

A LIFE OF SIMPLICITY



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HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE FOR A GROUP STUDY



This Bible study can be used for an individual or a group. If you intend to lead a group study, follow these simple suggestions.

- 1** Make enough copies of the articles for everyone in the group. If you would like your group to have more information, feel free to copy the Leader's Guides for them as well.
- 2** Don't feel that you have to use all the material in the study. Almost all of our studies have more information than you can get through in one session, so feel free to pick and choose the teaching information and questions that will meet the needs of your group. Use the teaching content of the study in any of these ways: for your own background and information; to read aloud (or summarize) to the group; for the group to read silently.
- 3** Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting people to open up.
- 4** When working through the questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for your group to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.
- 5** Begin and end the session in prayer.

ARE WE HAPPY YET?

True happiness comes from contentment.

As Christians, we know better: true happiness will never consist of things. Contentment will never be found through satisfying the desires of this life. But a culture that begs us to buy, buy, buy in an effort to make ourselves “better” does not leave us better off in any real sense—or ultimately satisfied. This study will discuss what’s wrong with this picture.



Scripture: Psalm 90:14–17; 103; Proverbs 15:16–17; 16:8; Ecclesiastes 4:6; Isaiah 55:1–2, 6; Matthew 6:25–34; Romans 8:5–6; Philippians 4:10–13; 1 Timothy 6:6–11; Hebrews 13:5–6; James 5:1–8

Based on: “Happy Meal Spirituality,” by John Ortberg, *CHRISTIANITY TODAY*, May 17, 1993

A Life of Simplicity ARE WE HAPPY YET?

Leader's Guide

Part 1 IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE

Note to Leader: Provide for each participant the article "Happy Meal Spirituality," from CHRISTIANITY TODAY, included at the end of this study.

"Happiness is a unique commodity. It is never found by the person shopping for it."

—Gary Chapman, *Hope for the Separated*

"Contentment comes not so much from great wealth as from few wants."

—Epictetus

Discussion Starters:

[Q] John Ortberg says our preoccupation with seeking contentment through fulfilling desires has led us to think of ourselves as consumers. How does this reflect a profound change in the way we think about human beings in general?

[Q] From what you know about American history, has this always been the case? If not, what is different? Beyond basic survival, how did people give themselves to causes intended to help others rather than just themselves?

[Q] Ortberg says that today, instead of callings we have careers. What is the difference?

[Q] How has conspicuous consumption become a kind of addiction?

[Q] When we get older, says the author, we don't get smarter: our Happy Meals just get more expensive. What evidence do you see of this?

[Q] List some adult equivalents of Happy Meals.

Optional Activity: Bring in a selection of popular newsstand magazines. Pick out some ads, or ask group members to do so, that illustrate the messages the author says seek to persuade us that: (1) we are discontented; and (2) contentment is only a step away. Discuss why this is false. For example, a new car advertised as bringing satisfaction and excitement will be old, obsolete, and in need of repair a few years from now.

[Q] Ortberg says that "desires, once satisfied, do not stay satisfied." Why don't they?

[Q] Ortberg says, "Consumerism is doomed to futility." Why is it?

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[Q] Why does being made in the image of God tell us that we are not meant to be primarily consumers?

[Q] What is the inherent difference between the creation mandate to “be fruitful” and our society’s call to “shop till you drop”?

[Q] Why is contentment not the same as happiness?

[Q] Do you agree with the author’s definition of “strategic discontent”? What, if anything, would you add to that definition?

Part 2 **DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES**

“Contentment is realizing that God has already given me everything I need for my present happiness.”

—Bill Gothard

“He is a wise man who does not grieve for the things which he has not, but rejoices for those which he has.”

—Epictetus

Teaching Point One: Scripture clearly defines contentment.

[Q] The following Scripture passages define true contentment. How do these ideas contrast with our society’s beliefs?

Psalm 90:14–17

- What several things does the psalmist mention that satisfy?

Psalm 103

- There are many things in this psalm for which we can praise God. Ask the group to find as many as they can and then explain why these things bring satisfaction or contentment.

Proverbs 15:16–17; 16:8; Ecclesiastes 4:6

- What is the point being made in these verses?

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Teaching Point Two: We will experience discontent.

[Q] Read Isaiah 55:1–2, 6. What does this passage tell us about human discontent?

- Ortberg says that “people have been ‘far too easily pleased’ for a long time.” Do you think this passage made any more sense to the people of Isaiah’s day than it does to people now?

[Q] The Bible takes human discontent seriously, says the author—it is no accident we are discontented. Why?

[Q] What does Paul say about contentment in the following verses?

Romans 8:5–6

- What is the difference between people who live by the dictates of their natural (sinful) natures and those who live by the Spirit?

Philippians 4:10–13

- Where was Paul when he wrote these words? What should that say to us?

1 Timothy 6:6–11

- How is Paul’s advice to the youthful Timothy as valid today as it was when it was written?

Teaching Point Three: We don’t need “riches” to be content.

[Q] Read Hebrews 13:5–6. What is the bottom line about contentment according to the writer of this book? Contrast this with what James says about riches in James 5:1–8.

[Q] In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had a great deal to say about riches and the value of things. Read Matthew 6:25–34. What is the principle being taught in this passage? What, according to Jesus, is most important?

Part 3 APPLY YOUR FINDINGS

“The contented man is never poor, the discontented never rich.”

—George Eliot

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“God can't give us happiness and peace apart from Himself because there is no such thing.”

—Epictetus

- [Q]** “Contentment is learned behavior, an acquired skill, like playing the piano or riding a bike,” says Ortberg. How do we learn contentment?
- [Q]** Do you know of people who, according to our society's standards, should be miserable—but aren't? For example, some people who have suffered the loss of many things seem happier, more contented than most of us. What accounts for the difference?
- [Q]** Ortberg says we have made the quest to satisfy our desires the foundation on which we teach people to build their lives. Give some examples of how we do this.
- [Q]** What are some things you feel you could not live without?
- [Q]** Name some things you have acquired that give neither satisfaction nor joy. If you were forced to choose among the things you possess, what could go? What would you retain?
- [Q]** What pitfalls do young people fall into? What replaces Happy Meals as they grow into adolescence? How can we teach them not to build their lives on the quest to satisfy desires?
- [Q]** How can we set good examples for others—particularly for our children? How can they learn the value of real contentment from the way we live our lives?
- [Q]** Discuss the two main solutions the author names to the problem of the insatiability of desire. Why is stoicism no real answer? Why is Christ's way the only way to meet the challenge?
- [Q]** Stoics, says Ortberg, believe one must learn to rein in desires—that the contented person is one who has stopped wanting. Does this appeal to you? Does it help to lower expectations?
- [Q]** The attraction to stoicism is that it “offers protection from the pain of dashed dreams.” Yet what happens to real contentment in the process?
- [Q]** What is the way of Christ? Why is this not merely a “shallow optimism”? In what way is this an “absurd hope”?
- [Q]** Ortberg says our problem is not that we want too much: “Our problem is that we are willing to settle for too little,” and “people have been ‘far too easily pleased’ for a long time.” If you did the optional exercise, refer again to the magazine ads you discussed: How do you see this occurring?

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Action Point:

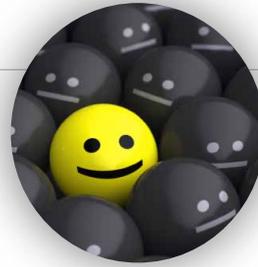
As you close the lesson, ask people to pray sentence prayers thanking God for those things that bring us real joy and contentment—not merely momentary pleasure. Ask God's help in seeking ways in which to glory in him rather than in the possessions of this life.

