

FIVE MARKS OF GROWING

Session 3 – Commitment

LEADER'S NOTES

The order of the Five Marks of Growing is.....

Christ-likeness

Commitment

Partnership

Influence

Numbers

However, in this course I have chosen to change the order to so that the course ends with Commitment session. I think it is appropriate to have as a climax to the course the opportunity for everyone to be invited to recommit themselves to Christ and to serving him. I have also put Influence before Partnership. So my revised order is.....

Christ-likeness

Influence

Partnership

Numbers

Commitment

However, you are clearly free to use the order you prefer.

This session is in two halves. The first half is in the same format as the previous sessions with input and discussion. The second half is a Communion Service where everyone is invited to renew, or make for a first time, a commitment to Christ. In addition everyone is invited to receive a prayer with the laying on of hands at the Communion Rail after receiving the wine. It is recommended that refreshments are served half way through between the two halves.

Participants being seated around tables works very well.

On the pages that follow are.....

- The Session Notes (pages 2-6).*
- Discussion Questions – Print and cut in half (page 7).*
- The Prayer of Commitment that will be used in the Communion Service and a copy of the Methodist Covenant Service Prayer (page 8).*
- Texts of the Bible passages which are included in the Communion Service (page 9).*

The order of service for the Communion Service is in a separate file. You may wish to change the choice of music.

GROUP ACTIVITY (5 minutes)

Introduce the theme of the session: commitment.

Then invite people around each table to draw up their own definition of "commitment" using not more than 25 words.

Ask someone from each table to read out the definition they have drafted.

You might then like to read out a couple of dictionary definitions.....

"The state of being bound emotionally or intellectually to a course of action or to another person or persons." (*The Free Dictionary by Falex – on line*)

"To pledge or align oneself to a particular cause, action or attitude."

(*Collins Dictionary*)

Explain that in focusing on "commitment" you are going to focus on our commitment to Christ.

Invite someone to read the passage from Revelation.....

BIBLE READING

Revelation 3.14-22

¹⁴"And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation:

¹⁵"I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. ¹⁶So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. ¹⁷For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

¹⁸Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. ¹⁹I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent.

²⁰Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. ²¹To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. ²²Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches." (NRSV altd)

INPUT

"Can I offer you a cup of tea or coffee, or perhaps a cold drink?"

I'm sure you will have been on the receiving end of such words many times in many different situations. I wonder what you normally opt for: tea, coffee?

Some people just ask for a glass of water – that is, cold water. However, a woman called Jane in my former church used to ask for a glass of **hot** water. I've known a few other people make the same request, though I've never drunk hot water myself.

However, I have never known anyone ask for a glass of **lukewarm** or **tepid water**.

And there are references to **these three sorts of water: hot, cold and lukewarm**, in our New Testament reading from the Book of Revelation.

In chapters 2 and 3 of that book, there are seven letters that Jesus sent to seven churches through the apostle John. All seven are in present day Turkey, and the last of the seven letters was addressed to the Christians who lived in a place called Laodicea.

Let me begin by giving some background information about this ancient city.

Laodicea was situated at the junction of two valleys and as a result three important roads all converged on the city.

Because it was situated on these trading routes the city became very rich and was a **centre of banking**. It was so rich that when it was destroyed by a disastrous earthquake in AD60 the people turned down financial help from Rome to repair the damage.

Secondly, it was also famous for its **textile industry** and produced both **cloth** and **carpets**. The cloth was special because it was produced from glossy black wool from the local sheep and it was highly sought after.

And the **third** thing about the town was that it had a famous **medical school** and produced **ear ointment** and **eye salve**.

But there was one thing that the town did **not** have, and that was **good quality water**.

"The river was not strong and sometimes in the summer it dries up. However, there are two other sources of water, one to the **north**, and one to the **south-east**.

Four or five miles to the north, standing high on a dramatic cliff, is the city of Hierapolis. It boasts to this day a set of **hot springs** to which tourists come from all over the world. The hot, chemically charged water comes bubbling out of the ground, and today it is channelled into the bathing pools of various hotels!

