

Generous God Generous People



Four Bible study sessions from St Mark's gospel
exploring who Jesus is
and how we can respond
to his love by living generous lives



THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

**Diocese of St Edmundsbury
and Ipswich**

Introduction

Responding to Grace

Bible Studies from Mark's gospel

Mark was probably the first gospel to be written. The whole story is styled to point to the key question – who is this Jesus and why did he come?

For small groups meeting to explore what Mark's gospel says about generous giving, it is important to remember the context. It's all about who Jesus is and our response to Him. The teaching of Jesus on our attitudes to others, possessions and lifestyles shouldn't be separated from the challenge to see Him for who He is. Jesus gave everything to save us and we should respond with our whole selves.

This is demonstrated in Mark 1:29-31 where Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law. He saves her from her illness. Her response to his action is to get up and wait on Jesus and the others in the house. Jesus reaches out to an ill woman and her immediate response is generous service and hospitality. So, what does this mean for group leaders, preparing sessions on money and possessions and our attitudes to them? Well, firstly, why not read the whole of Mark's gospel or listen to it at a sitting so you get the feel and pace of the story? It's about 30 pages long. Encourage your members to do so too.

The disciples listened to Jesus' teaching and presumably discussed it and asked Him about it as they tramped the countryside. Listening, discussing and then reflecting on what all this meant helped them eventually understand who Jesus was. As 21st century followers of Jesus, we cannot listen to Jesus in the same way. However, we do have the luxury of the Bible available and group members may find it helpful to use the Generous God, Generous People daily readings booklet alongside the weekly group studies. Some people also find it helpful to keep a journal to record questions, prayers, insights and decisions.

It is also helpful to think about the social background of Jesus' listeners and the readers of Mark. In many ways, the first century Roman Empire is remarkably similar to our own experience. A multi cultural set up with its fair share of fanatics and extremists; a government which was unpopular with the masses (especially out in the further reaches of the empire). Corruption, extremes of riches and poverty and natural disasters causing death and distress were present too. There were plenty of beggars around then, as now. The difference, though obvious, is worth pointing out; there was no benefit system or health care available to those in need. People were reliant on the extended family. If this was not available, as sometimes was the case for widows and orphans for example, then hunger and homelessness was the inevitable outcome. The majority of early Christians in Palestine were poor Jews.

Content

Session 1

Focus: Mark 6:30-44

Generous God: feeding soul and body

Suggested optional resources:

- Song: 'All I once held dear'
- Hexagons photocopied and cut out (appendix 1)
- Leaflets from the local foodbank, night shelter or missions for the third world
- Rolls and fish or a variety of breads from around the world e.g. croissant, pitta

Session 2

Mark 12: 38-44

Generous people: giving from the heart

Suggested optional resources:

- Song: 'Take my life and let it be'
- Bags of 20 buttons or objects
- Playdough and paper plates
- String and labels saying 'widow' and 'teachers of the law'

Session 3

Mark 8:31-38

Jesus focused living: Priority setting

Suggested optional resources:

- 'Splintered Messiah' by Stewart Henderson (appendix 2)
- True/false statements photocopied (appendix 3)
- Notepaper and envelopes
- Foot - shaped pieces of paper with prayer needs from www.barnabasfund.org written on them
- Foot - shaped pieces of paper with Mark 8:35 written on them

Session 4

Mark 12:28-34

What is important: Living for God and neighbour

Suggested optional resources:

- Song: 'I will offer up my life'
- Piece of paper with images to represent the heart, soul, mind and strength for each person (appendix 4)
- Heart - shaped piece of paper
- Money Revolution cards (appendix 5)

Useful resources to help understand Mark's Gospel

'Mark for Everyone' by Tom Wright, published by SPCK, is full of insights, but easy to read.

Session 1

Focus: Mark 6:30-44

Generous God: feeding soul and body

'...the work of salvation, in its full sense, is about whole human beings, not merely souls; about the present, not simply the future; and about what God does through us, not merely what God does in and for us.' Bishop Tom Wright

'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come; the old has gone, the new is here!'
2 Corinthians 5:17

Notes on passage

The context, both immediate and more wide ranging, for this passage is very important.

The disciples are weary and drained and in need of solitude. Yet the people follow them. They are at the end of their natural resources when they realise that it is late and they are in a deserted place and that the people will want food. They take the problem to Jesus, spelling out the issues, 'This is a remote place' they said to him, 'and it is already very late.'

How often do our plans go astray and we feel out of resources? And yet God often blesses us in these times.

Mark gives us the bigger picture in the previous verses. Jesus has been rejected by his home town, Nazareth. John the Baptist, who prophesied about Jesus, has been beheaded by Herod; thus Herod fails to 'feed' the people spiritually, one of his primary responsibilities as king. When Jesus has compassion on the people as sheep without a shepherd, he is looking on them as a king would. Mark is reflecting a phrase from Numbers 25:15-17 where Moses refers to the Israelites in this way. The people are spiritually hungry.