—*Study by Carol R. Thiessen*

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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- [A Look at Things](#)
- [Biblical Economics](#)
- [The Joy of Being Content](#)
- [Keeping Money in Perspective](#)
- [Money Issues](#)



HAPPY MEAL SPIRITUALITY

Why my kids are convinced they have a McDonald's-shaped vacuum in their little souls.

By John Ortberg, for the study "Are We Happy Yet?"

When we take our children to the shrine of the Golden Arches, they always want the same thing. If they get it, the trip is a success; if not, it is sheer misery. The odd part is that what they are after is not the food. They want the prize. The prize itself is a pitiful thing, worth maybe 10 cents; but for the moment, getting it is all that matters. McDonald's, in a fit of marketing genius, gave this package of food and prize a special name: the Happy Meal®. You're not just buying fries, McNuggets, and a dinosaur stamp, you're buying happiness. Their advertisements have convinced my children that they have a McDonald's-shaped vacuum in their little souls: "our hearts are restless till they find their rest in a Happy Meal."

The creation of what might be called strategic discontent in children enables McDonald's to inflate the price far beyond the value of the toy. I try to buy the kids off sometimes; I tell them just to get the food and I'll give them a quarter to buy something on their own, and the cry goes up, "I want a Happy Meal!" All over the restaurant, people crane their necks to look at the tight-fisted, penny-pinching cheapskate of a parent who would deny a child the meal of great joy.

So I buy each child his own, and they're happy—at least, for a minute and 30 seconds. The problem with the Happy Meal is that the Happy wears off. It is an illusion. No child discovers lasting happiness in one. Years later, no child says, "Remember that Happy Meal? What great joy I found there." You would think that after a while children would catch on, that a child would say, "You know, a Happy Meal never brings lasting happiness; I'm not going to get suckered into it this time." But it doesn't happen. When the excitement wears off, they need a new fix, another Happy Meal. They keep buying them, and they keep not working. In fact, the only one Happy Meals bring happiness to is McDonald's. Do you ever wonder why Ronald McDonald wears that silly grin on his face? Billions of Happy Meals sold.

When you get older, you don't get any smarter; your Happy Meals just get more expensive. All day long we are bombarded with messages that seek to persuade us of two things: That we are (or ought to be) discontented, and that contentment is only one step away—"use me, buy me, eat me, wear me, try me, drive me, put me in your hair." The things you can buy for contentment relating to your hair alone are staggering: You can wash it, condition it, mousse it, dye it, curl it, straighten it, wax it (if it's growing where it shouldn't), and Rogaine it (if it's not growing where it should).

Aren't people healthier, cleaner, richer, and smarter than ever? We live longer, eat better, dress warmer, work less, and play more than ever in the history of the human race. But are we happier? Or are we just cleaner, healthier, better-coifed—and sad—people?

The truth is that contentment is never achieved by satisfying our desires. Desires, once satisfied, do not stay satisfied.

This is not a new insight. Wise people from many spiritual traditions have always understood this. Almost 2,000 years ago the apostle Paul wrote, "I have learned the secret of being content . . ." Contentment is learned behavior, an acquired skill, like playing the piano or riding a bike. It does not just happen if I manage to fall into the right circumstances or sate my appetites.

Our society—so advanced in many other respects—seems to have lost touch with this simple truth, and more than lost touch with it. We have made the quest to satisfy our desires the foundation on

which we teach people to build their lives.

Social critic Christopher Lasch in *The True and Only Heaven* faults our society for running on the principle that insatiable desire will actually be our salvation, because it will drive people to work harder and make new discoveries. This leads to *progress*, and progress will usher in the end and consummation of all things:

Insatiable desire, formerly condemned as a source of frustration, unhappiness, and spiritual instability, came to be seen as a powerful stimulus to economic development. Instead of disparaging the tendency to want more than we need . . . [it was argued that] a continual redefinition of . . . standards of comfort and convenience led to improvements in production and a general increase of wealth. There was no foreseeable end to the transformation of luxuries into necessities. The more comforts people enjoyed, the more they would expect.

This preoccupation with seeking contentment through filling desires has led to a profound change in the way we think about human beings. We now think of ourselves as *consumers*. In the past, Lasch writes, human beings have generally identified themselves by what they produce, what they contribute. Millions of people still have last names that testify to this: Baker, Farmer, Smith. But now we label ourselves not by what we contribute but by the labels we acquire. Instead of callings we have careers—the primary purpose of which is no longer fruitfulness but the ability to support a lifestyle.

Consumerism itself has become a kind of addiction. The more toys we acquire the more frequent and expensive they need to be to produce the old high. The shift from finding identity in what we produce to what we possess, from a work ethic to a consumption ethic, at once exalts the pursuit of happiness and guarantees its ultimate futility.

Consumerism is doomed to futility, because to be made in the image of God does not mean primarily to be a consumer. The creation mandate, after all, was “be fruitful”—not “shop till you drop.” Strategic discontent drives us to work harder and spend faster; it raises our sense of entitlement and lowers our sense of gratitude—the Happy Meal society. There is one thing it cannot do, of course. It cannot produce contented people.

Even the church can be co-opted into becoming just one more dispenser of Happy Meals. A friend of mine who is a denominational official told me of one man who proudly reported attending one church when it was growing, then switching to another when it was hot, and then to a third when it was hotter still; “I’ve just got to be where the action is,” he exulted.

Historically, there have been at least two main alternatives to the problem of the insatiability of desire. One is the way of stoicism. Discontentment rises from unfulfilled desires. If gratifying all desires is impossible, stoics argue, then the wise course is to learn to rein in your desires. The contented person is not the one who gets everything he or she wants (because getting always leads to the desire for more), it is the person who has stopped wanting. “Who is more contented, the man with a million dollars, or the man with ten children?” The correct answer, of course, is the man with ten children—because he does not want any more.

This approach is attractive because it offers protection from the pain of dashed dreams. Charles Schultz showed Snoopy grumbling one Thanksgiving because Charlie Brown was inside eating a huge feast while Snoopy was stuck with dog food. But a few moments of reflection on the roof of his dog house turned Snoopy around: “It could have been worse. I could have been born a turkey.” Snoopy was a good stoic. Lower your expectations. Hedge your bets. Don’t get your hopes up, and you won’t be disappointed.

The way of Christ, however, is not stoicism. It points in another direction. It offers neither the promise of contentment through gratification nor contentment through renunciation.

The way of Christ is the way of hope. Christianity is hopeful—wildly, absurdly hopeful. This hope is not a shallow optimism that things will be better tomorrow than they are today. It is a settled conviction that there is another—and better—world than this one. The way of hope suggests that joy flows not to people who have fulfilled their desires or fallen into the right circumstances, but to people who have developed a certain kind of character—the character of Christ. It clings to the belief that the triumph of God and his kingdom will one day be fully revealed, and even now gives us the power to endure all things, and still hope.

Søren Kierkegaard said it is this that allowed Abraham to offer his son Isaac, not out of stoic, resigned obedience, but in the absurd hope that God could still be trusted. It is this hope that allows Paul to see himself—precisely when he is in chains and in want—as an “overcomer” who “can do all things through him who gives me strength.”

From a Christian perspective, then, our problem is not that we want too much. Our problem is that we are willing to settle for too little. C. S. Lewis wrote in a celebrated essay, “The Weight of Glory”:

Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

People have been “far too easily pleased” for a long time. A shrewd critic asked his own culture millennia ago, “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” (Isa. 55:2, ESV). You would think that after a while people would catch on.

