

Stewardship in the First Testament — Week One Table Talk

Created in the Image of God

List the words that come to mind when you hear the word “power.” Make a list of *positive* connotations and a list of *negative* connotations of power. What makes the difference between the two lists — what makes power good? What makes it bad?

Some helpful background The story that opens the Bible is the first of two full-blown biblical narratives about the creation of the world. The other follows immediately in Genesis 2-3. There are other much more fragmentary allusions to ancient creation stories sprinkled throughout the Bible. The story in Genesis 1:1—2:4a makes a number of unmistakable allusions to an ancient Babylonian creation story, the Enuma Elish. For example, the Hebrew word usually translated “the deep” (Genesis 1:2) is *tehom*, a Hebrew variation of the name Tiamat, the sea goddess in the Enuma Elish. The term often translated “the spirit of God” that hovers over the surface of the waters in 1:2 is probably better translated as “an awesome wind,” an allusion to the four winds that the Babylonian god Marduk blew across the belly of Tiamat, i.e., the surface of the waters. These and other allusions to the Babylonian story set up the brilliant and surprising switch that happens as the biblical story unfolds. In the Babylonian story, the creation of human beings is the final act of a bloody, violent narrative where the world is the end result of a divine massacre and human beings are created as slaves. In the biblical story, human beings are created to exercise power in the world as God exercises power in the universe. But that power stands in stark contrast to the kind of violent, dominating power exercised by the Babylonian empire and its patron god Marduk. God’s power is generous and joyful. The world, created in peace, is the source of flourishing life. Human beings, male and female, created in the image of God, are called to exercise power in the world the way God does, with life-giving generosity, confidence, and joy. Filled with power, women and men are free to give.

Read the following biblical texts. Is “power” positive or negative in each of these passages? What makes the difference?

- Daniel 8.3-4
- Daniel 8.23-25
- 2 Corinthians 12.8-10
- Luke 6.19

Watch Rick Lowery on [Stewardship in Genesis part 1](#) (10:00) and [part 2](#) (6:45)

Discuss

- The Babylonian imperial creation story portrays a dangerous, unsettled world where justice and peace depend on domination and the threat and actual use of extreme violence. The biblical story, by contrast, portrays a created world called into being by a divine word, without threat, without a fight, without bloodshed of any kind, a world teeming with abundant life. How might each of these worldviews affect the way someone might think about material possessions? About giving and sharing?
- Name some of the fears — as a nation, as a community, as a church — that hold us back, that cause us to act without generosity and self-confidence. What might we be able to do if we could move beyond those fears? How might we begin to put those fears behind us or at least address them in a way that allows us to move forward?
- In the biblical story, human beings are created in the image of God to share power in the world. Discuss some examples of people not experiencing their God-given power. What might the church do to help them experience that power? How can we increase the sense of shared power in our church? Our community? Our nation? Our world?

Closing Prayer

Stewardship in the First Testament — Week Two Table Talk

Sabbath delight

Think of something in your life that is scarce, that you never seem to have enough of, that you crave. How does it affect you to pursue it? How do you feel when you acquire it? What is it like when it goes away? Have you ever let something go and found it returned to you on its own?

Some helpful background Today's story portrays the creation of the world as an act of divine generosity and grace. Unlike the Babylonian creation story that serves as its backdrop, the Genesis story paints the picture of a world created in peace, overflowing with abundance. The very word translated "create," *bara'* in Hebrew, carries the connotation of "fatness," that is, prosperity, well-being, and health. In the biblical account, you can't think of creation without thinking of abundance and well-being. In stark contrast to the Babylonian story that says human beings are made to be slaves to the gods — to the imperial representatives of the gods — this biblical story says that human beings are created in the image of God to have power, to exercise governance in the world, and to enjoy and honor sabbath rest. Sabbath rest is the climax, the point of creation, according to this story. The final word is not productive work or limitless consumption. The final word is sabbath rest — quiet, calm appreciation of the glorious world God has created. The final word is self-limitation, the willingness just to stop the frantic busy-ness of life and enjoy the goodness of a world teeming with abundance and life. Though we often try to cram eight days of work into a seven-day week, God promises seven days of prosperity for six days of work. It requires a leap of faith to trust that God will provide more than enough for us to survive and thrive. But this story calls us to take just such a leap of faith, to honor sabbath, enjoy life, and trust God's abundant care. The story thus gives us a clue about how we are to live and to govern in the world as human beings created "in the image of God." At the end of virtually every day of creation, God offers the assessment that what's been created is "good." This Hebrew word *tov* may be better translated "delightful!" God takes delight in creation's every detail, culminating in the creation of human beings, male and female in image of God, which God describes as "especially delightful!" As empowered "governors," "stewards" in the world, we are called to delight in creation, to walk in bold confidence that God desires abundant life for all. God calls us to live lives of hope, generosity, and joy.

