

LAND, THE BIBLE AND OUR HEARTS

JULY 2019 | RICHARD LUNDIE

The topic of land in South Africa has been, for the longest time, an issue of great contention. It has been at the heart of our history and many of the darkest moments have been linked to it. It is not surprising that current discourse on land is highly emotive and is often divisive in nature. Layered on to this are political parties and social commentary whose messaging may feel like there are only two options for people who own land: give it up and leave, or build higher walls and hope for the best.

Reflecting on this issue reveals that this is more than the number of square meters that you may own (or not own). With a Christian paradigm, we must recognize that this is a heart issue. This resource is intended to inform and inspire the hearts and faith of Christ-followers as they discern what they could be doing with what God has entrusted to them. With such an emotive and important issue in our context, the church has been given the opportunity to put on display to the world what it looks like when Christ-followers live under the Kingship of Jesus.

THE GOSPEL AND SCRIPTURE SPEAK TO US

An important truth to remember about the gospel is that it transforms the whole life of a believer. It is not merely the message that we can get into heaven. It is not merely the message that we have forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God and restoration of our 'vertical' relationship with God. It is also the message that what sin has damaged in us is overcome. The truths of what Jesus accomplished reshapes the way we live, the way we relate, the way we do community and the way we handle our everyday lives.

It is for these reasons that Christ-followers are to have a more nuanced approach to the topic of land. Christ-followers are to engage with scripture to ensure that their response is rooted in what God would have for his redeemed people. Which ever side of the political spectrum you lean towards, be sure that scripture is the loudest voice in shaping your attitude, posture and response. Faithfulness to Jesus and his ways should be the deepest motivation to engage. And we can trust Him as he leads us to respond. If you fear engaging with this topic biblically it may indicate a lack of trust in God. Perhaps you don't believe that he has your very best interests at heart.

Now, it must be recognized that scripture does not give us explicit instructions around this topic for our context in Cape Town today. The contexts and era in which God's word was written are so different to ours today that direct comparison is unhelpful. There is not a list of commandments for what to do with your land, or how to get land if you don't have. This means that there is not a uniform response to this topic. Given your history, your heritage, your means, your current context and myriad of factors, what God is leading you to do in response to this topic is likely going to be different to what he is leading someone else to. This makes the conversation and journey of discernment more nuanced. There isn't 'one way' to respond, and so a binary 'do it' vs 'don't do it' doesn't exist. This breathes creativity and many options into the conversation. What is clear, as you will see, is that every Christ-follower is to journey towards increased faithfulness to Jesus in this area of life. Have a look here to see how Christ-followers have engaged, explored and responded to this issue:

<https://www.commongood.org.za/blog/redeeming-land/>

Before we go any further, it is worth noting that this resource is primarily aimed at those Christ-followers who have land, or who have had land within their families of origin. This is not trying to answer questions of Christ-followers who have lost land. These are crucially important questions to engage with, but is outside the range of this particular resource.

What follows are eight marks of how faithful believers would engage with this topic. It is intended that as you read each of the eight, you explore your own heart and reflect on whether it is something that you (and others) would say is something you demonstrate as part of your life. And as you internalize these, you discern what you are to be and do.

Marks of how faithful believers see and use their land or property:

Faithful believers see the earth as the Lord's

"The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; 2 for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters." (Ps 24:1-2 and quoted by Paul in 1 Cor 10:26). The earth does not belong to the created, but rather the creator. This influences how we see what we own, or steward what he has entrusted to us.

Paul warns believers of how we are not to worship created things, but rather worship the God who made them (Romans 1:24-25). In this way, land or property should never be something we worship, whether we are seeking to protect it or pursue it. As soon as we worship created things, they become our gods and we become enslaved by them. If we feel a disproportionate amount of attachment, security, or hope in property, we must ask ourselves whether we are looking to find something in our property that we can and should only find in our God.

Question: Before examining the hearts of others, have you considered whether you have put property (yours or others) in a place in your heart that only God should have? Do you need to repent of worshipping land/property?

Faithful believers use what they have to support others

9 "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. 10 Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that

have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God". (Leviticus 19:9-10 and repeated in Lev 23:22; 24:19-21)

The gleaning laws in the Old Testament capture something of God's heart for his people. Believers who have resources and means of production do not use or spend what they have only on themselves. Instead, there is intentionality of generosity towards those who have less, or those who do not have the means to provide for themselves. This isn't about leftovers, but rather purposeful generosity.

A brief aside: It is important to note that the lineage of Jesus includes Ruth, who gleaned from the fields of Boaz (Ruth 2). Through Boaz fulfilling the gleaning laws, Ruth lived, and her great grandson was King David. You cannot know the blessing that comes to the world through faithful obedience to His laws, even if you are not alive to see the fullness of them.