The Bible takes human discontentment very seriously. In fact, the Bible says it is not an accident we are discontented. To God, it is tragic when human beings throw away their lives by centering them in the mere gratification of appetite. So God gives us the gift of frustration—his own version of strategic discontent—in the hope that we will see the fruitlessness of such living and turn at last to him. “For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in *hope*” (Rom. 8:20, RSV).

God allows us to hunger and thirst—to be discontented—in the hope that at last we will be hungry enough and thirsty enough to search for that which can truly satisfy:

“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. . . . Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. . . . Seek the Lord while he may be found.” (Isa. 55:1–2, 6, NRSV)

“Here,” says Jesus, “Take my flesh for your bread, and my blood for your wine, and you will finally find food that can nourish your soul. Take my words, and you will find life. For the Meal of sacrifice and death is the Meal of great joy, which the Father could not withhold from his children.”

—At the time this article was written, John Ortberg was pastor of Horizons Community Church in Diamond Bar, California.

TOO MUCH STUFF



Give it away before it controls you.

In a classic from TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, Mayo Mathers confesses that greed is her ongoing temptation, and that it takes on some unexpected forms. This temptation strikes everyone—from the stay-at-home mom to the wealthy Christian CEOs we learn about in CHRISTIANITY TODAY's article. What does it look like to handle our resources in a definitively Christian way?

Scripture: Proverbs 11:4, 28; 23:4–5; Deuteronomy 15:7–15

Based on: "Too Much Stuff," TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, January/February 1999, "[The Engine of the Market](#)," CHRISTIANITY TODAY, posted October 3, 2008

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A TOO MUCH STUFF

Leader's Guide

Part 1 IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE

Note to Leader: Provide for each participant the article "Too Much Stuff" from TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, and the article "The Engine of the Market" from CHRISTIANITY TODAY, included at the end of this study.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] Many of us wage an ongoing battle with clutter—the stuff that seems to stack up in our closets, on our desks, and in our lives. What kind of clutter tends to accumulate in your home?

Read the following excerpt from "Too Much Stuff":

Several years ago while on vacation, our family ate at a restaurant that claimed to have the largest buffet in the United States. We swarmed the mind-boggling array of culinary delights as though we'd never seen food before. By the time we finished gorging ourselves, we could barely walk out of the restaurant.

Unfortunately, our restaurant experience reflected my lifestyle at the time: excessive possessions . . . and desires. While our house had reasonable storage space, our belongings had expanded from the attic to the garage and beyond. My daily calendar was filled with back-to-back meetings. . . . My cluttered life left me no significant time to spend with God, and fractured my family time. But I had no clue how to begin creating more physical, emotional, and spiritual space in my life.

Then one morning I read in my Bible, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15). I'd never considered myself greedy, yet my home was filled with more clothes than I ever wore, more dishes, books, gadgets, and knickknacks than we ever used.

[Q] Why do you think people live such "overstuffed" lives?

[Q] Mathers identifies this over-accumulation of stuff as "greed." Do you agree? Why or why not?

[Q] What was your reaction when you read in the CHRISTIANITY TODAY article that many wealthy Christians give away their wealth? Should Christians be able to keep their wealth or must they give it away?

Part 2 **DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES**

Teaching Point One: Greed is a sin.

[Q] What would you say is the essence of greed?

Leader's Note: It's a craving for material things. The concept is rendered well by Ecclesiastes 5:10: "Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income."

[Q] Is there something inherently wrong about owning possessions? Or is the danger in our attitude toward our possessions?

[Q] A greedy person is called a miser, which comes from the same root as "miserable." What would you say is the connection between greed and misery?

Greed is a joy bandit. Greed can prevent us from enjoying what we *do* have. Writing in LEADERSHIP, Randy Rowland observes: "Greed can flourish in the presence, or the absence, of material wealth. I used to think time and again that I deserved better pay in my jobs. I would constantly chafe at the amount I was paid and assert I was worth more. The problem was, even when I did get raises, they didn't come as gifts, or even as perks for working hard and accomplishing goals. Instead they came as morsels that I couldn't enjoy because they represented less than I thought I was worth. Greed steals the enjoyment of what we have because we're fixated on 'more.'"

[Q] What are the ways that people rationalize their greed?

Leader's Note: Some might be, "I deserve more," "I need more," "It's my life and I can do what I want," "There's nothing wrong with being comfortable," and "More possessions are a sign of God's blessing."

[Q] Which of the Ten Commandments would place limits on greed and the way we accumulate personal wealth?

Teaching Point Two: Greed is dangerous.

[Q] What are some of the dangers of greed?

Our greed can affect others—something we've seen countless times in corporate America. But those who are greedy also hurt themselves, especially when they're led into traps. A number of Ponzi Schemes have drawn in countless people and cost them thousands of dollars.

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[Q] What would lead otherwise sensible people to part with their savings?

Greed makes people look for their security in the wrong things. German pastor and theologian Helmut Theilicke (1908–86) provides a vivid illustration in his book *How to Believe Again*:

I once heard of a child who was raising a frightful cry because he had shoved his hand into the opening of a very expensive Chinese vase and then couldn't pull it out again. Parents and neighbors tugged with might and main on the child's arm, with the poor creature howling out loud all the while. Finally there was nothing left to do but to break the beautiful, expensive vase. And then as the mournful heap of shards lay there, it became clear why the child had been so hopelessly stuck. His little fist grasped a paltry penny which he had spied in the bottom of the vase and which he, in his childish ignorance, would not let go.

The Bible describes greed's misplaced values as perilous. Read Proverbs 11:4, 28, and 23:4–5.

[Q] What kinds of situations in life do these proverbs make you think of?

[Q] In some ways, greed is a symptom of a deeper condition. What would you identify as the underlying issue?

Ephesians 5:5 puts it this way: “For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.”

Greed simply reveals what we consider most important in our life, and what authority we acknowledge. As in the story of John Tyson in the *CHRISTIANITY TODAY* article, it's easy to say that others are important to us, but our actions reveal our true beliefs. Greed makes us willing to step on others in order to gain what we desire. It lifts our own desires and wants above others'—even God's.

Teaching Point Three: There is an antidote to greed.

What is the antidote to greed? The Bible makes it clear that the cure for greed is generosity, giving away things you value. It prescribes treatments such as secret giving (Matt. 6:3) and cheerful giving (2 Cor. 9:7).

This spirit of generosity was part of the Old Testament law. Read Deuteronomy 15:7–15.

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[Q] In this text, what are the reasons God gives for his people to be generous?

In the New Testament, Paul instructs: “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life” (1 Tim. 6:17–19).

[Q] What are the benefits Paul identifies that come from conquering greed?

In contrast to John Tyson, there are stories of wealthy Christians who use their wealth for the benefit of others. Ralph Larsen and Joel Manby live well below their means in order to give away much of their income.

[Q] How might intentionally giving away so much guard Larsen, Manby, and other wealthy Christians from greed?

[Q] How could intentionally living on less guard you from greed?

Part 3 **APPLY YOUR FINDINGS**

[Q] How can you become more generous and less prone to greed?

[Q] Could you be living on less? What could you do with the rest to benefit others?

Action Point:

As a group, identify some steps you can take. To spark your thinking, read these “Four Ways to Beat Greed” by Ed Young (adapted from *Fatal Distractions*, Nelson, 2000).