Read

- Genesis 1.1-2.4, substituting "delightful" for "good."

Watch Rick Lowery speaking on [Sabbath Delight part 1](#) (13:38) and [part 2](#) (10:27)

Discuss

- Economists often speak of “the scarcity problem,” which is rooted in two contradictory realities of the world: human beings have unlimited needs and wants, but the world has limited resources. In an important sense, the biblical creation story addresses the scarcity problem by reframing the issue, flipping the scarcity problem on its head. The world God desires is a world of abundance where there is more than enough for everyone to survive and thrive because human activity is characterized by sabbath self-restraint. Where human beings see scarcity, God provides lavish abundance. While we always crave more, God calls us to observe limits on work and consumption, to honor sabbath.
- It’s important to note that the picture of the world in Genesis 1 is not an accurate depiction of the world as it is. Creation in this story is a completely vegetarian world, for example. Not only humans, but also all the lions and tigers and bears are herbivores (1:29-30). Genesis 1 is, like Isaiah 11:6-9 or Revelation 21:1 -- 22:5, a vision of the world God dreams about, the world God hopes for and calls us to strive to build.
- Some have described the workings of the world envisioned by Genesis 1 as “sabbath economics.” It is a way of living in the world that starts from the assumption that it’s possible for everyone to have enough to thrive. Scarcity and poverty are not “the will of God.” They are failures of human imagination, departures from the dream God has for the world. Sabbath economics assumes that everyone can have enough. It is grounded in a conscious choice to place limits on our own work and consumption.
- With all of that in mind, discuss any or all of the following questions:
- What are some ways we in our personal life, our congregational life, our national life act out of an attitude of scarcity? What difference might it make if we could act out of an attitude of abundance? What might we do differently?
- How might we view economic activity differently if we started not from an assumption of scarcity, of unlimited needs and wants, but from an assumption of abundance and of self-limitation? What might have to change? How might we act differently? How might corporations act differently? How might nations act differently? What would it mean for the way we interact with the rest of creation? What are some things we can do on a small scale to start living out “sabbath economics”?
- What are some things we might do as individuals, as a congregation, as a nation to foster attitudes of abundance and generosity? to support the discipline of sabbath keeping?

Closing Prayer

O God of sabbath delight,
help us live lives of abundance.
Where, in our hearts, there is fear,
fill us with hope.
When, in our fear, we shut down,
open us to new possibilities.
Give us the gift of your vision for the world,
help us dream dreams of
a new creation.
Help us imagine
new ways of living.
Give us the courage to share,
the confidence to know when enough is enough,
the joy to sustain us in the work you have called us to do,
and the good sense to rest.
O God of sabbath,
you are our life and our delight!
Amen.

Stewardship in the First Testament — Week Three Table Talk

Abundance for all

Some background The Bible's second story about the origin of sabbath observance is centered around God's miraculous provision of food for Israel when they flee into the desert to escape the Egyptian army. They finally are free, but the people panic. They're afraid they'll starve. They turn on their leader Moses. Freedom, they fear, is not all it's cracked up to be. There is a certain predictability and comfort to being enslaved. And the people now liberated are worried, terrified by the insecurity of freedom. God responds to their complaint by providing "manna," a bread-like substance that could not be stored overnight. So it did no good to hoard it. The curious thing about this manna, however, was that on the sixth day of every week, it could be stored for one additional day. This allowed Israel to gather a double portion on the sixth day, so they wouldn't have to gather manna on the seventh day, which God declared to be a day of rest, sabbath. Manna had one other strange feature: when people of different abilities and strength harvested the manna and took it home to eat, they discovered that everybody had exactly the amount of food they needed. Those who gathered more had no surplus. Those who gathered less had no shortfall. In a community shaped by sabbath, God provides enough for all, regardless of ability.

The ethical vision of this story is consistent with ethics that grow out of household-based economies like that of ancient Israel. In the ancient household, every member works for the long-term survival and well-being of the family. And households within a given region are morally obligated to ensure that vulnerable families survive. This moral obligation is expressed in a variety of ways in the Bible, for example, through the tradition of gleaning that requires families to leave a portion of the crop at harvest time so poor and vulnerable families can gather the rest for themselves. There are strict regulations on lending. Creditors are limited in the kinds of collateral they can demand. They are prohibited from charging interest on subsistence loans, that is, loans that people take out to feed, clothe, and shelter their families. Creditors are regulated in the way they treat people who take out loans. They can collect their money, but they must respect the basic human dignity of their debtors.