Question: with what you have, have you prayed over how you can be generous? Do you use 100% of your income on yourself, or do you budget to bless others?

Faithful believers have systems to prevent intergenerational poverty

In the laws of Israel was the year of Jubilee. Every 50 years there was to be a year where debt was cancelled, slaves released and people returned to their original lands. Leviticus 25 covers this in great detail. "10 Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you is to return to your family property and to your own clan".

In this is the statement that the land belongs to the Lord, not the people (v23). Again and again, the Lord connects these financial implications to interpersonal relationships – the Israelites are not to rule over each other, exploit each other or take advantage of each other.

There would come calamity, oppression and personal sin, leading to individuals and families living in poverty. This put them at greater risk of being exploited, and possibly selling their property to others or even selling themselves into slavery as a way to survive. At the end of 49 years, there would be disparities of standard of living between families.

These Jubilee laws, in some ways, it was a 'reset' to ensure that poverty was not passed on from one generation to another.

All throughout these laws, God states the identity of the Israelites – those whom God had redeemed out of Egypt. Understanding that helped them to remember that every other Israelite was a brother, a sister, a cousin, a nephew or niece. With that perspective, the Jubilee laws were a way of families being restored.

How does this work for us today? We may struggle to figure out if and how the Jubilee laws apply to our capitalist society. Rather than being caught up in economic models, focus on what can be done to break intergenerational poverty. Believers are brought into a new family, where people who were previously strangers are now brothers and sisters (Matt 12:48-50). This helps to shape the conversation of Jubilee around relationships, not economic systems. It is on God's heart, as shown through these laws, that families are not bound to poverty for generations.

Question: what are the opportunities you have, with what God has entrusted to you, to be part of breaking the cycle of poverty in a family? If nothing immediately comes to mind, pray that God would open a door for you.

Faithful believers do not exploit others to gain their property

There is powerful narrative captured in 1 Kings 21. We read of how King Ahab of Israel, stated as one of the evilest of Israel's kings (1 Kings 16:29-34), stole the vineyard of his neighbor, Naboth. Naboth would not give it to the king, so Queen Jezebel conspired to have Naboth killed so that the land could be given to the king for a vegetable garden. God then sends the prophet Elijah to confront Ahab:

"9 Say to him, 'This is what the Lord says: Have you not murdered a man and seized his property?' Then say to him, 'This is what the Lord says: In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood—yes, yours!'" Ahab's greed led him to kill in order to gain land. And God poured out his wrath upon him and his family.

Other laws instructed believers to not move the boundary markers, which was essentially stealing land (Deuteronomy 19:14, Prov 22:28). Proverbs 23:10-11 warns believers that to take advantage of vulnerable people would stir God to act against them, "10 Do not move an ancient boundary stone or encroach on the fields of the fatherless, 11 for their Defender is strong; he will take up their case against you."

Given the history of our city and nation, families were forcibly removed from homes and areas. Those who had less power were exploited and dispossessed. This should move the Christ-followers heart to be more sensitive to community dynamics and history. Have a curiosity about the history of the area in which you live. When there are protests or lobbying in other areas, seek to understand the history, the heart, the stories of the residents. Explore ways in which you can "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. 9 Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy." (Proverbs 31:8-9).

Question: how familiar are you with the history of your city and community? How many conversations have you had with people from those areas who were affected by unjust laws and who were exploited?

Faithful believers do not hoard their possessions

The parable of the rich fool in Luke 12 is a sobering message. The world tells us that you need more and more in order to be safe, and so hoard what you have. Jesus tells this parable in response to a man asking Jesus to tell his brother to divide his inheritance. Jewish tradition held that the eldest brother received a double portion of the inheritance. This likely made the younger brother discontent and he wanted Jesus to intervene to tell the older brother to divide it with him.

Jesus goes on to tell this parable of a rich man who had an abundant harvest – so much so that he plans to tear down his barns and build bigger ones so that he can take it easy for many years. But Jesus calls him a fool, closing the parable with a profound challenge: “20 “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ 21 “This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”

Our possessions, property and means of income are from God. They are not evil in and of themselves. They are not there, however, to hoard at the expense of generosity. Too often people can hide behind ‘good stewardship’ and hoard in order to feel safe and secure, revealing that their trust is in their possessions, not the one who gave them the possessions and holds their life in his hands.

Question: do you have a tendency to hoard what you have? If unexpected money came your way, is your first thought to ‘put it away’ or to be generous with it? Why do you think this is? What could God be saying to you about the way you manage what you have been entrusted with?