1. Learn the secret of admiring without desiring. If you can look at something and admire it without feeling you have to own it personally, you will save yourself thousands upon thousands of dollars. Develop the ability to look at something in a store window and say, “Wow, that’s really awesome,” but don’t say, “That’s really awesome, so I’ve got to own it.” Refuse to allow goods to become gods.

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2. Learn the secret of giving stuff away. About once every three months, I try to give away something that I truly value. No strings attached. It helps me to stay free of greed and to put things into perspective. We're to love people and use things to show love to people. Greed sets in when we start to love things and use people to get things.

3. Learn the secret of being generous toward God. When the former rip-off artist Zacchaeus told Jesus what he planned to do with his wealth, Jesus replied, "Today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19:9). Jesus didn't mean that Zacchaeus's soul was saved because he gave away money. He meant that Zacchaeus was on the road to getting things right with other people and with God because he'd repented of his greed and was making a move toward generosity. When things lose their hold on us, we truly are free.

4. Learn the reality of death in its relationship to things. Death marks the final failure of things. We might flash our cash on this earth, but we cannot take anything with us when we die.

—Study prepared by Marshall Shelley, with Amy Jackson

TOO MUCH STUFF

If clutter's got you down, try these secrets to simplifying.

By Mayo Mathers, for the study "Too Much Stuff."



Several years ago while on vacation, our family ate at a restaurant that claimed to have the largest buffet in the United States. We swarmed the mind-boggling array of culinary delights as though we'd never seen food before. By the time we finished gorging ourselves, we could barely walk out of the restaurant.

Unfortunately, our restaurant experience reflected my lifestyle at the time: excessive possessions, commitments, goals, and desires. While our house had reasonable storage space, our belongings had expanded from the attic to the garage and beyond. My daily calendar was filled with back-to-back meetings for church and other ministry functions and civic groups. And they all had to be woven around family and work! My cluttered life left me no significant time to spend with God, and fractured my family time. But I had no clue how to begin creating more physical, emotional, and spiritual space in my life.

Then, one morning I read in my Bible, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). I'd never considered myself greedy, yet my home was filled with more clothes than I ever wore, more dishes, books, gadgets, and knickknacks than we ever used. Was God telling me to simplify my overcrowded existence?

I thought of a church family who'd adopted a Romanian girl. She'd spent her first five years in an orphanage, and after living in America for a few months, her new father asked her how she liked it.

"Oh, Daddy!" she said, laughing. "I love America. In Romania we had no stuff. But in America WE HAVE STUFF!"

Like the little girl, I liked my stuff, but if God saw my excess as greediness, it needed to be eliminated.

I immediately set to work to declutter my house, only to find my stuff had a stronger hold on me than I'd realized. So I focused on the area of my greatest excess: *my closet*. I love shoes and owned more than 50 pairs. The thought of parting with any of them was painful. First, I boxed up all but one pair of each color and moved them to the garage. That way, if I went into shoe withdrawal, I knew where to get a quick fix.

To my surprise, once the shoes were out of sight, I never thought of them again. So I did the same with my clothes and accessories. I boxed them up, moved them to the garage, then eventually passed them on to a secondhand store.

The more spacious my closet became, the stronger my sense of freedom grew. Before, when my alarm clock went off in the morning, the first thing I faced was a jumbled closet. It made my day feel jumbled before it even started.

After the successful closet campaign, I advanced the *battle to the bathroom*, cleaning out makeup drawers (why have six tubes of lipstick when I only wear one?), medicine cabinets, and cleaning supplies. I started severely limiting the array of choices in my home.

A Life of Simplicity TOO MUCH STUFF

Article

I was shocked at how much time had been devoured by the upkeep of all these unnecessary possessions. My growing sense of freedom and time was exhilarating!

My next step was to *limit my shopping excursions*. Most of my excess was the result of casual shopping. Going to the store for a jug of milk, I'd return home with a pair of sale earrings from the drugstore next door. Now I limit myself to shopping once a week for groceries, household supplies, clothes—everything. One shopping trip a week doesn't leave much time for casual shopping.

My success at decluttering made me take a hard look at the other areas in my life. My calendar was chronically overbooked with too many commitments. *A critical, prayerful look at my commitments* showed me ones that were unnecessary. I resigned my position in a local speaking organization and looked for other things to prune from my schedule, asking God to guard the time I freed up, filling it only as he directed.

I also *listed the things of greatest importance to me*. To my surprise, my list was short; it consisted entirely of people, not goals or dreams or possessions: my husband, my sons, my family and friends. I realized that no matter how fulfilling a career is, it's temporary. But my relationships as a wife, mother, daughter, sister, and friend remain—and deserve more attention. I pray God will help me never to become more committed to temporary things than to the permanent relationships in my life.

By creating material and physical space, I automatically created more emotional space, but I knew that to keep that space intact, I needed to take more deliberate steps.

In his book *Margin*, Dr. Richard Swenson recommends *planning pauses into each day*. He suggests doing things that force you to slow down, such as choosing the *longest* line at the bank or grocery store instead of the shortest. This has been the hardest habit to develop! I seem driven to find the shortest line and feel stress building when another line moves faster than the one I'm in. Forcing myself to step into the longest line and relax still requires great effort—but I'm learning.

Another way I've created emotional space is by *taming the stress promoters in my day*. Since we operate a business from our home and the telephone rings incessantly, my greatest source of stress was the telephone. My stomach always coiled in a knot from the constant interruption of this necessary evil.

One day it occurred to me that I behaved as though I had to answer every call. So I started letting our answering machine take over when I didn't want to be interrupted. At first, I felt guilty about ignoring calls, but it so completely diffused my stress that I soon forgot about my guilt.

Along the way I've learned other ways to create emotional space: a brief walk or a few moments of solitude behind a closed door. Talk show host Oprah Winfrey encourages viewers to create emotional space by keeping a *gratitude journal* in which they list five things they're thankful for every day. These simple actions promote a shift in attitude that keeps troubles in perspective so they don't affect me negatively.

Finally, I knew I needed to declutter my spiritual life. Much of my time is devoted to "spiritual things"; I speak to Christian groups, write for Christian publications, work in women's ministry, and serve with an international missions organization. But as important as all this Christian stuff is, it becomes sin if it crowds my relationship with God. I must never allow anything to interfere with that.

A Life of Simplicity

TOO MUCH STUFF

Article

I can only maintain that all-important relationship by *spending a significant amount of time alone with God each day*. If I don't build space into my days to allow my relationship with God to mature, I'll never be able to maintain a healthy amount of physical and emotional space.

It's been two years since I first began decluttering my life. It hasn't come easily; it cuts against the grain of my natural desires. When a store advertises a huge sale, I still find myself getting in my car—even though I don't need anything. An invitation arrives in the mail that I long to accept—even though it will steal time from my family. My struggle to maintain physical, emotional, and spiritual space is ongoing, but the rewards of my perseverance are as enticing as that giant food buffet we encountered on vacation: serenity, order, and a satisfying sense of God's approval. It's impossible to accumulate too much of that kind of stuff.

—Mayo Mathers is a TCW regular contributor who lives in Oregon

"Too Much Stuff," TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, January/February 1999



THE ENGINE OF THE MARKET

It's not capital. Why wealthy evangelicals and others need to reconsider executive compensation.

By D. Michael Lindsay

American evangelicals are becoming a wealthy lot. This has created opportunities for the wider evangelical world. Rich evangelicals have deployed their financial resources to establish new ministries, expand opportunities for young leaders, and develop initiatives around the world.

But didn't Jesus talk about it being easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God? The rich young ruler went away sorrowful in the Gospel of Luke. Money, in and of itself, was not the problem. It was the love of money that tripped him up. He may have been generous, but he wasn't willing to sell everything. I can hardly blame him.