In the first century they built aqueducts to bring this water across to Laodicea. They can still be seen today, with their insides covered in hardened mineral deposit.

But by the time the water arrived in Laodicea it was **no longer hot**. It was merely **lukewarm**. What was worse, the concentrated chemicals made it unsuitable to drink.

To the south-east of Laodicea was the town of **Colossae**, and it had a **splendid supply of water**. It flowed down from the high, snow-capped Mount Cadmus. So this was **very cold** water. However, when it was taken to Laodicea, 11 miles away, the Turkish heat meant that it, too, became lukewarm.

And it is this remarkable feature of Laodicea - hot water that has cooled down, and cold water that has heated up - that forms the most well-known part this letter."¹

Jesus says to these Christians.....

I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. (RSV)

Tom Wright says that the word for "spew" or "spit" as it is often rendered, would be better translated "**vomit you out of my mouth**"!

He writes.....

"Jesus is disgusted at the taste of Laodicean Christianity. **It makes him sick.**"

Cold water is fine to drink – and so is hot water. But lukewarm water is not!

And Jesus criticises the Christians at Laodicea for being **lukewarm in their Christianity**. The comfortable, self-sufficiency of the society in which they lived, had rubbed off on them.

No doubt they would say that they **believed in Jesus**.

No doubt they met together for **worship**.

However, they were **apathetic**. They were **lacking in zeal** and **enthusiasm**.

Their **commitment** to Christ was **questionable**.

When Jesus did an OFSTED at the Church in Laodicea, when he examined the quality of the commitment of the Christians at Laodicea, he was **not impressed**. So he challenged them about the level of their commitment.

And when Jesus does an OFSTED to the Churches of the Diocese of York and examines the quality of **our** commitment to him, what would he say to us?

When we read the Gospels, it is very clear that the call to follow Jesus means **making him Number One** in our lives. Being a disciple means making him our **Lord**, our **King** and our **boss**: being committed to him before everything and anyone else.

While that might sound demanding, those who have done that, find that it actually results in **great joy** and **blessing**!

Jesus is **not impressed** with **lukewarm Christianity**. He calls us to have a faith in him which is alive and that makes **a real difference** to how we live out our lives. He calls us to live **for him, to seek first his kingdom**.

Writing about the Christians at Laodicea, one writer said.....

"To profess Christianity while remaining untouched by its fire is a disaster" (*Leon Morris Commentary p.82*)

So in this letter, Jesus tells us that he wants his followers to be **fully committed to him** and that this will show itself in **enthusiasm, zeal and a determination to serve him**.

This was not the only challenge that Jesus gave them.

As I said earlier, Laodicea was renowned as an important centre of banking, for its cloth, and for its eye ointment.

Yet this is what he said to the church at Laodicea.....

You say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. (*NRSV*)

When he said they were poor, blind and naked, he wasn't referring to their **physical condition**, he was pointing to their **spiritual condition**.

It is interesting that poverty, blindness and nakedness are referred to by St Paul in his letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians. These were both circular letters written to churches in the region of Laodicea. So they are likely to have been read by the Christians at Laodicea. As Paul wrote at the end of his letter to the Colossians.....

After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans. (*4.16 NIV*)

A first example is that five times in Ephesians² and once in Colossians³, Paul writes about the spiritual riches that are ours in Christ. Yet the Laodicean Christians were **poor**! Even though they were rich in material terms, spiritually they were poor! They did not know the riches of Christ.

Secondly, in both letters⁴, Paul tells his readers to **clothe themselves with Christ** and with the qualities that he displayed, because although Laodicea was famous for fine cloth, Jesus told the Laodicean Christians that spiritually they were **naked**!

In the ancient world to be naked was the **ultimate form of humiliation**. Whereas to be clothed with **fine apparel** was to have great honour.