This OT reference is important because it keys Mark's readers into the story known by every Jew; God provided manna in the desert for the Israelites under Moses' leadership. The people here, too, are in a barren and remote place and are physically hungry and Jesus provides abundantly for them. All four gospel writers include an account of this miracle – it was clearly vital to their understanding of Jesus as the Messiah the Jewish people were waiting for. The disciples ask Jesus to disperse the crowd who are hungry because it is late in the day. Jesus' response is to bat the problem back to them. 'You give them something to eat.' You can pick up a slight tinge of exasperation as the disciples spell out the problem in further detail. It would cost eight months wages to feed the crowd.

Jesus chooses to provide for the people once the disciples have found some bread and fish. Having given thanks he asks them to distribute the laughably tiny offering of food. The people are provided for amply and with twelve basketfuls left over. Jesus asks the disciples, exhausted and frustrated as they are, to be part of the provision for the crowd.

Session 1

Worship suggestion

Sing or listen to 'All I once held dear'

Choose one or two of these starter activities to help explore the passage

- Ask each person to describe their weekend in one word, preferably not an adjective e.g. decorating, childcare, football, weeding etc. Then read the passage (possibly once out loud and once silently) and ask each person to describe the passage in one word – again not an adjective to avoid easy words such as 'amazing'.
- The disciples had experienced a very busy time and reported all that had been happening to Jesus. Ask the group members what in this past week has excited them, made them anxious, drained them or left them feeling helpless.
- Using the hexagons (appendix 1) ask the group to make a honeycomb shape, selecting and placing what they think are the most important words and phrases in the passage in the centre. Then build the other words or phrases around the core words.
- Have you any experience of being asked to share when you have very little to give? Or have you been in a situation or seen a TV report where you feel the need is so great you feel helpless?
- Can anyone share an experience of God unexpectedly meeting their need?

Searching the Bible: prompts for discussion

- The disciples were seeking solitude and were weary. They were followed by needy people – how can you keep giving when you feel drained? What example should we follow here?
- Why do you think the crowd went out into the wilderness without resources? How important is hearing Jesus' teaching to you?
- This miracle appears in all four gospels, the only miracle to do so. Why is that do you think? (If you have time, you may want to look at the story of the manna in Exodus 16 and see what similarities or shared teaching you can find.)
- Was it more important for Jesus to feed the people spiritually with his teaching or physically with the food?
- Why did Jesus instruct the disciples to feed the people rather than doing a miracle straight away?
- Has God always provided for your every need? Or for those in places suffering drought and poor harvests?

Session 1

So what now?

What does this mean for us in the world, our church and our individual lives? In this section we ask questions in each of these three areas.

- Who is responsible for meeting the needs of the hungry in today's world?
- The crowd went physically hungry because they wanted to hear Jesus' teaching. That probably won't happen to us, but what might change in our church life if we were that serious about listening to the word of God?
- Jesus gave thanks for the food. Do we always have an attitude of gratitude every time we eat?

Taking action

- Consider becoming involved in a local foodbank or support a charity working with the poor overseas? Or could you commit to pray for them regularly?
- Consider taking part in the 'Living below the line' challenge (run by Christian Aid) this year or try living on a limited cash only budget for a week to find out the challenges those in your area in that situation might experience.
- Read Generous God, Generous People daily and perhaps keep a notebook of any thoughts that occur whilst you read the Bible passage.

Closing worship/reflection

- Use leaflets from the local food bank, night shelter or, going further afield, mission organisations such as Tearfund or Christian Aid to prompt prayers for those who are in need and those who are giving of themselves to support them.
- Place a tray with some rolls and a couple of fish in the centre of the room. Somebody in the story gave their 5 loaves and 2 fish. (In John's gospel we are told it is a boy.) Presumably it was meant as a picnic meal for someone with the foresight to provide for themselves. Ask the group members to consider what they have been able to provide for themselves, possibly by careful management and even some sacrifice such as a home, a pension. Then ask them silently to thank God for them and offer them to Jesus to use as he wishes.
- A variant of the previous idea would be to place bread from different cultures (pitta, roll, croissant, matzos etc.) on a table and ask people to think about the different ways God has provided for them and silently give thanks to God for the gifts he provides and offer them back to him.

Prayer for the week

Almighty God
whose love is revealed in Jesus Christ your Son,
may we who have responded by faith to your call
so order our lives that they are built on your wisdom.
Grant that as we respond to your love
we may grow into your likeness.
Create in us loving and generous hearts
that we may respond to your call upon our lives. Amen

Session 2

Mark 12: 38-44

Generous people: giving from the heart

"He who has God and everything else has no more than he who has God only."

— C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*

'Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.' Romans 12:1-2

Notes on the passage

Jesus decides to teach the crowd in the Women's Court of the Jerusalem Temple. A few days previously he cleared out the moneychangers and those selling offerings, saying those involved in trading had turned the holy place into a den of robbers. (These people were notorious for their unfair practices.)