But as the nation's economy continues to be unstable, we have to consider how the greed of an individual or a group of people affects the structure of our economy. Americans are growing angry over the "golden parachutes" that protect business executives even if their companies fail. After serving 18 days as the chief executive of Washington Mutual before the bank collapsed on September 26, 2008, Alan Fishman received a \$19 million severance package. That is the equivalent of \$1.12 million for each day he led the company—a company that subsequently imploded, no less. Analysts tell us that curbing excessive compensation packages for executives will not dramatically change the current financial outlook for the United States. Perhaps that is so, but the nation needs business leaders they can trust. The engine of the free market is not so much capital as it is trust.

The dark side of wealth

Evangelical executives frame their business life as a moral activity. But what happens when they enjoy lavish compensation packages even as workers are called upon to tighten their belts? In 2004, John Tyson was serving as CEO of Tyson Foods, one of the 100 largest companies in the United States. The company experienced a financial downturn and decided to shore up money by demanding wage cuts from line workers. At that same time, Tyson's annual compensation grew by leaps and bounds—upwards of \$20 million. Eric Schlosser, writing for *The Nation*, summarized the feeling of many critics: "During an interview . . . Tyson outlined his personal theory of labor management, . . . [citing the importance of] a moral anchor. Tyson said, 'You have to serve the people that work for you . . . and in effect become a servant to the people that work for you.' He said it with a straight face."

There are some evangelical business leaders who eschew the accoutrements of an executive lifestyle. Ralph Larsen, the onetime chief executive of Johnson & Johnson, and his wife made a conscious decision to live significantly beneath their means. That meant that they did not move to a bigger house or a better neighborhood even as Larsen rose up through the company ranks. They gave away vast sums of their annual income. Evangelicals in Silicon Valley and in other places around the country have made similar decisions. Joel Manby, who once ran Saab USA, told me, "We could afford a second home, [but] with all these people . . . homeless, I just don't feel right about that. . . . I'd rather do Habitat for Humanity where I'm building second homes [rather] than living in one."

The current cultural moment is unique for evangelicals. There have always been a few of them who had great wealth. J. Howard Pew, for example, was an extraordinarily wealthy industrialist in the first half of the 20th century. With his support, evangelical initiatives such as CHRISTIANITY TODAY were established and grew. A century earlier, Arthur and Lewis Tappan funded Charles Finney's ministry during the Second Great Awakening, as John Wanamaker had supported A. T. Pierson, the popular Presbyterian pastor and evangelical leader.

But today's wealthy evangelicals are far more numerous. Among the 101 business leaders I interviewed for *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite* (Oxford), the average amount of money they give away each year is \$1.1 million, and their giving ranged from \$30,000 per year to \$15 million. One knowledgeable source told me that in the space of a few months, he met with 20 families who had a cumulative net worth exceeding \$40 billion. Evangelicals have given away millions and in the process filled the coffers of many leading churches and evangelical ministries. At the same time, it has generated new challenges. How should evangelicals respond to their rising wealth, in terms of lifestyle and in the context of the country's economic woes?

Bearing witness to their faith is a core commitment of American evangelicals. In a day and age when executives enjoy exorbitant compensation packages, simply refusing executive perks and stock options or redirecting them toward philanthropic outlets could be a simple, yet clearly noticeable form of evangelical witness. How much is enough for an executive to keep? The annual salary of the President of the United States is \$400,000. That seems like a reasonable place to start.

—D. Michael Lindsay is a sociologist at Rice University and the author of *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite* (Oxford).

"The Engine of the Market," CHRISTIANITY TODAY, posted October 3, 2008 (www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/octoberweb-only/140-51.0.html).

A TRULY SIMPLE LIFE

Though the world tells us we must be, do, and have more, God calls us to be content.

Magazines, commercials, books, and Pinterest boards have tons of advice for leading a simple life. Magazine headlines scream at us: “Tips for Doing It All!” “10 Organizing Secrets!” “3 Must-Have Cleaners!” “5 Easy Weeknight Meals!” They promise the secrets to a simple, organized, contented life. But it doesn’t take long to realize that all their tips and tricks just leave us with more to do, buy, and long for. It does anything but make us content.

But maybe the simple life doesn’t have anything to do with stuff. Perhaps God’s Word holds the only secret to the simple life that we need.

Scripture: Psalm 46:10; 63:2–5; Mark 1:35; Luke 12:13–21, 22–34; 1 Timothy 6:6–10

Based on: “Real Simple,” by Cindy Crosby, *KYRIA*, January/February 2011



A Life of Simplicity

A TRULY SIMPLE LIFE

Leader's Guide

Part 1 IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE

Note to Leader: Provide for each participant the article "Real Simple," from KYRIA, included at the end of this study.

If you could have a simpler life, would you? What does a simple life consist of? Magazines, commercials, books, and Pinterest boards convince us that a simpler life is possible—and that we need it. But their advice for gaining a simple life might not lead us the right way.

Discussion Starters:

- [Q] What does a simple life look like?
- [Q] Who do you know that lives a simple life? What makes his or her life simple?
- [Q] What area of your life would you like to be simpler? Why?
- [Q] What holds you back from living a simpler life?

Part 2 DISCOVER THE ETHERNAL PRINCIPLES

We long for simplicity, but it's difficult to achieve. We wonder if we must sell all our belongings and move to a secluded cabin in the woods. Or if we simply need someone to help us organize our closets. Though it seems hard to live out, something in us longs for less stuff, less chaos, and fewer obligations. We want a simpler life. But simplicity isn't based on our location, our possessions, or our schedule—it's a state we can only achieve in light of our relationship with God.

Teaching Point One: Places and possessions can't bring us simplicity.

Our culture tries to convince us that in order to simplify we must do and buy more. In fact, Cindy Crosby tells us that simplicity is a big business, with organizational stores and consultants. But this doesn't line up with Scripture. Read Luke 12:13–21.

- [Q] What does the man in the parable do when he doesn't have enough room for all his crops? What other solutions may have worked?
- [Q] How have you tried to simplify your life by organizing your possessions? Did it involve buying more? Did it work? Why or why not?

A Life of Simplicity

A TRULY SIMPLE LIFE

Leader's Guide

[Q] Jesus warns in verse 15 that “life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.” What does life consist of?

Jesus teaches his disciples a follow-up lesson in Luke 12:22–34. Read the passage.

[Q] Summarize this passage in one or two sentences. What is the point of Jesus' lesson?

[Q] What does Jesus say about the ravens? How does this speak directly to the parable he taught in the previous passage? How does it speak to the need to acquire more possessions?

[Q] In verse 34, Jesus says, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” What is the condition of a heart that always needs to acquire more?

Optional Activity: *The media is constantly trying to convince us that we need more in order to simplify: more shelving units, more containers to put things in, and more living space. Provide several magazines (especially Real Simple, Better Homes and Gardens, or Martha Stewart). Allow several minutes for group members to flip through the magazines for advertisements or articles that give instructions for simplifying. Then discuss: When have you tried to follow methods like these to find simplicity? Do they truly bring a life of simplicity? Or is there something missing?*

In the article “Real Simple,” Crosby writes that she tried to find simplicity by finding a new location. She tried going out into the woods, and she mentions another family moving to a rural farm to seek simplicity.

[Q] What was the result of these pursuits of simplicity in new locations? Why do you think it turned out that way?

