CENTER FOR STEWARDSHIP

Your Story - Living for the Neighbor: Stewardship Equals Responsible Christian Living

GOAL OF THE STUDY

Relating personal testimonies may be an unfamiliar practice for your group. Help them think about the difference their Christian faith makes for the way they live their lives. Ideally, someone may offer that faith provides meaning and purpose for life. The follow-up question focuses on how people actually function in real life, and the things they choose to secure significance for their daily lives. The possible suggestions of "worldly" sources of meaning are many. It would be helpful, though, for the group to realize that even good things like family, volunteer work, humanitarian causes, and love of country can become false solutions for a person trying to find something meaning in life.

ANSWERS

1. The man's land was productive through nothing he had done. He was the passive recipient of divine favor. That he died just as he was about to "eat, drink, and be merry" and all that he had accumulated would pass to others is a stark declaration of the limits of human control over life, the contingency that governs us all, and the folly of finding meaning in things that are temporal. At the man's death, what did he have to show for his life? His full barns did him no good. His life had been squandered on what did not matter.

2. Retirement is not a simple thing when considered from the vantage of Christian faith. If a human life is meant to be lived for the sake of others and doing one's vocation is our responsibility as a creature, then retiring to "do nothing" is incompatible with Christian faith. One's capacity to do work will change and eventually diminish as the toll for living in a broken world; but one should never seek to retire from vocation—whatever form it takes. Even while meeting vocational responsibilities, however, a Christian certainly can delight in the good gifts that God gives. Enjoying the blessings that he gives is a form of praise to God—as long as they do not become idolatrous or otherwise detrimental to growth in God's grace.

3. It will be easy to get bogged down, so read quickly—skimming should be sufficient. In the first eleven verses, Solomon weighs the possibility that experiencing pleasure is the key to a meaningful life. He recounts his thorough effort at living this way. In verses 12–17, the wisest of kings evaluates wisdom as a source of meaning and decides that it yields no better result than a life marked by folly. Finally in verses 18–23, he considers that in work or a career one can find purpose and meaning in life. Every option, though, Solomon declares to be inadequate and finally a failure. Thus, his advice is to make the most of what God gives and live according to God's plan. The questions that follow will elaborate on this solution. While people may dislike and resist the harsh conclusions reached by Solomon, they are an accurate portrait of the final futility of life lived apart from God's purposes.

4. The psalmist, if possible, seems even more pessimistic than Solomon in Ecclesiastes! The words are disconcerting and humbling, and therein lies their power. The harsh reality of life's vapid and empty nature apart from faith should drive us back to the gospel and the assurance that within God's plan, each

ANSWERS cont.

creature and each creature's work is significant. The hard word of law makes us receptive to the blessings of the renewing and redirecting gospel message of God's provision of grace and purpose. This is the express point of verse 7: we hope in God.

5 God's explicit direction given to Adam and Eve can provide great comfort and purposefulness in our living. We do not have to wonder why we are here, or what we are supposed to be doing. This is the significance of understanding vocation in light of God's will for our lives. We are here to fulfill the tasks God has given us within his creation, and these tasks are tied to the relationships and responsibilities associated with our place in the created realm. A Christian does his vocation in fulfillment of the Genesis 1:28 mandate.

6 Considering the first great commission compels us to consider the second great commission. Typically, the second great commission is seen as a narrow task that generates more angst and guilt than purposefulness and direction. Yet, the direction from Jesus can only be understood as his clear intention for how we are to live and function as God's redeemed people. Our vocations are for the good of the neighbor, and our vocation as proclaimer of the gospel is also for the good of the neighbor, who clearly benefits from our faithful efforts to fulfill the commission of our Lord.

7 In meeting our vocational obligations to those around us, we gain credibility and opportunities for sharing the claims of the gospel. This is true of colleagues at work and in our recreation and our neighborhood and in our homes. When parents consistently strive to be fathers and mothers according to God's design, their children are far more likely to honor and emulate the faith that they see and hear in action in their parent's lives. In other words, the second great commission is to be heeded in the raising of children and in loving service to a spouse.

8 The point is clear: strive to fulfill the task that has been given to you to fulfill. Faithfulness to the command of Christ and obedience to the will of God, demands that we see our vocations and our work within the creation for the good of those around us as obligations not to be shirked. We are each responsible to do what God gives us to do in our individual lives and within our unique relationships. Thus, the fulfillment of God's purpose for each Christian's life will be unique to that child of God. There is, then, no place for comparison, resentment, or boasting regarding the tasks one has or has not been given.

9 In view of all that God accomplished in the resurrection of Jesus, Paul asserts unflinching confidence in the ultimate meaningfulness of what we do. Since God will make all things new—even our own bodies—and since he accomplishes all that needs to be done to assure us of our place in the eschatological fulfillment of the last day, we can indulge in the tasks and responsibilities of this world with abandon. Since God has already taken care of everything else, including the promise to conquer death, we can do the things that we have been given to do with freedom and with certainty that within God's plan they do matter. What is done in relation to the fulfillment of a person's vocation given by God is never wasted.

10 Encourage the participants in your group to think of specific ways that what they have discussed will make a tangible impact on the way they go about living their lives and finding joy and meaning in the process.