

FOCAL TEXTS

Deuteronomy 8:10–18;
Matthew 25:14–30

BACKGROUND

Deuteronomy 8:1–20;
Matthew 25:1–46

LESSON ELEVEN

Stewardship

Introduction

Does money really buy happiness? Studies by a generation of behavioral scientists show that material goods usually don't deliver lasting happiness. But there is one way that money can buy happiness—when you spend money with and for others. Researchers call this phenomenon a “buying experience.”

Elizabeth Dunn and Michael Norton, a pair of researchers who authored the book *Happy Money*, reported on the following experiment:

We handed out Starbucks gift cards on a university campus . . . [and] told some people to head to Starbucks and buy something for themselves. We told others to pass their gift card along to someone else. And we told a third group of people to use the gift card to buy something for someone else—with the additional requirement that they actually hang out with that person at Starbucks.¹

Dunn and Norton concluded, “Who was happiest? Those who treated someone else and shared in that experience with them.” These results should not be shocking to followers of Jesus. This is because God gives us everything we have so that we can share it with others.

Stewardship Lesson Eleven

Focal Texts: Deuteronomy 8:10-18; Matthew 25:14-30

Background: Deuteronomy 8:1-20; Matthew 25:1-46

Teaching Aim: To lead members to determine if they are using their talents to bring glory to God or to themselves.

Connect with Life: Ask members to identify the talents or abilities they have received from God. Encourage everyone to be open about this without feeling they are bragging about themselves. Help those who may struggle with this activity to think of those things they enjoy doing most that seem to have the most affect on those around them.

After everyone has shared at least one talent or ability, ask members to determine who is receiving the most glory as they use their talent, themselves or God? The study for today will find us considering some hard questions that will help us with this determination.

Guide Bible Study: Then lead members to discuss the following questions related to the focal passage for this study:

1. Why would the children of Israel need to be reminded to praise God for what he had given to them? (Deut. 8:10) This passage was Moses' farewell speech to the children of Israel. He had been with them long enough to know that they desperately needed such a reminder. "Success is found only in a relationship with God." Moses predicted great prosperity for the children of Israel after they entered the promised-land. "Though this financial well-being would be celebratory, it would generate new temptations: pride and forgetfulness."
2. Why would prosperity cause the children of Israel to forget their commitment to keep God's laws and commands? (Deut. 8:11) While in the desert, the children of Israel would see the necessity for turning to God for their daily needs. When the prosperity Moses promised came to each of them, they would not feel as great a need to turn to God. "Everything about the Hebrew experience had been centered on their relationship with God. Moses had delivered the law of God to the people. He wanted to be sure they would never forget God's law." "The law was designed to constantly draw the people's thoughts and hearts back toward God."
3. Why did Moses feel it was necessary to warn the children of Israel to avoid personal pride? (Deut. 8:12-17) He knew they would be tempted to forget all that God had done for them and to forget their complete dependence upon God. "Without the law the people would easily be drawn to themselves and begin to see their success as a product of their own efforts." Their lives were about to be totally different from their days in the desert. "Moses was describing a shift from a nomadic, foraging culture, to a more stable, agri-business culture. And he was warning them that in the cultural transition it would be easy to forget God. Their hearts would grow proud of all they

had accumulated, and they would forget that it was God who had made it all possible.” “Moses then launched into a recitation of what God had done for them.” “There is a smug and unfounded confidence that can come with affluence. It is difficult to abandon yourself to complete trust in God when you go through life with so many financial and material safety nets. Eventually, God seems to be unnecessary.”

4. Why the reminder about God having given them the ability to produce wealth? (Deut. 8:18a) “God provided both escape from Egypt and provision in the wilderness, not because the Hebrew people deserved it, but to keep them humble and spiritually prosperous. They received manna and quail on a daily basis in order that they might be humbled by God’s generosity; maintaining their exclusive dependence on God and growing prosperous in character and spiritual insight.” Now that their daily dependence upon God’s provision had changed, they were in danger of losing their relationship of dependence upon God. They would be tempted to trust in their own abilities to provide for their daily and long-term needs.
5. Why did Moses think it necessary to remind them of their covenant relationship with God? (Deut. 8:18b) God’s continued blessing upon the children of Israel was dependent upon their continued obedience of His laws and commands. They must continue to recognize their dependence upon God if they were to continue to enjoy the blessings of that covenant relationship with their heavenly Father.

Then share the following from the Study Guide: “The biblical perspective on all things material is that everything belongs to God. Private ownership is a figment of our imagination. It is a false human construct designed to facilitate the consolidation of power. This concept was central to ancient Hebrew thought. It impacted the way they viewed cattle, crops, houses, family, and land. All of it was given to them by God as a stewardship.”

Then enlist someone to read Matthew 25:14-30 and ask members to listen for ways this parable supports the biblical perspective on material wealth. (The talents were gifts from the master. There would have been no production of wealth without these gifts. In the end, the servants recognized that everything, including what they had made in interest, ultimately belonged to the master.)

Share background information from the Study Guide about the value of the talent. “There were two important aspects to the role of the steward. There was (1) an entrusting, and (2) an accounting. The Master entrusted each servant with a certain amount of his wealth. When the master returned, he held each servant accountable for the portion of the wealth entrusted to them.”

Ask members to discuss the following two questions:

1. What was the reward for the faithful servants? (More opportunities to use their talents.)

2. What was the punishment for the unfaithful servant? (Complete rejection by God.)

Then ask members how the experience of the unfaithful servant can be related to the salvation experience. (This really is a picture of total rejection by the unfaithful servant of God and his will for the man's life.)

Encourage Application: Remind members of the discussion at the beginning of this study related to their talents or abilities. Ask them to help develop some summary statements that will help with application of this study to the use of their talents. For example:

1. When you are using your talent in the right way, God will be praised and receive the glory. You will be appreciated but people will see God in you and in your acts of service.
2. The best way we can show our love for God is to consistently use our talents for His work and ministry as an act of obedience to God's will for our lives.
3. As we experience appreciation from others because of our talents or abilities, always focus on the one who gave us the talent and His many blessings in our lives.
4. If we have the ability to make money, always remember who gave us that gift.
5. Maintain a right relationship of accountability and dependence upon God, especially when things are going well in our lives.

Close with a challenge for members to use their gifts, talents, or abilities in a way that will always bring glory to God, not themselves.