Leader's Note: *Simplicity is a state of heart, not a location or something we can attain through material possessions. Additionally, it's not something that material possessions can take away. Instead, simplicity is solely dependent on our hearts. Therefore, leaving our current situation or place won't automatically bring simplicity. Without a heart change, there will be no change.*

[Q] Imagine a time when you went on vacation or to a spa. These getaways may represent a simpler life, one that we dream about escaping to. What might happen, though, if you stayed on vacation for a long time? Would it remain a simple place or would some of life's complexities creep in?

A Life of Simplicity

A TRULY SIMPLE LIFE

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Teaching Point Two: Simplicity is directly related to contentment.

It's possible to live a simple life wherever you live, with whatever you have. In fact, it's possible to live a simple life as a millionaire in Hollywood or as an impoverished farmer in Chile. If simple living isn't based on possessions or location, what is it based on? Read 1 Timothy 6:6–10.

[Q] What does Paul say will happen to those who want to get rich? Give one example of when you've seen this.

[Q] Is having possessions or wealth inherently sinful? Why or why not?

Leader's Note: Read 1 Timothy 6:17–19 for an example of how possessions can be used to further God's kingdom.

In order to simplify our lives, we need to stop basing our contentment on what we have. Psalm 63:2–5 shows another way. Read the passage.

[Q] Why is the psalmist satisfied?

[Q] On what do you normally base your contentment? What might happen if your contentment were based on our unchanging, loving God?

[Q] Crosby suggests that we live like we're dying. How does that perspective challenge you to base your contentment on God?

Teaching Point Three: We must intentionally create space in our lives to experience simplicity.

Simplicity is found when we focus on God, spending meaningful time with him. But that's easier said than done.

[Q] What activities or situations make you feel especially close to God? Why?

[Q] How often do you engage in the things that make you feel close to God? Do you wish you spent more time doing those things?

We've all experienced times where our schedule was filled to the brim, and we were forced to let something go for a time. Unfortunately, in those busy times—when we need God more than ever—we often let our relationship with him fall to the wayside. In all the running around, we neglect God.

Read Psalm 46:10 and Mark 1:35.

A Life of Simplicity

A TRULY SIMPLE LIFE

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[Q] How often do you take time to be still before God? Do you wish you did this more often? Why or why not?

[Q] What does being still before God, alone with him in prayer, do for us and our relationship with him?

[Q] If there are clear benefits, why do we often skip this important time alone with him?

[Q] Crosby suggests turning off cell phones, refusing to check e-mail, and going for a walk in order to avoid distractions. What things distract you from your relationship with God? What can you do to minimize or end those distractions?

[Q] Have you ever felt that your relationship with God was overcomplicated? How? Why?

***Leader's Note:** It's possible to overcomplicate our relationship with God by focusing on in-depth reading plans, lengthy prayers, or time-consuming journaling instead of simply spending time with him. When the time we spend with God becomes daunting because we have so much to do, we've lost the point.*

Part 3 **APPLY YOUR FINDINGS**

In a world that constantly tells us to do and buy more, it can be hard to truly simplify our lives. But God calls us to be content with who he is, first and foremost. As we spend time with him, stilling our minds and hearts, focusing on his love for us, we'll learn to live simple lives of contentment.

And we may realize that we've had more than enough all along—it was just difficult to see amidst all our busyness and belongings.

[Q] If your home is always cluttered and you can't seem to organize, you may have too much. What do you need to get rid of?

[Q] If you're constantly craving a quiet spot in the woods or a lounge chair on the beach, you may be too busy. What needs to go from your schedule?

[Q] If the thought of spending time with God is daunting, you may be overcomplicating your relationship with him. What steps can you take to simplify your relationship?

[Q] If you're convinced that you need new, better, and more things, you may not be content with what God has provided. How can you focus on the blessings God has given you rather than on what you don't yet have?

A Life of Simplicity

A TRULY SIMPLE LIFE

Leader's Guide

Action Point:

Identify one thing in your life that needs simplifying: possessions, schedule, relationships, etc. Then take one step this week toward simplifying that area of our life. What specific step will you take?

Examples include sorting through your closet and giving away half of your clothing, removing two regular engagements from your calendar, choosing a simpler Bible reading plan that isn't overwhelming, or refusing to go shopping for anything but groceries for a time.

Commit to connecting with God each day this week—even if only for five minutes. Read Psalm 63:2–5 and ask God to help you find your contentment in him.

—Amy Jackson is managing editor of ChristianBibleStudies.com and SmallGroups.com. You can follow her on Twitter [@AmyKJackson](https://twitter.com/AmyKJackson).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

📖 For more studies like this, go to ChristianBibleStudies.com.

📖 **Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity**, by Adam Hamilton (Abingdon Press, 2009). Enough is an invitation to rediscover the Bible's wisdom when it comes to prudent financial practices.

📖 **Real Simplicity: Making Room for Life**, by Rozanne and Randy Frazee (Zondervan, 2011). *Real Simplicity* tells you why it's so important to balance work and play. The Frazees' practical insights will motivate you to achieve the lifestyle you were created to enjoy.

📖 **Simplicity**, by Mindy Caliguire (IVP Connect, 2008). Our closets, our garages, our cupboards, our lives are—let's face it—cluttered. Are you longing for space—for simplicity?

📖 **Spiritual Simplicity: Doing Less, Loving More**, by Chip Ingram (Howard Books, 2012). In our frantically driven, complex lifestyle, we suffer from fatigue, little margin, shallow relationships, and fractured families. This book gives you the tools to run the race at a different, more meaningful pace.



REAL SIMPLE

It's not what you might expect it to be.

By Cindy Crosby

A loon's plaintive cry echoes across the water as I settle into my campsite. For more than a week, I've been backpacking alone on this wilderness island in Lake Superior, and my heart and spirit are calmer. I have only what I can carry. Each day has brought with it only the simplest of decisions: How many miles to hike? Should I spend the next hour watching the water and its pageant of moose, osprey, and ducks? Or should I fix some Ramen noodles for dinner on my pocket-sized camp stove?

If only life back home in the Chicago suburbs were so simple. Most days, I'm juggling work deadlines, my husband's travel schedule, the assorted needs of family members, and a list of church and volunteer activities. All good things in themselves. But not simple.

Where Simplicity Begins

Simplicity is big business. Stores are devoted to helping me find it; consultants want me to hire them to divulge the secret. Much of the advice on living simply is "here's what to buy." But simplicity as found in clear plastic organizers, a new, easier hairstyle, or a streamlined wardrobe hasn't cut it for me.

I used to believe simplicity might be discovered in a different location. Moving out of the city to a rural area, where the ideal of the simple life has been polished to a fine halo.

An article in the early '90s extolled the lives of a young couple who, desperate to give their children and themselves a simpler life, moved to the wilds of British Columbia. There they chopped wood for cooking and heating, dug a well for drinking water, and grew all their own produce. No television, no distractions, no preoccupations with material acquisitions. Surely the simple life was theirs. I envied them.

But nothing is that simple. A few years later I read of the demise of the couple's marriage and their move back to civilization. They'd given up everything for an ideal of simplicity, and instead found nothing but chaos and unhappiness. They discovered simplicity isn't a location. But if simplicity can't be found in a place, where is it?

Jesus, who had the most complicated assignment in history ("Save the world!"), lived a simple life. As he sent his 12 disciples on a special mission, he cautioned them: "Don't think you need a lot of extra equipment for this. You are the equipment. No special appeals for funds. Keep it simple" (Mark 6:8–9, *The Message*).

I am the equipment. In some ways, it seems easier and simpler to buy something. To relocate. But Jesus says simplicity begins with me.