Finally, families have the responsibility to provide hospitality -- food, shelter, and protection -- to travelers and to immigrants who temporarily come into the neighborhood because of economic hardship, natural disaster, or war. In all of these cases, the moral obligation to provide assistance is grounded in the conviction that we are stronger together than we are divided against one another -- even when the "other" is not one of our ethnic or national group. When we share, we succeed. In community, we thrive.

Watch Rick Lowery speaking on [Abundance part 1](#) (14:18) and [part 2](#) (7:10)

Discuss

In Exodus 16.2-30, God provides food for Israel, but that food cannot be hoarded. If you try to store it for later, it rots. In fact, no matter how much anyone is able to gather, everyone winds up having exactly what they need to get by today.

- What are some ways God has provided exactly what you, your family, our church needs?
- How, if at all, have you been able to use that to help meet the needs of others?
- What difference would it make if we assumed that God wants everyone to have what they need?
- How would that affect how we spend our money?
- How might that affect the policies our government pursues?
- Should this biblical vision have an impact on our political and economic decisions? How so? How not?

What do you think Jesus means in Matthew 6.9-11 when he prays: “give us this day our daily bread”?

- Name some ways that this prayer comes true for you, for our church, for our community, for our nation.
- Do we have a responsibility to help ensure that everyone has daily bread?
- If so, what are some things we might do to meet that responsibility?

The story of Abraham, Sarah, and God at the oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18.1-8) is a bit unclear because we have at least a couple of versions of the story that are now merged together in the current text of Genesis 18. So it's confusing at points whether Abraham is talking to three men (who are probably angels) or whether he's talking just to God. But the basic point is the same: Abraham and Sarah are role models when it comes to ancient rules of hospitality. The hospitality code tells you how to deal with travelers who come into your neighborhood. Travelers in the ancient world were inherently vulnerable because they were cut off from their own networks of mutual economic support, their extended families. Because they were vulnerable, they also were potentially dangerous. As the Jamaican singer Bob Marley once said, “a hungry man is an angry man.” You can deal with a threat by trying to crush it. Or you can deal with it by trying to neutralize it. By inviting the stranger to sit at his table, Abraham is trying to neutralize the threat. He's inviting the stranger temporarily to become part of his household and therefore to play by the rules of his household, to commit to the long-term welfare of the house of Abraham. It is a mutually beneficial relationship, sustenance for the traveler and security for the household.

- Who are the strangers in our world today?
- What might a code of hospitality look like today?
- What might we do as a community, a nation, a church, a family to practice hospitality?

Closing Prayer

God of sweet manna in the desert,
give us today our daily bread,
lead us through this wilderness,
feed us with your gracious love,
and inspire us to share.

Rain mercy on us,
quench our burning thirst,
bring us to the place of rest.

Accept our praise,
for you are our God,
our strength,
our hope,
our life.

You have provided,
and always will.

Grant us the courage to receive,
and the wisdom to share,
that every single one
may find
exactly
what she,
what he
needs.

Amen.

Stewardship in the First Testament — Week Four Table Talk

A table set with justice

Some background A Christian understanding of giving is grounded ultimately in the sacrificial life of Jesus. But “sacrifice” in this context is often misunderstood. Many of us tend to think of ritual sacrifice as an offering made to appease an angry God. The idea is that humans have done something wrong and now must slaughter an animal whose shed blood will soothe the righteous wrath of God. This idea that God demands blood sacrifice for sin in fact runs directly counter to some of the Bible’s key prophetic traditions. Micah 6.6-8 is the clearest example of that, but there are other passages as well. While it is true that ritual sacrifice is sometimes performed as an act of appeasement, it is generally better to think of biblical sacrifice in terms of the ancient code of hospitality.

The hospitality code governed how to deal with strangers who come into your neighborhood or region. Immigrants and travelers were cut off from their normal systems of economic support, their extended families. They were economically vulnerable. Their vulnerability made you vulnerable as well, because they might, out of desperation, steal your property and harm your family in the process. The way the ancients solved this problem of mutual vulnerability was to invite the traveler to share their table, to become temporarily a member of their household. This solution had a dual benefit: you were now morally obligated to protect the interests of the vulnerable immigrant or traveler who, in turn, was now morally obligated to protect the interests of your family. *Hospitality was a two-way street.* If a stranger accepted your offer of hospitality, all was well. If the stranger rejected your offer, you probably were in trouble.

Most ritual sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament functions in the human-divine relationship like hospitality functions between human beings. God is in many ways the strange “other.” Encounters with God had the potential for great benefit but also carried the risk of disaster. The story of Israel’s encounter with God at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19.10-24) illustrates the sense the ancients had that coming into God’s presence was a very dangerous thing to do. In this story, God tells Moses to tell the people not to come near to God, because God might “break out on them” and kill them all. Meeting God could be wonderful or disastrous. It could go either way.