Faithful believers are moved by the gospel to generosity

(Acts 2; 4; 2 Cor 8)

The early church models something for us today about the power of the gospel and God's grace to move people to generosity.

“44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need”. Acts 2

“32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. 33 With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all 34 that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales 35 and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.” Acts 4

Notice in 4:33 how it is God's grace powerfully working in them to bring about the generosity to the degree that there were no needy believers. Their generosity extended not only to their leftovers but to their dwellings. God's grace worked in them so that their property was not lord over them, but rather Jesus was lord over it.

Paul, when writing to the Corinthian church to appeal for funds towards the famine in Jerusalem does not command them to be generous, but to consider truths of the gospel: "8 I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. 9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." (2 Cor 8:8-9). By focusing on the generosity of Jesus towards us, we are moved towards generosity to others in need.

Question: is your motivation to be generous rooted in guilt, obligation or fear? Or is it rooted in the generosity of Christ towards you? How regularly are you praising God for his generosity, and has this moved you into generous acts to others?

Faithful believers know and live that they will give an answer for how they use and manage their property

The early church saw acts of generosity as part of their earliest existence. We see in Acts 5, however, a tragic account of deception and lying. Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of property to lay at the apostle's feet and they withheld some of the proceeds for themselves. They then lied to the apostles about how much the property was sold for. Peter confronted them and Ananias fell dead and later Sapphira.

The challenging question Peter puts to Ananias reveals something of the accountability we have for what we own, "4 Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God." (Acts 5:4). The Holy Spirit is aware of what we are doing with what we have been entrusted.

The parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) also speaks to this reality of believers answering to their Master about what they have done with what was entrusted to them, regardless of how much they were given.

Regardless of what people know about our finances, God knows the inner working of our hearts and money and this should instruct us in how we see what we have. God will hold us each responsible for what we have been entrusted (whether lots or little). And he will look at how we manage them (being wise and a good stewards) AND how generous we are with what we have.

Question: what goes through your heart and mind when you consider that you will give an account for what you have been entrusted with? Why is that?

Faithful believers live with the future in mind

One of the comforting and challenging realities of a Christ-follower is living between the times. We live in the age where the power of sin and death has been broken by Jesus, but not yet fully cast out. We await the fully realized kingship of Jesus, wherein there is a new heaven and new earth. We live in the tension of a broken, sinful world that causes pain and loss, whilst experiencing the redeeming and restoring work of Christ, even as we long for a future that is fully whole. We cannot expect complete wholeness until Jesus comes again but knowing what is coming moves us towards action and participation in His work.

We read in Revelation 21 about this new creation and how dwelling places change “1 Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

Isaiah prophesied how this would impact on the quality of life for faithful believers “21 They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. 22 No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat.”

It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the housing and land problems in South Africa. Knowing that God is bringing all things together and that this affects the dwelling places of believers gives us comfort and hope. We are not the saviours nor will we be the ones who create a new heaven and a new earth. This does not leave us complacent, either. Knowing that this is how human history ends, we have to ask ourselves: are we living in a way that is in line, or facing the direction of what God is doing and will do? Are we working with him, or against him?

Question: do you feel hopeless when you consider the magnitude of the housing and land issues in South Africa? How could knowing God’s plans infuse hope and creativity into your response?

Consider Jesus

As you grapple and discern your response, consider for a moment the earthly life of Jesus. Jesus takes on flesh at a time that his parents were in their place of origin, but did not own land. Jesus enters into the human story landless. And when he is taken off the cross, he is put in Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb. The buried Jesus was landless. Jesus knew what it meant to be without a permanent home, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” Luke 9:58. The Son of God, who created all things and sustains all things, was very aware of what it meant to be landless. And that was his choice. He could have incarnated into power and riches. But he chose to commune with those who had less.

Jesus challenged a rich young ruler to sell everything and give it to the poor. This was met with great astonishment by his disciples. Jesus then responded by saying, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:26). As one who had given up everything for the sake of others, he knew what sacrifice meant. And he tells us this is possible in Him. And in that same breath,

he states, "29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. 30 But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

In conclusion, this is not an easy or simple topic. Remembering that one of the curses of sin was dislocation (Adam and Even removed from Eden) and one of the future realities is relocation (dwelling with God in the new creation), this issue of home and housing will always be deeper than many other issues we face. Our hope is that through these resources, you would take more steps towards integrating your faith and this big topic. Our hope is that your heart is transformed by Christ as you grapple with this. Our hope is that you would take practically steps to use what you have for the betterment of others – especially those who are trapped in poverty. And, as you take steps forward, you would see God move in powerful way, demonstrating his grace in and through you, and showing that, in Him, this is possible.



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