To Live Like You Are Dying

The poet Mary Oliver writes, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" Do I spend my wild and precious life organizing my closet by season? Will having a Blackberry make life simpler? Should I cross all the items off my to-do list before I go to bed? How do I decide what constitutes simplicity and what—when neglected—will lead to tension and frustration?

"Live like you are dying," sing country musician Tim McGraw and former American Idol winner Kris Allen. Perhaps this is the key. Or if you'd prefer, listen to the apostle Paul: "I do want to point out, friends, that time is of the essence. There is no time to waste, so don't complicate your lives

unnecessarily. Keep it simple—in marriage, grief, joy, whatever. Even in ordinary things—your daily routines, and so on. Deal as sparingly as possible with the things the world thrusts on you. This world as you see it is on its way out” (1 Cor. 7:29, *The Message*).

Live like you are dying. The world as you see it is on its way out. When I think about what’s really important—what I would do if I knew I didn’t have a lot of time left—I cut to the heart of simplicity. I turn off my cell phone and stop checking my e-mail for a few hours. I go for a walk in the park—in the sun, rain, wind, or snow—and use my five senses to see, smell, feel, taste, and hear the natural world around me. I let the dishes soak in the sink for an evening and snuggle with my daughter on the couch. I sit in the dark on my back porch, marveling at the Big Dipper.

So much of the time, we surround ourselves with white noise. God wants to talk to us, to linger with us, but we have to make a quiet space for him to come in. Simplicity is making that room, cutting out the things that clamor for attention, if only for a little while. It means small steps. Journaling for 15 minutes in the morning, trusting that what’s most important will float to the surface. Letting prayer bookend my days. Life’s complicated. Giving some of that complication to the Lord moves me a step closer toward simplicity.

Opening Up

I think, I journal, and I muse: Do I need the latest, the fastest, the best? Is a 15-step makeup application necessary every morning, or will a little mascara and lip gloss accomplish the same thing? Do I feel proud telling others how overscheduled I am, affirming my worth? Or take pride in complaining how exhausting my volunteer work is? Do I need the badge of a complicated life to convince others and myself of my value?

Maybe we avoid true simplicity because it promises to strip us of our veneer, to show who we are under all our posturing, makeovers, organized pantries, and well-ordered social calendars. Living the simple life means giving up some of our ideals about how we want others to view us. In other words, simplicity begins by eroding our pride.

Humble hospitality is a great place to start learning simplicity. Invite friends over without fussing. Give yourself permission to be less than perfect: for your home to be comfortable, instead of immaculate; for your food to be take-out or hot dogs on the grill instead of filet on the best crystal and china. Eat slow. Talk long. Laugh much. “A pretentious, showy life is an empty life; a plain and simple life is a full life” (Prov. 13:7, *The Message*).

Simplicity isn’t a place, a wardrobe, or a diet. It’s not found in clear plastic boxes. There’s no 12-step plan, no index-filing system, no consultant who can create it for us.

Simplicity isn’t something we can or cannot afford. Some of the world’s most poverty-stricken people know the secret, and many of the world’s wealthiest don’t. Simplicity means open hands, open hearts, open eyes. Breathing deeply. Taking time.

When I die, I want to know I’ve paid attention to this “one wild and precious life” God’s given me. True simplicity is a way to begin.

“Real Simple,” by Cindy Crosby, KYRIA, January/February 2011. The KYRIA brand (2009–2012) changed to become TODAY’S CHRISTIAN WOMAN in 2012.

SIMPLE LIVING

Are we consumed by consumption?

Those of us who have many possessions or few can all be possessed by what we have—or don't have. While Christians should live simply, the focus should not be on getting rid of what we have, but rather upon cultivating the disposition of "a life of joyful unconcern for possessions" (Richard J. Foster). Such a disposition will lead to actions and behaviors of simple living. This study focuses on what it means to live simply, and how we can cultivate an attitude of contentment.



Scripture: Deuteronomy 26:1–11; Ecclesiastes 5:10–6:9; Matthew 6:25–33; Acts 2:44–47; 2 Corinthians 8:1–9; Hebrews 12:1; Revelation 3:17–20

Based on: "The 'Real' Simple Life," by Matt Bell, ChristianityToday.com, 2005

Part 1 **IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE**

***Note to Leader:** Provide for each participant the article "The 'Real' Simple Life," from ChristianityToday.com, included at the end of this study.*

Perhaps you've seen the bumper stickers: "I shop, therefore I am." Or "Caution: I brake for garage sales." We might smile at these bumper sticker confessions, but they point to a deeper reality in our culture. As some social analysts have been saying about our consumer culture, a new type of human being is developing—the human being as consumer. For this type of human the purpose for being isn't to serve God, make a living, be creative, or be a lover or friend of others; the purpose for the human being as consumer is the accumulation of things.

Our culture is, indeed, consumed by the wanting and accumulating of many things. Work is not just a means to making a living and providing sustenance for ourselves and our family; work is a means to the end of accumulating more and better things: a bigger house, a sleeker car, more stylish clothing, not to mention all the gadgetry that our technological economy provides. Every week, for instance, CNET.com publishes a list of the current "hot" electronic gadgets, and if that is your thing, it's tempting to wish you had every one of those electronic items. The problem is, by next week the list will change, just like the top ten hits on the radio.

Material things aren't inherently evil. God made the world and all that is in it, and what God made is good. We need things not only to survive, but to thrive and enjoy life as God intended. The problem is what we do with material things and the place we give to them. St. Augustine said that sin is an inordinate desire for the relative good. In other words, sin can be giving too much emphasis to something that is good but not ultimate, thereby displacing better things in our lives, such as relationships with people and, above all else, our relationship with God.

What is important is putting things in their proper place, not letting them become a burden to us, as well as being generous with others—sharing freely with others as God has shared with us. An attitude of gratitude and a practice of generosity with others should lead to living simply and non-possessively in relation to material things.

One problem with possessions is that they "over-promise and under-deliver" (Gary Thomas, *The Glorious Pursuit*, NavPress). How quickly does that new, more powerful computer, for instance, seem outdated and obsolete. Even quicker does the rush of making such a purchase dissipate.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] Think about the last big-ticket item you purchased. How long did it give you pleasure and satisfaction? How quickly did you either come to take it for granted or be disappointed in it, or wish to replace it with something even newer and better?

[Q] What is the main focus of Matt Bell's article "The 'Real' Simple Life"? From a Christian perspective, what is the key to living a simple life according to Bell?

[Q] Drawing on Richard Foster, Bell says there are three inner attitudes about possessions that will lead to peace. What are these inner attitudes?

- How would you grade yourself on these attitudes?
- What are ways in which Christians can develop these attitudes by the grace of God and with the help of his Spirit?

Part 2 **DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES**

Teaching Point One: Money and material possessions do not make us content or bring us satisfaction. In fact, they can make us more unhappy and anxious.

Read Ecclesiastes 5:10–6:9. The industrialist John D. Rockefeller, one of the wealthiest humans of his generation, was once asked how much money is enough. He answered: "Just a little more." That is the effect that money and possessions have on us: even if you're Bill Gates, the wealthiest man in the world, it is not enough; you'll want more, and you'll work hard to ensure that no one overtakes your level of wealth and power. The preacher of Ecclesiastes understood this. While the mere laborer seems blessed by good sleep, the wealthy person is anxious about what he has or still wants, and therefore sleep evades him. The awareness that what we have can so quickly be taken from us makes us even more likely to hang on to what we have, despite the fact we've come into the world with nothing and will leave that way again when we die. Still, Ecclesiastes recognizes that material possessions come from God, and they are therefore good. They are made available to us not just for our sustenance, but for our enjoyment. Still, possessions can't ultimately satisfy; only the God who provides for us can.