Thirdly, in the first chapter of the letter to the Ephesians, St Paul writes about having **the eyes of our hearts enlightened** so that we can understand the things of God and experience the reality of Christ in our lives.

Yet Jesus says that spiritually the Laodicean Christians were **blind**!

So Jesus letter to the Laodiceans and Paul's circular letters that they will have read both touch on the same things!

In order to address their spiritual poverty, nakedness and blindness, Jesus says to them.....

*I counsel you to buy from me **gold** refined by fire so that you may be **rich** ;*

*and **white robes** to clothe you and to keep the shame of your **nakedness** from being seen;*

*and **salve** to anoint your eyes so **that you may see.** (NRSV)*

So instead of spiritual poverty Christ offers them **his riches.**

Instead of **spiritual nakedness**, Christ offers to clothe them in **white robes** in all their **splendour and beauty.**

Instead of **spiritual blindness** Christ offers to give them **sight** and vision.

He was using **picture language** that the people who lived in Laodicea would connect with.

But what might Jesus have meant by offering them gold, white clothing and ointment?

This is made clear in verses 19 and 20.

He says two things:

First, in verse 19 Jesus issues a call to these people to change.....

Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. (19 NIV)

The word “repent” means to **change** – about turn!

It is particularly used with reference to our need to turn away from sin.

Even though children often don’t recognise it, **good parents correct their children** when they do what they shouldn’t, and they do this because of their love for their children. Similarly Christ corrects us because of his love for us.

So a first step is **to be willing to change.**

Then secondly, in verse 20, which is a well-known New Testament verse, Jesus says.....

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. (NRSV)

Jesus likens our lives to a house. Just as someone would knock on the door of our house in the hope that we will **open the door** and **welcome them in**, so Jesus is knocking on the door of my life and your life in the hope that we will **open the door** and **welcome him in**.

The context at Laodicea was of Christians who had pushed Jesus out of their lives.

This image of Jesus standing at the door and knocking is one that works for us whether we have been Christians for years, or if we have never taken that step of inviting him into our lives.

To invite him in, means **committing ourselves to following him.** It means making him Lord of our lives.

Our commitments are crucial in life and every single person is committed to one thing or another, whether to our job, our favourite football team, our children, fly-fishing, guitar-playing, stamp-collecting, or whatever.

An author called Rick Warren wrote a best-selling book called, *The Purpose-Drive Life.*

In it he wrote this.....

“Nothing shapes your life more than the commitments you choose to make. Your commitments can develop you or they can destroy you, but either way, they will define you. Tell me what you are committed to, and I’ll tell you what you will be in twenty years. We become what we are committed to.”

The thought of committing our lives to Christ, of making him the Lord of our lives, can be daunting.

In the days before the abolition of slavery in America, a fine black slave was among the men being sold at auction. As the bidding began the slave noticed that a foreign-looking man was leading the bidding for him. He was consistently increasing his offer with every counter-bid.

The slave began to shout and curse at the man, saying, 'If you buy me, I will never work for you. I'd sooner die than work for you. If you buy me, I'll try to kill you!' He said this because he knew that if he were bought by a foreign buyer, he'd probably be separated from his family and relatives, and most likely never see them again.

But still the man went on bidding and eventually the slave was sold to the foreign-looking stranger. He paid the money over to the auctioneer, received the bill of sale, and walked over to the slave.

The crowd parted, waiting to see what would happen next. As the man reached the slave, he stretched out his hand with the bill of sale in it and said. 'Take it' he said, 'I bought you to set you free. You are now a free man.'

The slave looked blank for a moment and then, as he realised what had happened, he fell on his knees before this unknown benefactor.

'Sir', he said, 'I will serve you and go with you wherever you want. Your home will be my home. Your concerns my concerns, and your wish my command. I am yours.'

As we consider Christ's commitment to us - the way Christ died to free us from the slavery of sin and death, then our response (like the slave in the story) should be to commit or re-commit ourselves unreservedly and unconditionally to him above all else.

Are you prepared to do that?

Have you ever done it before in a clear, unequivocal way?

