *might* disagree with Jesus' words in these two passages, and argue that ***it is possible for a man to serve two masters***.

- I remember a time when our daughter Hannah had a full time job and 3 part-time jobs.

- In each of her four jobs she put her heart into working for a different boss.

- But in His saying about serving two masters Jesus was not speaking about an employee-employer relationship.

- The Greek verb He used in this saying in both Mt and Lk is the Greek word ***douleuein*** which means ***to serve as a doulos, to serve as a slave***.

- So when Jesus teaches about how we should serve God He wants us to think in terms of serving Him the way a conscientious, devoted and loving slave serves his master.

- We may have difficulty getting the point of this teaching, because our culture strongly disapproves of slavery, in fact it loathes the idea of slavery.

- Consequently, we tend to think that everything about slavery is utterly despicable and repugnant, and we find it unnatural to have any positive thoughts about slavery.

- In this we show ourselves to be children of our age and our culture.

- If we had lived in another time and place we might have had a more balanced attitude toward slavery than we do.

- No doubt, many slaves owned by kind, loving masters found life far more pleasant and comfortable than many so-called free people who have lived very short lives of poverty and great hardship in the employ of harsh exploiting employers.

- Jesus knew that slavery could be uncomfortable, but He did not hesitate to describe our proper service to God in terms of slavery.

- He wants us to remember that we belong entirely to our Creator.
- He also wants us to think in terms of serving God the way a conscientious, loving and devoted slave would serve his owner.
- If we stumble over the idea of being God's devoted slaves, we will not get Jesus' point.
- Pleasing the One that we belong to body and soul should come first in our thinking.
- It should come first in terms of our personal priorities, commitment and passion.
- Whatever we may be inclined to think of slavery as an institution, being God's slave does not mean being mistreated, unloved or exploited.
- Jesus also taught that He came to give us true liberty, to make us truly free, but this liberty is to be enjoyed in God's service, not outside of it.
- He also taught that God loves us as a Father loves his children.
- True liberty and sonship are not inconsistent with giving God wholehearted loving service.
- Paul refers to the stewardship principle in 1 Cor 6:19f where he says, "***You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.***"
- When we hear the words, "***you were bought at a price,***" we immediately think of how Jesus offered His life for our cleansing and redemption from the guilt of our sin.
- But that is not all Paul is saying here; he is not just speaking about the payment of our sin debt to God by Jesus.
- He is saying that we no longer belong to ourselves, the way someone who has been purchased in the slave market does not belong to himself, but to the one who purchased him.

- **Jesus also explained our duty to God in terms of stewardship.**
- Today, anyone having enough wealth to employ a steward in the Biblical sense would probably call that person his property manager.
- The role of a steward is mentioned repeatedly in the Scriptures and in the teaching of Jesus.
- Stewards were often trusted slaves.
- The fact that some slaves could be trusted with the management of their master's estate says something about the positive sort of relationship they had with their master.
- A free man could also be appointed as a steward, but his employer had less authority to punish him for mismanagement or dishonesty than he had over a steward who was a slave.