Just as rules of hospitality helped people in the ancient world reduce the risk involved when strangers suddenly appear, the rules and practices of ritual sacrifice helped the people reduce the risks of coming into contact with God. At the table shared, God and people become family, friends. Just as Abraham and Sarah spread a lavish feast for the strangers at the oaks of Mamre in Genesis 18, including nice tender steaks, so too the people of Israel spread a feast of bread, wine, and choice meat before God. The ritual slaughter of animals is not the bloody appeasement of an angry God. It’s slaughtering the fatted calf. It’s pulling out all the stops, sparing no expense to throw a fancy feast for the potentially dangerous,

potentially beneficent “other” you hope will be your ally and friend. Ritual sacrifice is an act of hospitality, keeping the friendship strong by keeping a regular dinner date with God.

But an interesting reversal occurs in the ritual feasts described in the Bible: the offering of the people to God becomes the offering of God back to the people. Deuteronomy 14.22-29 gives the most striking example of this, but throughout the Bible we’re told that the sacrifice or some portion of the sacrifice is to be consumed by the priests who bring it (Leviticus 24.5-9, for example). In the ritual act, the people’s gift to God becomes God’s gift to the people.

Several of the prophets criticize the people for conducting ritual feasts, while failing to care for the vulnerable poor. In Isaiah 1.10-14 and Amos 5.21-24, for example, the prophets, speaking on God’s behalf, reject the people’s offer of hospitality. It turns out that God is above all a God of justice who has a special concern for the most vulnerable people in society. God desires justice for all and is completely uninterested in accepting hospitality from people who are so busy being religious that they fail to do whatever they can to help the vulnerable poor.

This key prophetic concern forms the backdrop of the gospels’ accounts of Jesus “cleansing the temple” (Matthew 21.12-17; Mark 11.15-17; Luke 10.45-46; John 2.13-17). His attack on the dove-sellers and the money-changers highlights the economic dimension of his critique. Doves were the poor person’s sacrifice (Leviticus 5.7), particularly associated with rituals related to women’s reproductive health (Leviticus 12.6-8). Money changing, of course, was the essential interface between the Roman imperial economic system, with its Caesar-cult coinage, and the temple ritual system that would not allow transactions with Caesar coins. Jesus was not attacking the ritual system per se. He was condemning the social-economic injustice of the imperial system and the failure of religious and political leaders to address it.

If you’re going to spread a table for God, you’d better make sure you’re serving a heaping helping of justice for the vulnerable poor.

Read Exodus 19.10-24 (excerpts)

‘Be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death. ¹³ No hand shall touch them, but they shall be stoned or shot with arrows; whether animal or human being, they shall not live....’ ¹⁶On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled.... ¹⁸ Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire.... ²¹ Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go down and warn the people not to break through to the Lord to look; otherwise many of them will perish. ²² Even the priests who approach the Lord must consecrate themselves or the Lord will break out against them.” ... ²⁴ The Lord said to him, “Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you; but do not let either the priests or the people break through to come up to the Lord; otherwise he will break out against them.”

Watch Rick Lowery speaking on [A Table Set with Justice part 1](#) (11:58) and [part 2](#) (13:13)

Discuss

Read Deuteronomy 14:22-29

- Can you describe a time when a gift you gave ultimately brought a blessing to you? What motivated you to give the gift? Why did it become a blessing to you?
- What are some issues of social-economic justice that should be addressed in our community, in our nation, in our world? How, if at all, is our church already addressing those issues? If we're not addressing them, how might we begin to address them? If we're not addressing them well, how might we do a better job?

Read Amos 5:21-24 and Micah 6:6-8

- What are some of the ways we already connect issues of social-economic justice with our worship of God?
- Are there particular places in our regular worship where we might make those connections more clearly?
- Are there particular times during the church year that would be especially good for such a focus?
- What could we do to increase the profile of issues related to social-economic justice in our congregation, our community, our region, our nation?
- How might we draw a clearer connection at the communion table between our communion with the crucified and risen Christ and our calling to work for social-economic justice for all?

Closing Prayer

God of Sinai,
redeemer,
liberator of slaves,
defender of the vulnerable,
hope of those without hope,
fill us with your justice fire!
The earth trembles
at the sound of your footsteps,
at the sound of your people marching
toward a world renewed,
born in justice,
nurtured in the ways of peace.
Shake us up!
Prepare us to meet our God!

Lead us into your presence,
that we may lead the lost.
Feed us at your table
that we may feed the hungry.
Build us up
that we may, by your power,
build a better world.
Give us hearts of fire
for justice and peace.
O God of Sinai,
redeemer, defender, companion, friend,
you are the hope of the hopeless,
the bread of life for a hungry world!
In the name of Jesus,
our hope,
our life,
Amen.