This area had large trumpet-shaped chests to receive the money offered by the people.

He now turns his attention to the teachers of the law, accusing them of wanting respect and honour and of praying long prayers which others notice whilst they take away (devour or gobble up) widows' houses. Most widows were totally reliant on family support and many were extremely poor. They had very few rights, if any, and were at the mercy of powerful men. Jesus states that those who seek fame and glory and treat the poor widows cruelly will be punished severely.

At this point Jesus sits down and watches those giving offerings. Many rich people are described as throwing in large amounts (presumably with a satisfyingly loud clink of valuable coins for all to hear).

The poor widow turns up and puts in two coins – the lepton was the smallest denomination coin (translated as a mite in later centuries, being the smallest coin at that time).

Jesus explains his thoughts on this to the disciples – not this time to the whole crowd. He recognises her offering represented all she had and was therefore the most generous. This teaching is reflected in 2 Corinthians 8:12 'For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.'

It is also worth noting that Jesus castigates the teachers of the law for 'devouring' widows' houses – and this widow has given all she possesses, and may be at risk of having her home taken away.

Session 2

Worship suggestion

Sing or listen to 'Take my life and let it be'

Choose one or two of these activities to help explore the passage

- Give each person 20 buttons (paperclips or other items could also work). Tell them the 20 buttons represent their monthly income. Ask them to set aside the proportion they would need to pay the rent or mortgage and any essential household bills. Then ask them to set to one side the proportion needed to feed and support family or any they are responsible for. And then the proportion spent on entertainment, holidays etc. And the proportion given away to charities. (It is helpful if it can be arranged that this activity is in some way reasonably private.)
- Ask for any observations about how the offering compares to a financial picture.
- Give each person a small piece of playdough and a paper plate and ask them to make a model of the key image or meaning of this passage in their view. (Playdough can be purchased in handy little pots or made for a few pence from recipes online.)
- Give each person a sheet of A4 paper and some coloured pens. Ask them to draw a 'yellow brick road' and then to write on it the story of their own journey of giving, marking the milestones and adding some key words which help explain the journey. What did they learn at home about giving, or at school, or their youth group? Did things change when they started work – for better or for worse? Have there been any especially significant milestones on the giving journey? Has church teaching played a part in the giving journey? Are there giving plans to for the not too distant future – perhaps a legacy or a response to a change of circumstances?

Searching the Bible: prompts for discussion

- Is Jesus' teaching about how much we should give or the heart with which we give? Can we really separate the two? Someone said it is only godly to give the widow's mite if we give with the widow's heart!
- Is Jesus encouraging his disciples to literally give all we have? (If you have time you could compare this story to passages about giving e.g. rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-25), Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), the tithe law (Leviticus 27:30), 2 Corinthians 8:12 and consider how much is expected of us.
- Jesus pointed out the widow's giving to his disciples, not the crowd. Are disciples expected to be particularly generous? Might that expectation extend to church leaders?
- Are wealthy people expected to give more or less than poor people?
- What injustices might we be involved with? Examples might include buying clothes made in poor or dangerous conditions, ignoring bullying of a colleague or neglecting an elderly neighbour.
- To what extent should Christian giving be sacrificial? Should the church have to coax money from its members?

Session 2

So what now?

What does this mean for us in the world, our church and our individual lives? In this section we ask questions in each of these three areas:

- What examples of incredible generosity have you heard about lately in the media? Is there a difference between generous giving of money and fundraising?
- How does our church help new members to think about the relationship between money and faith? What do they learn about giving? What might they hear about spending, borrowing and saving as Christian people? What could we do better?
- If Jesus were watching each one of us as we plan our budget or spend money each day, what might he approve of and what might he criticise? Is there anything we might do differently this week if we were conscious that Jesus were sitting watching us?

Taking action

- Take a moment when you buy or eat something to be aware of those who have made it or grown it and pray for them.
- During the next week consciously think about and look for ways in which we can be caught up in injustice, such as cheap clothes or environmental issues. The aim is not guilt, but becoming aware so that we practice justice as well as generosity.
- Continue to use Generous God, Generous People daily and record thoughts and comments in a notebook.

Closing worship/reflections

- Put out 80p in coins (the amount many people live on each day) and use it as a prompt to pray for those for whom having a tiny amount of money extra would make a huge difference to their lives.
- Stretch out a piece of string out on the floor with the words, 'Teachers of the Law' at one end and 'Widow' at the other. In silence ask the group to consider where on the string they are and what God is asking them to do to move nearer to the 'Widow' end of the string. Close the time of silence, with a prayer asking for forgiveness for unjust actions and asking God to enable each person to become more generous through his Holy Spirit. You could close by reading Galatians 5:22 (the fruit of the Spirit).

Prayer for the week

Lord Jesus Christ,
we present ourselves to you
as an offering of all that we are
and all that we have.
May we daily be transformed
by the Spirit at work within us,
that our whole lives may be worship
which is pleasing and acceptable
to you our Lord and Redeemer. Amen

Session 3

Mark 8:31-38

Jesus focused living: Priority setting

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."
— Jim Elliot, 20th century missionary martyr.

