

Growth



Preparation:

- Print a copy of Appendix C for each participant in the group
- Have ready a copy of the Bible, and some spare pens or pencils for anyone who has forgotten theirs

Getting started

5 minutes

The subject of this session is growth. We have heard much talk about economic growth – or the absence of it – from businesses and political leaders of all parties over recent times. Economic growth has long been a central policy aim of governments across the world. The opposite of growth – recession – has been a watchword for economic failure.

Invite people to briefly discuss the question:

- When people talk about economic growth, what are they hoping will grow?

In this session, we will be digging more deeply into the idea of economic growth – why it's seen as important, what's good about it, and some of the problems that it can bring. As in previous sessions, we'll be doing some Bible study together to inform our discussions. But today we begin with some individual reflection.

What do we treasure?

20 minutes

Give everyone a copy of Appendix C and invite them to spend ten minutes individually completing the task.

Read Luke 12:15-21 and discuss the following questions:

- What strikes you first when you hear the reading and look at what you have written or drawn in your two barns?
- What do your answers say about what is most important to you in life?
- Do you feel the things you want more of would be good for you? Would they be good for society?
- What do you think Jesus means when he talks about being 'rich towards God'?
- Do you see examples today of the kind of attitude Jesus was warning against?

The purpose of growth

10 minutes

The UK economy, like that of most of most Western countries, is a form of market capitalism. This is defined as an economic system in which businesses and industries are privately owned and operated in pursuit of profit.

Any system that has a drive towards profit also has a drive towards growth. An ever-increasing volume of goods and services needs to be produced and consumed so that capital can be accumulated

and profit generated. Our current economic system relies upon stimulating this drive for more.

Discuss the group's ideas about:

- In what circumstances is 'more', good?
- When might it be problematic? Why?

In places where people have very little, such as many of the world's poorer countries, economic growth can often bring benefits to the whole population. There is a clear link between the *per capita* wealth of a country and measures of human development such as health, education and life expectancy.

However, in richer nations, such as the UK, the link between growth and human wellbeing is much less evident; how wealth is distributed within society is a much more significant factor.

Economy and ecology

8 minutes

Ever-increasing levels of economic production and consumption are also creating major problems for the environment.

Since the 18th Century, industrialisation, sometimes supported by a ready supply of natural and human resources through colonialism, led to a huge surge in economic growth which formed the foundation of the prosperity enjoyed by many European countries, including the UK. But these economic activities produced increasing amounts of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in such quantities that they went beyond the ability of natural processes to constrain them. The result has been global temperature rises, and the devastating and widening impacts of climate change.

Invite people to look at the graph at the bottom of Appendix C. This shows how since the middle of the last century, global economic growth (shown by the bars) has been tightly coupled to rapid increases in the levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂) (shown by the line). The countries with the biggest economies have the highest carbon emissions per person.

The more we grow, the higher the environmental cost, in terms of climate change and many other ecological systems.

“Anyone who believes exponential growth can go on forever in a finite world is either a madman or an economist,” observed the American academic Kenneth Boulding (who is in fact an economist!)

Invite people's reactions and briefly discuss the following question:

- If economic growth clearly has such a destructive impact on the environment, why do you think it is still widely seen as a desirable goal?

One Biblical concept which some people have found helpful in thinking about the responsibility of humans in relation to the rest of the environment is the idea of restraint.

Living with restraint

15 minutes

Read Exodus 20:8-11.

This is one of the ten commandments that God gave to Moses. Discuss the following questions:

- What significance do you think it has that God rested on the seventh day of creation?
- What is the purpose of limits being placed on economic activity on the Sabbath, and what benefits might it have brought?
- Do you feel this idea has any relevance for our thinking about the economy today?

Homework

1 minute

Before the next session, invite people to look again at what they wrote or drew in their barns, and reflect on the questions printed at the bottom of Appendix C:

1. As Christians, what do we want to see grow?
2. What, if any, limits would we want to put on the economy?

Closing prayer

1 minute

Loving God, we pray for more –

not more of the things that destroy the earth,
and distance us from you and other people