- When Joseph was a slave in Egypt, he was put in complete charge of the estate of his owner, Potiphar [**READ Gen 39:4-6**].
- Later, when Joseph became rich and powerful, he had a steward of his own [**READ Gen 43:19**].
- Before someone would appoint another person as his personal steward, he would have to have confidence in his honesty, prudence and intelligence.
- Who would trust someone who lacked one of these qualities to manage his property and business affairs?
- Because a steward usually started out being trusted completely, a dishonest or irresponsible steward might get away with a lot of pilfering or mismanagement before he got caught.
- Jesus told a parable about such a steward (Lk 16) who got caught, but was clever enough to use his position to win some friends who would help him out after he was fired.
- The steward in this parable was a free man and lost his job because he was found to be a poor and irresponsible manager.
- **One of Jesus' best known parables about God's kingdom and our duty to serve Him deals with stewardship.**
- I am speaking about **the parable of the talents**.
- This parable is about three slaves who are made responsible for the management of large chunks of their owner's wealth.
- It is unfortunate and confusing that in English the word, *talent*, means *a special personal ability*.
- In the parable the word, *talent*, has no such meaning.
- Instead, it refers to a unit of weight that was used to measure out silver or gold.
- A Hebrew talent of gold weighed about 108 pounds, and one talent of gold was worth about the same as ten talents of silver, although this one-to-ten ratio changed over time.
- To appreciate the value of a talent, we have to bear in mind that a normal labourer's wages for a day's work was a single small silver coin called a denarius (Mt 20:10, 13).
- [**READ Mt 25:14-27**]
- You will note that the three stewards in this parable are slaves.
- Jesus speaks casually about slaves and slavery, and takes it for granted that a slave could be made responsible for managing a large fortune.
- Because this is a parable about the kingdom of heaven, it is clear that Jesus is saying that we, as stewards in God's kingdom, have been made responsible by God for taking care of great wealth, and we will be held accountable for how well we fulfill our assigned responsibility.

- Shirking this responsibility is not an acceptable option.
- We will be held accountable for how well we serve Him.
- The wealth we have had entrusted to us probably includes our service gifts and the good news about Jesus that we have received.
- **Obviously, our responsibility as God's stewards involves much more than having to give God a prescribed portion of our wealth or income, and then being free to use the rest of our time and possessions as we please.**
- Jesus told us that we would be held accountable for our stewardship of His resources, so there is no doubt that we have received those resources.
- He made it quite clear that both as slaves and as stewards, our faithful and loving service belongs to God.
- No doubt that is why Jesus gave no specific instruction or rules concerning how much of our wealth or income to give to the work of His kingdom.
- Instead He spoke of faithful and loving service to our Owner, and emphasized our foundational duty to love Him with our whole being.
- If we can get this right, we will have the perspective we need to serve God properly.
- A slave whose service springs from loyalty and love doesn't need rules.
- He delights to serve and finds ways to please.
- Similarly, a good steward can be trusted to serve responsibly, remembering that he serves the owner's interests.
- While Jesus gave us no detailed instruction on financial giving, He provided guidelines for giving in the writings of Paul.
- Lord willing, we will explore them later in this course.
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- But, on one occasion Jesus made a point of drawing the attention of His followers to an example of the kind of giving that He considered worthy of special note.
- That example helps us to see all our gifts to God more clearly, -more clearly than may be comfortable for us.
- **[READ Mk 12:41-44]**
- Jesus and the disciples with Him were able to watch people giving their offerings to God, as they deposited them in one of the boxes placed in the temple courtyard for this purpose.
- Apparently, each box had a large metal funnel sticking up out of the top of it, so coins being deposited there could be seen and heard as they dropped out of the giver's hand and slid down and into the box beneath.
- Paper money had not been invented yet.
- This woman gave two very small copper coins called lepta.

- It is often said that each coin was worth about an eighth of a cent.
- Saying this is very misleading, because today a cent buys practically nothing.
- A lepton was the smallest coin in circulation at that time, and represented an eighth of the small silver coin called a denarius.
- We have seen that a denarius was what an ordinary labourer would earn by working for one day.
- A common labourer would probably work for a quarter of a working day, or 2 to 4 hours, to earn the two lepta that this woman dropped into the offering box.

Q: What do you think is noteworthy about this example of giving?

A: [DISCUSS]

- This example seems to show that the true measure of a gift is the love that it demonstrates, and how much it costs the giver.
- I think it is important to realize that Jesus is *not demanding sacrificial giving here*.
- He just points to this example and says, “No one has given God more today than this woman has.”
- Of course, by drawing attention to her example He is implying that He likes what He sees.
- By itself, that should be enough to influence our giving behaviour, even though Jesus gave no specific command on the subject of sacrificial giving.
- In the same way, a first grade teacher can influence the behaviour of an entire class without giving a command, by saying, *“I am really impressed by Johnny; he is sitting up straight and tall and paying attention.”*