'What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?' Mark 8:36

Notes on passage

This passage poses a huge challenge. How do we think about, feel about the stuff that is important to us? Our possessions are placed not only against our own eternal life, but the returning of Jesus at the end of time. Life with Jesus is about a quality of life and relationship both now and after the end of time - as opposed to a pile of possessions and money. What we do with our money and possessions can either hinder or help our discipleship. In this choice, we risk losing everything, our very life, if we choose wrongly.

There are, however, some difficult moments to grasp in the story. Jesus, referring to himself as the Son of Man (echoing the prophecy in Daniel 7:13) spoke plainly to the disciples about his coming sufferings and rejection. Peter, gloriously reliable in his ability to put his big foot in it and get things wrong for the best of reasons, took him on one side. It is tempting to imagine the conversation. 'Look, you're bringing the morale right down. That's not what happens to a Messiah. Surely you know that.' Peter tries to get Jesus back on the track he thinks he should be on.

Jesus' response is strong, even harsh. Peter, with the best will in the world is vocalising the temptation Satan is putting in Jesus' path. Peter, even whilst following Jesus, does not see the reality that Jesus sees. Peter has in mind, 'the things of men'. It is possible to be a follower of Jesus and still be deceived about what is important. This is certainly true when it comes to money and possessions. In fact in verse 36 Jesus uses the financial language of profit and loss to talk about gaining the world and losing our souls.

Jesus offers a stark contrast here. Saving your life means losing it, offering it completely to Jesus and for the good news. Losing your life means holding on tightly to what you have. This is not Jesus being mean and demanding complete allegiance like a power crazed dictator. He is spelling out the reality of life, both the physical here and now and the larger spiritual truth of, as 'The Hitchhiker's Guide' would have it, 'Life, the universe and everything.' This is the true answer, not 42!

In John's gospel, Jesus says, 'I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.' (John 10:10). Real life does not lie in grasping for stuff but in following Jesus, whatever the cost. And Jesus' followers would know exactly what he meant by taking up your cross. Those about to be crucified had to carry the heavy cross bar through the city on their way to a torturous death.

Jesus further explains that our attitude to Jesus will be reflected back to us when He returns. Those that are ashamed of Him will have that same attitude returned to them. Our very attitudes and the actions that arise from them have eternal consequences.

Session 3

Worship suggestions

Read, 'Splintered Messiah' by Stewart Henderson. The text of this poem is in appendix 2.

Choose one or two of these starter activities to help explore the passage

- Give a copy of 'Splintered Messiah' to each group member and invite them to discuss the poem. In what ways do we and our church and indeed, our world, prefer a false Christ to the real one, as the poem suggests?
- Give a copy of the true/false statements (appendix 3) to everyone and discuss the similarities and differences the group come up with.
- Ask for suggestions of people, famous or not, who may be said to have given their lives for the sake of Jesus and the gospel. (You may like to introduce the moving story of Fr Maximilian Kolbe and Francis Gajinisdek from chapter 3 of 'Alpha - Questions of Life' by Nicky Gumbel and available via an internet search.)
- Desert Island Disciples: apart from the Bible and Shakespeare name one song and three things would you take to your desert island – and say why.

Searching the Bible: prompts for discussion

The passage contains two challenging statements: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves' and 'what good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul'. So:

- Ask each group member to suggest one thing he or she likes to do, play, watch, purchase and so on. Is Jesus saying that to enjoy these things we are not denying ourselves but instead losing our souls? If we disagree, can we say why?
- Jesus calls us here to lay down our lives. Is he being literal or is this for the first disciples only? If not, what does this mean for the choices we make in how we live our lives here in the UK?
- Walter Brueggemann wrote, 'There is nothing so radical to the wealthy as being told all they have is a gift'. Do you agree with this? Is understanding that all we have is a gift from God a biblical and helpful way for us to think about our possessions?
- Peter was trying to help but he got it wrong – we and others sometimes make the same mistake. What could Peter have said that was more supportive or helpful (v32)?

Session 3

So what now?

What does this mean for the world, our church and our individual lives? In this section we ask questions in each of these three areas.

- There are many traps and temptations in our consumer society. How does the media encourage us to value ourselves and other people according to what we spend and what we own?
You might like to have available some glossy lifestyle magazines to pass around. Ask each person to choose one or two adverts or stories and say why they appeal to them, what they say about success or happiness and what temptations they are presented with.
- How does our church help Christians to navigate the “white water” of a consumer society? What else could we do or how might we do things differently to help our congregation and our community?
- “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt 6:21).
If what we do with money reveals our hearts, are there any possessions or financial commitments we should personally re-evaluate in the light of this passage?
- “Excel in this grace of giving” (2 Cor 8:7).
In what ways might generous, planned giving help to renew our hearts and reshape how we think, feel and act around money?