but more of the treasures of heaven

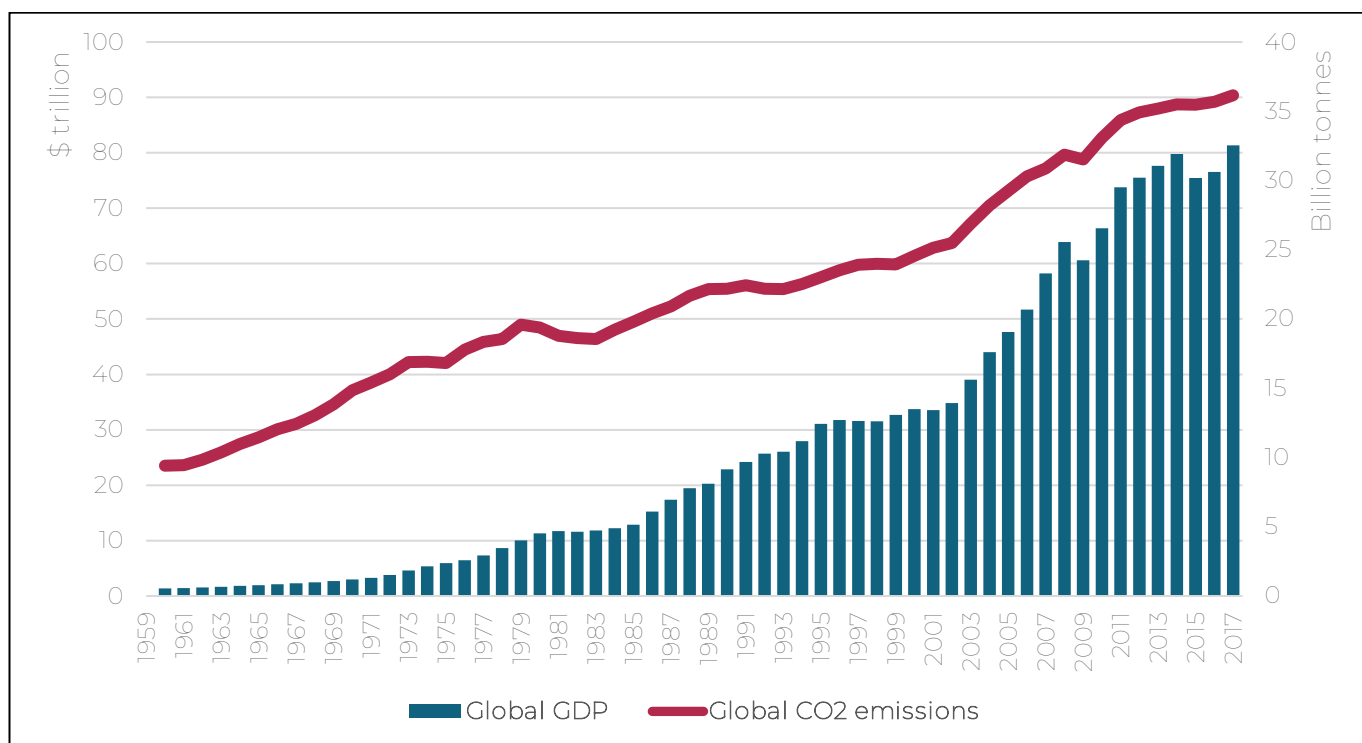
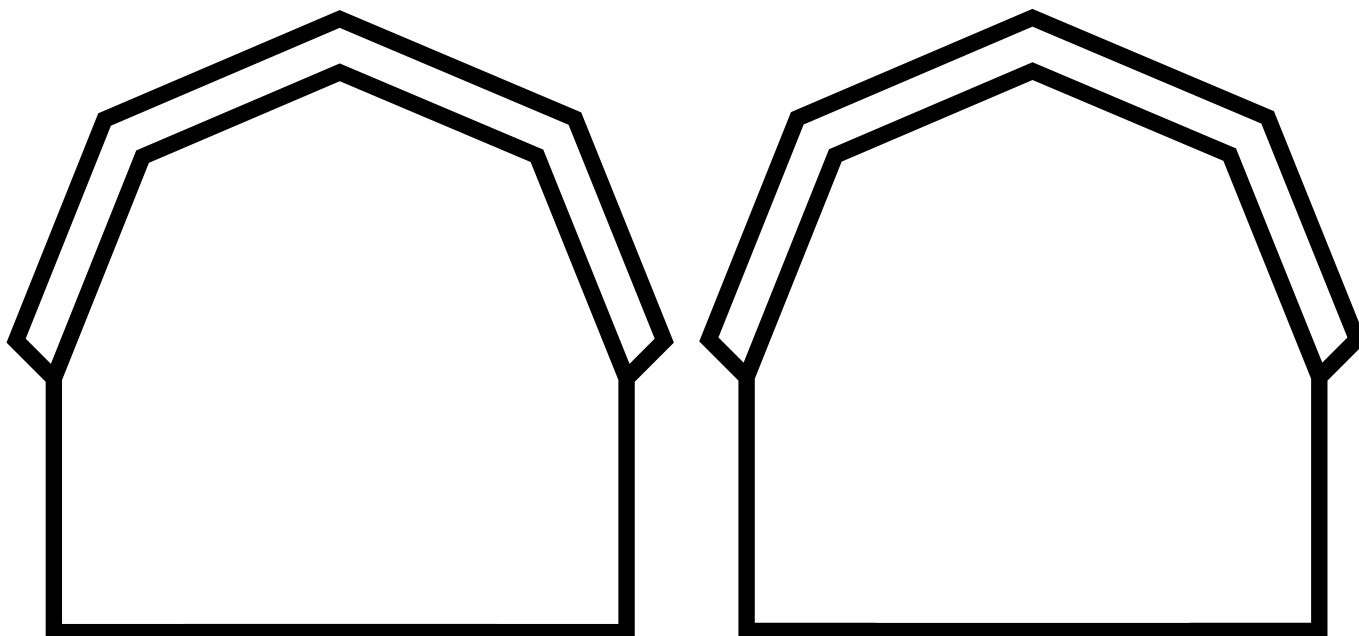
more love for you and our neighbours

more of what really matters.

Amen.

In the first barn below, write or draw some of the things you are glad you have. These could be material possessions but also things that money cannot buy, e.g. job, health, relationships.

In the second barn, write or draw some of the things you'd like more of. Again, these could be physical or intangible things.



Homework questions:

1. As Christians, what do we want to see grow?
2. What, if any, limits would we want to put on the economy?