In the same way that a bride and a groom make a formal, life-time commitment to one another in the Marriage Service, have you ever made that commitment to Christ?

In the Service of Holy Communion that we will move into shortly, there will be an opportunity to pray a Prayer of Commitment to Christ.

Hand out the sheet that contains the Prayers of Commitment.

You might like to read out the Prayer of Commitment

This is a prayer that I will invite us all to say. No one has to say it. It's your decision.

I have also printed out a copy of the Methodist Covenant Prayer that is used at Methodist Watchnight Services on New Year's Eve each year. In essence this is a prayer of commitment. I think it is a very solemn prayer. It's one should not rush into praying. I think we it would only be right to prepare oneself to pray that prayer.

I have included it so that you can reflect on it and take it away. You may wish to make it your own prayer at some point in the future.

Following the opportunity to join in that prayer of commitment, there will also be an opportunity to receive a prayer with the laying on of hands at the Communion Rail after receiving the wine.

The text of that Prayer of Commitment is on the Order of Service so you will be able to read it through later. This is what it says.....

*N, as you kneel before the Father,
from the riches of his glory
may he strengthen you with power
in your inner being through his Spirit.
May Christ dwell in your heart through faith,
and may you know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,
and be filled with all the fullness of God.
Amen.*

If you would like me to pray this prayer for you, simply remain at the Communion Rail after you have received the wine.

If you would prefer not to receive that prayer, then simply return to your seat after you have received the wine.

Now as we have some refreshments theirs is an opportunity to discuss tonight's topic: Commitment to Christ.

GROUP DISCUSSION

- What might make you stop short of committing your life to Christ so that he has “first place in everything”? (*Colossians 1.18*)

Christ is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. (Colossians 1.18 NRSV)

- What would you say to someone who said, “To be fully committed to Christ above everything and everyone else would constrain me and prevent me from being who I am.”?

How does this square with what Jesus said in John 8.31-36?

Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free....If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. (John 8.31b-32,26)

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PRAYER OF COMMITMENT

Lord Jesus Christ,
thank you for dying on the cross to free us from our sin.

Thank you for the gift of forgiveness,
for the gift of new life,
and for the promise of the Holy Spirit.

I admit that my commitment to you has often been lukewarm
and that I need your forgiveness.

I am willing to turn away from all that I know is wrong
and to make you Lord of my life.

As you knock at the door of my life, I now open the door.

Please come into my life by your Holy Spirit.

Come in to save me and to lead me,
come in to be with me for ever.

Help me to be committed to you in faith and obedience
and to serve you all for the remaining years of my life.

Thank you, Lord Jesus.

Amen.

THE METHODIST COVENANT SERVICE PRAYER

Christ has many services to be done:
some are easy, others are difficult;
some bring honour, others bring reproach;
some are suitable to our natural inclinations
and material interests, others are contrary to both;
in some we may please Christ and please ourselves;
in others we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves.

Yet the power to do all these things is given to us in Christ,
who strengthens us.

Therefore let us make this covenant of God our own.

Let us give ourselves to him,
trusting in his promises and relying on his grace:

I am no longer my own but yours.

Put me to what you will,
rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing,
put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you
or laid aside for you,
exalted for you
or brought low for you.
Let me be full,
let me be empty,
let me have all things,
let me have nothing.

**I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.**

**And now, glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours.**

So be it.

**And the covenant made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven.**

Amen.

FIVE MARKS OF GROWING

Session 5 – Commitment

Bible Readings

New Testament Reading: Revelation 3.14-22

To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation:

"I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth.

For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent.

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.

Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."

Gospel Reading: Luke 14.25-33

Large crowds were travelling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters -yes, even his own life - he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'

Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace.

In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.

¹ The content of this section is based on Tom Wright, *Revelation for Everyone* p.37-38

² 1.7; 1.18; 2.7; 3.8; 3.16

³ 1.27; 2.2

⁴ 4.24; 3.12,14