Taking Action

- Spend a few moments at a different time each day consciously offering to God the possessions to hand and giving thanks for them: e.g. when preparing a meal, using a computer or phone, when driving, watching TV etc.
- Continue to read *Generous God, Generous People* daily and record actions and thoughts in a notebook.

Closing worship/reflections

- Give each person a foot-shaped piece of paper. Using information from the Barnabas Fund website, write on the paper the prayer needs of the persecuted church and as the ‘feet’ are laid on the floor, pray for the individuals and groups.
- You could give each person a second ‘foot’ and write on v35 and ask them to lay these ‘feet’ on the floor as a commitment to follow Jesus whatever the cost.
- Ask each member to write a letter to themselves explaining what they feel God is saying to them through the passage and what this will mean to how they live this week. Give each person an envelope for the letter and ask them to seal it and address it to themselves. These could be opened and discussed and prayed over at the beginning of the next sessions. If yours is a long-standing group, you could ask people to do a similar activity but for the next month or term.

Prayer for the week

Lord Jesus, you have called us to follow you.
As we consider how we respond to your love
grant that we may be generous,
faithful and responsible stewards
of all that you have entrusted to us. Amen

Session 4

Mark 12:28-34

What is important: Living for God and neighbour

"I hope that what you give me comes not from your surplus but it is the fruit of a sacrifice made for the love of God. You must give what costs you, go without something you like, then you will truly be brothers to the poor who are deprived of even the things they need." - Mother Teresa

'In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.' James 2:17

Notes on the passage

Jesus is debating with the teachers of the law. One of them asks a genuine question as opposed to attempts made to trick Jesus on other occasions, such as the question on marriage in the preceding passage (Mark 12:18-27).

'What is the most important commandment?' Jesus answers, not by quoting the first of the Ten Commandments as might be expected, but the Shema. 'Shema' is the first word of the prayer from Deuteronomy 6:4 that Jews recite twice daily. It is the last prayer a Jew hopes to hear before death. The Shema is written on a tiny scroll and placed in a small container called a Mezuzah, which is fixed to the doorpost. Faithful Jews touch this as they enter the house and then kiss their fingers to acknowledge and bless God. It is also in the Tefillin that are tied to the forehead and arm during morning prayer so that the prayer is quite literally bound to the mind and actions.

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart...' In Jewish thought the heart is not the centre of the emotions as it is in modern western thinking. For Jews it is the seat of thinking and the will. Loving God is primarily a decision, a commitment, a choice, rather than an emotional response.

It is difficult to clarify exactly what the difference between heart, soul and mind would have meant to first-century Jews. However, alongside the heart as the centre of the will, the mind is the centre of rational thought. Christians are not required to check in their brains at the door of their church. Attending a Bible study such as this, where questions can be explored, is a positive response to this command. The soul for Jews is that which connects them to God – there is an early Jewish idea that God's spirit (ruach, the word for wind or breath) was blown into humans to give life and this became the soul.

The commandment goes on to require those that love God to love their neighbour as they do themselves. Loving God is intrinsically linked to loving our neighbour. Generosity to others is not an optional extra.

In Luke's version of this story (Luke 10:25-37), Jesus' answer is followed up by a subsidiary, and, it seems, genuine question: 'Who is my neighbour?' In response, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. The love demonstrated by the Samaritan was of a practical, serving and costly nature. There is no mention of emotion apart from pity for the mugged traveller. The Shema intimately links our love for God with our love for our neighbour and again it is a question of decision. There is no love for God which does not also embrace our communities, our families, our world. The same Greek word, *agapē*, is used of loving God and our neighbour in this passage

So, how does the passage reflect on our giving and attitude to money and possessions? Choosing to love God is a daily decision of the will that shapes our thinking and actions and this includes what we do with our money. We need to bring our whole lives, including our finances, to God to be offered to

Session 4

Him and moulded by Him. As we consider in this session what it means to show generosity towards others, Jesus' teaching here reminds us that this is not an optional extra, some charity tacked onto our faith. Rather generosity is an integral part of what it means to love God in how we manage and give of our wealth. The example of the Good Samaritan given by Luke in his version of this story (Luke 10:25-37) shows someone generously, even extravagantly, taking care of someone unknown to them. Parsimonious counting out of the minimum is not the attitude required.

Worship suggestion

Listen to or sing, 'I will offer up my life'

Choose one or two of these starter activities to explore the passage

- Give each person a copy of appendix 4. Ask the group to read the bible passage and then write down for each image on the sheet what it might mean to love God with our heart/will, soul, mind and strength.
- Give each person a piece of paper cut into a heart shape (about A4 in size). First invite the group to think of their favourite films or books with 'Love' in the title or as a key theme, for example the Christmas film Love Actually. Write on one side of the heart what the word 'love' means in the book or the film. Have a bit of fun doing this. Then, on the other side of the heart write down what 'love' means in this bible passage and any other sections of the New Testament they know. What are the similarities and differences?

Searching the Bible: prompts for discussion

- If we did not have this passage in the Bible, would our view of what is the most important commandment be different? Why?
- We are called to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength? What do you think these challenging words mean? (This question picks up one of the exercises above.)
- What might it mean for us to love our neighbour when we may not feel loving towards them or do not even know who they are?
- What does it mean to love God with all that we are when it comes to our wealth and possessions? Turn to 1 Tim 6:17-19 or print out these verses for each group member. Ask the group to identify the key words in the passage which help us develop a healthy attitude to money – amongst them are contentment, giving and gratitude. Then ask the group to think under each heading how they might love God with their wealth and possessions: what to be content with, enjoy, be grateful for etc.
- The teacher of the law knew which laws were the most important and presumably tried to follow them. What did Jesus mean when he said, 'You are not far from the Kingdom of God'?

Session 4

So what now?

What does this mean for the world, our church and our individual lives? In this section we ask questions in each of these three areas.

You could say that there are actually three commandments in this passage, to love God, to love our neighbour and to love ourselves. Let's look at what this kind of love means in our world, our church and for ourselves.

- Love our neighbour: in our global world what does it mean in practical terms for us to love our neighbour? Issues of migration, Fairtrade or environmental considerations might be considered here.
- Love God: our giving resources the ministry of our church and is part of our worship. In what practical ways can we honour God with our "first fruits" and make giving to provide for the ministry needs of our church a priority? Does it help to think about giving to our church, to Christian charities in this country and overseas and to other charities?
- Love ourselves: as the Jews do with the Mezuzah and Tefillin (see the introductory notes), how can we develop practical ways to be disciples in our financial lives? Can you share ways to grow as generous givers, to learn contentment, practise gratitude and be free from the trappings of a consumer society? Here are some suggestions, just as a starter for ten:
 - As a discussion starter and a helpful resource, give each person a "money revolution card" to keep in the purse or wallet as a reminder of the need to be a good steward of what God has entrusted to us. The cards can be found in appendix 5; print them on card, double-sided and in colour and then cut up to a card for each group member. This resource is courtesy of Dr John Preston, the author of a very handy 64 page book, 'The Money Revolution' which is available from Dr Preston (john.preston@churchofengland.org), price £1.50 per copy plus P&P.
 - Learn the words of the Shema in Mark 12:30-31 by heart and recite it to yourself before you go shopping.
 - Carry a small cross in your purse or wallet to remind you to focus on Jesus.
 - Try to use cash rather than plastic: it helps us plan and control our spending
 - Do you have a household budget? If not, it is the essential tool to control our money
 - Do you set aside your giving in an envelope each week or, better still, these days give by standing order/direct debit?

In some groups it may be helpful to address two rather different questions:

- What are the financial dilemmas facing our children and younger teens?
- How can we help our children grow up to be both generous and financially capable?

Taking Action:

- Put any decisions (such as the Money Revolution credit card for your purse or wallet) into action.
- Continue to read *Generous God, Generous People* daily and record thoughts and insights in a notebook. At the end of the five weeks of reading *Generous God, Generous People*, reflect on lessons learned and what actions you have thought about and resolve to put them into action.

Session 4

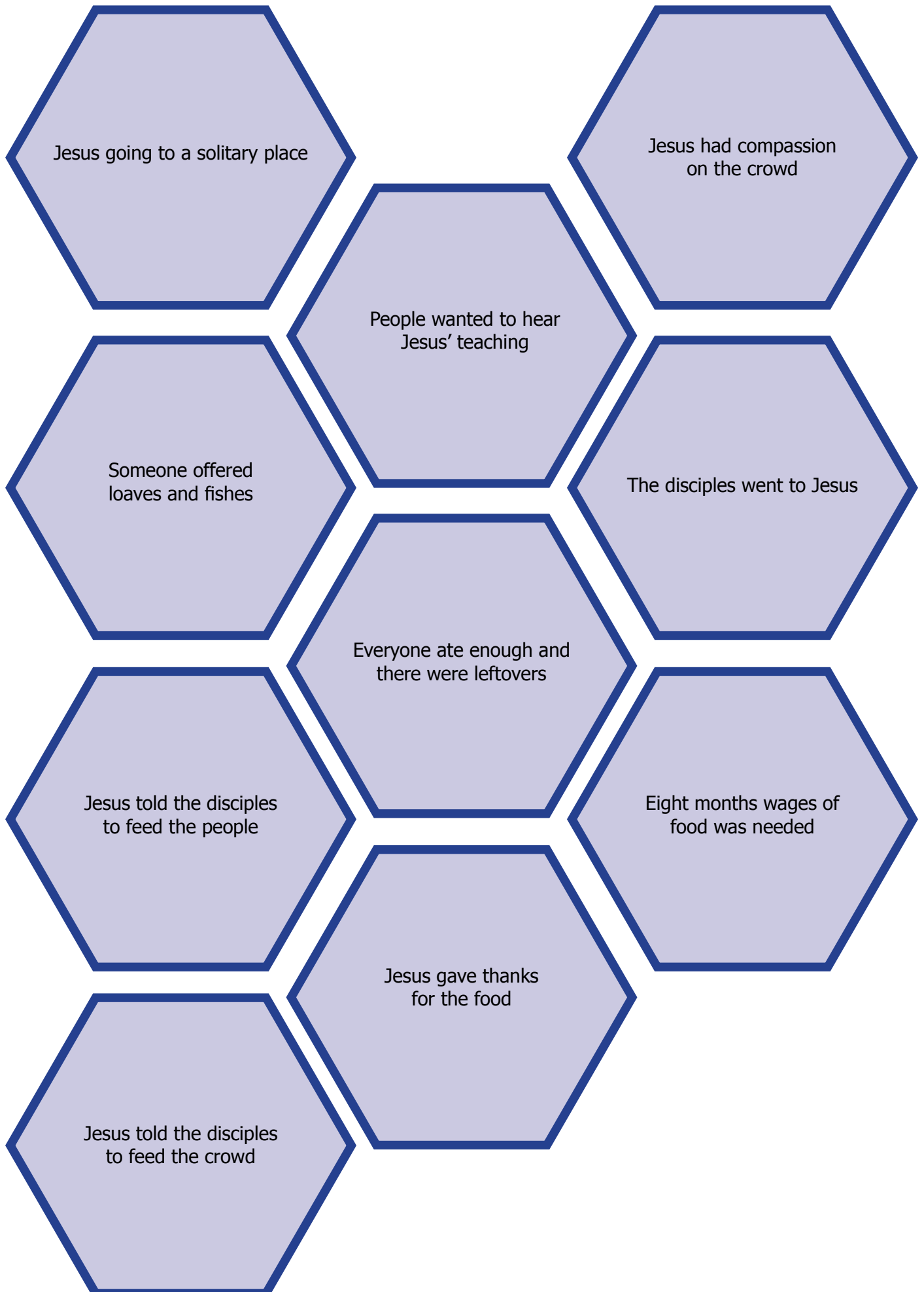
Closing worship/reflection

- Give each person a small version of v29-31 and say it out loud together. Follow this with a time of silence to give an opportunity to confess and repent of times when this has not been followed and then lead the group in a prayer asking for help to keep this commandment. Encourage the groups to take this passage home and read it out loud morning and evening every day for a week.
- Ask the group what messages do we get from society, home, as we grew up, from advertising etc and write them as graffiti on a small heart shaped card we each have or perhaps as a group exercise on a heart on flip chart or wall paper. Then ask the group individually to reflect in prayer about what needs to change in me if I am to love God and neighbour with how I handle my money.

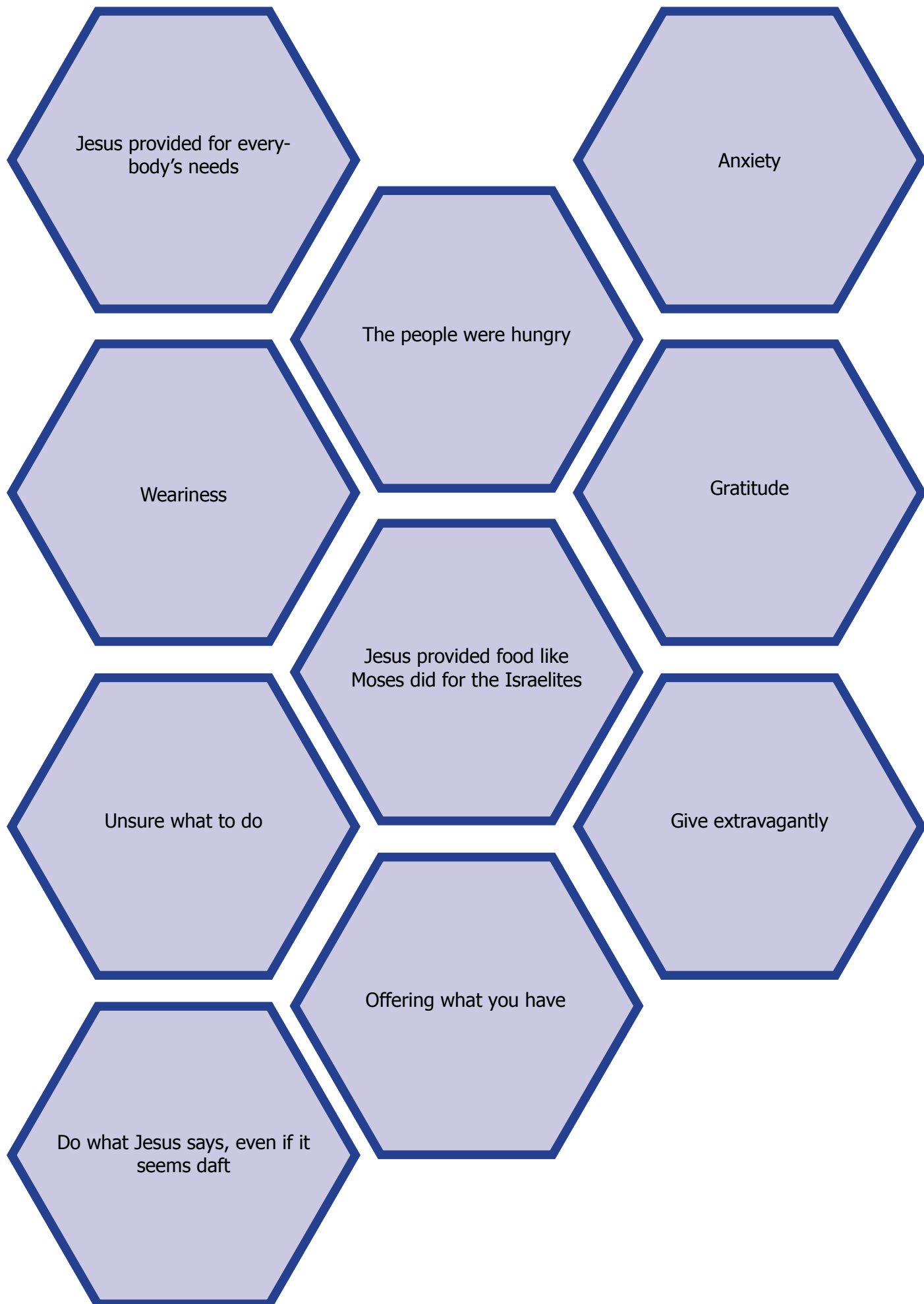
Prayer for the week

Heavenly Father, you are the God of all people.
You have called us to serve the poor,
grant to us a humble spirit
of understanding and service,
that we may stand alongside the poor;
that we may challenge those things which oppress
and affirm those things that set free those
who are imprisoned by poverty of body and spirit.
This we ask in the name of your Son,
our Lord. Amen.

Appendix 1



Appendix 1



Appendix 2

Splintered Messiah

I don't want a splintered Messiah
in a sweat-stained, greasy grey robe
I want a new one
I couldn't take this one to parties
people would say 'who's your friend?'
I'd give an embarrassed giggle and change the subject
If I took him home
I'd have to bandage his hands
The neighbours would think he's a football hooligan
I don't want his cross in the hall
it doesn't go with the wallpaper
I don't want him standing there
like a sad ballet dancer with holes in his tights
I want a different Messiah
streamlined and inoffensive
I want one from a catalogue
who's as quiet as a monastery
I want a package tour Messiah
not one who takes me to Golgotha
I want a King of Kings
with blow-waves in his hair
I don't want the true Christ
I wanna false one.

'Splintered Messiah' written by Stewart Henderson (published in *Assembled in Britain*, Marshall Pickering, London, 1986, p.17); and reproduced with the author's permission.

Appendix 3

True False statements for Mark 8:31-38

Circle a score for each of the following statements, where 1 is totally false and 5 is totally true

The Son of Man refers to Jesus.

1 2 3 4 5

Jesus explained what would happen at the Resurrection.

1 2 3 4 5

Peter was sinful when he rebuked Jesus.

1 2 3 4 5

It is OK to call people, 'Satan' when we disagree with them.

1 2 3 4 5

Everyone who follows Jesus needs to give up the good things of life.

1 2 3 4 5

Thinking about God's view of what we come across every day is really important.

1 2 3 4 5

You are only a good Christian if you experience rejection and suffering.

1 2 3 4 5

Keeping your soul safe with God is more important than anything else in the world.

1 2 3 4 5

Being ashamed of following Jesus is a dangerous state of mind.

1 2 3 4 5

Appendix 4

HEART



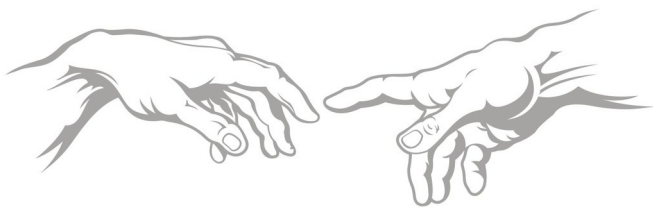
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THE MONEY REVOLUTION



PSALM 24 VERSE 1

THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S
AND EVERYTHING IN IT

I will remember:

Please sign

1. Good spending is consistent with Christian values
2. To think "Am I really going to use it?"
3. The cost, not just the price
4. To spend time shopping around
5. To pray about major purchases
6. It doesn't always have to be new

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Acknowledgements

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The Money Revolution Card is courtesy of Dr John Preston, the author of a very handy 64 page book, 'The Money Revolution' which is available from Dr Preston (nso@parishresources.org.uk) price £1.50 per copy plus P&P.



THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

**Diocese of St Edmundsbury
and Ipswich**

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