[Q] Think about how much money you earn in a year. How much more do you wish you made? How much more money do you think would make you feel really secure?

[Q] G. K. Chesterton once said that when a man knocks on the door of a brothel, he's really looking for God. Perhaps today he'd say when a person goes to the mall to shop, she's really looking for God. Why do people go shopping? Is it merely to purchase the necessities of life, or are they looking to satisfy some deeper need? Why do you go shopping?

- Compare Revelation 3:17–20 (especially the first and last verses of this passage) to Ecclesiastes 5:17ff.

[Q] Why does wealth make us become self-sufficient?

[Q] What is the antidote to this in Jesus' words to the wealthy and materialistic church at Laodicea?

***Leader's Note:** He tells them to repent and change their ways and invites them to commune with him.*

Teaching Point Two: We should trust that God will take care of our needs—and therefore not be anxious.

Read Matthew 6:25–33.

We should interpret this passage by beginning at the end: what we are called to, first of all and above all else, is to seek God's kingdom. This is a kingdom without geographical location, one without an earthly ruler. To seek God's kingdom is to seek the will of God in all that we do. If we do this, then "all these things will be given to you as well."

What are "all these things"? They have to do with how we will make a living. The point is not that we don't need to do anything to provide for ourselves; rather, if we seek God's kingdom above all else, making provision for our family and ourselves will fall into its rightful place. We will then work to serve God rather than to gain security for ourselves, which makes us less dependent upon God. Jesus, recognizing our human frailty and our difficulty in trusting God to provide for us, commented that his disciples are of "little faith."

[Q] Think about a situation in which you were in dire economic need. How did you respond to the situation? Did you ask God for help? Did you tell others (family members, friends, or brothers and sisters in Christ) about your need? Did you trust God to provide for you?

- How was the situation resolved, if indeed it has been? Do you believe that God met your needs in this situation?

Teaching Point Three: God's people have an attitude of gratitude and practice generosity because of all that God has done for them.

Read Deuteronomy 26:1–11.

Moses instructed God's people about how they should conduct themselves when God gave them the Promised Land. They were to remember where they had come from, and how God had redeemed them from slavery. Their identity wasn't to be tied to the land God was giving them, nor to the bounty of the land, but rather to their pilgrim past and to God's merciful salvation. On account of what God did for them, they were to do three things: one, bring the first fruits of the harvest as a gift to God, from whom all good things come; two, celebrate God's goodness to them; and three, look out for the wellbeing of two groups in particular in their midst: the Levites (that is, the priests) and the aliens or foreigners among them (remembering that they too were once aliens in a foreign country).

[Q] How do you remember and celebrate the bountiful blessings of God in your life?

[Q] If you genuinely believe that the good things you have are gifts from God and therefore belong to him, does this help you cling less to things and be more ready to share with others? Explain.

[Q] The children of Israel were to give their tithes as a first-fruit offering to God. Rather than giving what was leftover, the first and best was to be given to God. How do you decide what to contribute to the work of God's kingdom—including your tithes and offerings, spiritual gifts, and time?

[Q] Assuming in our context the "Levites" are today's pastors and other church workers, and that aliens are not just foreigners, but anyone alien to the community of God's people, how do you care for the wellbeing of the "Levites and the aliens" in your church and community?

Teaching Point Four: God's people are characterized by the practice of sharing things with each other and contributing to the needs of the poor.

Read Acts 2:44–47 and 2 Corinthians 8:1–9.

The gospel changes individuals, but it also transforms relationships and builds a mutually supportive community within the church. This transformation changes our attitude and practice in response to the needs we see around us. The early church had everything in common, Acts reports, after Peter's Pentecost sermon. Today we don't have a common treasury, like the early church must have had for a time. Later, sharing with the saints took another form: the apostle Paul went to the churches that he had started to appeal to them for funds to help their poor

brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. He pointed to the example of the churches in Macedonia: they had gone through tough times, yet out of their great Christian joy they generously gave when an offering was taken for the church in Jerusalem. The principle, for Paul, was Christ's example: he who was rich became poor for us so that we might become rich. It is out of our gratitude for what God has done for us that we should be generous in sharing with others in need.

[Q] How do you make decisions about sharing with others in need? Are you inclined to ask, "Can I really afford this contribution?" Or do you rather ask, "In light of God's grace and goodness to me, how generous should I be in giving to _____?"

[Q] What most compels you to give? Why?

[Q] How do you make decisions about the amount and organization to give to?

[Q] Like Jesus' example of the widow's mite, often it is the poorest and neediest people who are most generous in giving. Why is this? Do you agree or disagree that wealthy people might be more tempted to be greedy?

[Q] Does your congregation have a means of giving to people with financial need in your church? In your community? How does this system work?

- If you had a dire financial need, would you feel free to let your congregation (pastor or deacon) know about it? If not, why not?

Teaching Point Five: Material things and prosperity can be a hindrance in our life as Christian pilgrims in this world. We need to lay aside those things that weigh us down.

Read Hebrews 12:1.

The Christian life is like a long-distance race. We have a goal in mind, but we also have to practice disciplines along the way that will help us reach that goal. One of those disciplines is casting off any encumbrances, things that weigh us down and keep us from making progress in our growth toward Christ-likeness. Material things clearly can get in the way of running the race of faith. Jesus stated the problem very directly: we can't have two masters; we either have the true God as our Lord, or we serve other gods. Money and the things money purchases can become our gods.

Another image for the Christian disciple is that of a pilgrim with a knapsack or backpack who is traveling lightly through this life. The Christian is one who doesn't need many things to experience joy or to live life to the fullest.

[Q] Thinking of the Christian life as a long-distance race, what are the things that encumber you, that keep you from running this race to the fullest?

[Q] Thinking of the Christian disciple as a pilgrim walking through life with all his earthly possessions in a backpack on his back, what are the essentials that you really need to live, to enjoy life without being weighed down by things?

Part 3 **APPLY YOUR FINDINGS**

Action Points:

- *Think back to the last non-food purchase you made. What was it? What went into your thinking when you purchased it? In retrospect, was it a real need, or just something you wanted? When we make a purchase, it is typical for us to ask: Can I afford this? It is equally important to ask: Do I really need this? If so, what need is this purchase meeting? Think ahead to something you've thought about purchasing. Ask yourself these questions in making the decision whether to make the purchase.*
- *Go through your closet or other storage areas to discern what you no longer need, giving things away to Goodwill or the Salvation Army or some other social service agency.*
- *One way to be less burdened by material things is through sharing with others. For instance, does everyone really need a lawn mower that gets used only once a week? Some neighbors share things like this with each other. Books are another item that are easily borrowed and shared. Before purchasing a book, check out whether your public or church library already has it. If you do purchase a book you'd like to read, consider making it available to others when you've completed it. Do you have such items you could share with others? Are there things you've thought about purchasing that you might be able to borrow from someone else? One congregation made up a list of things that members had which they were willing to share with others in the congregation, and then distributed that list to everyone. Could you see your congregation or your Sunday school class or small group doing such a thing? What items would you be willing to list?*
- *Review the ten principles from Foster in the article that help us move from an inner reality of not being possessed by possessions to outer practices of simple living. Choose one or two that you think you need to concentrate on in the coming weeks and months. Consider sharing this with the group or a trusted Christian friend. What steps do you need to take to make progress on the point(s) you've chosen?*

—Study prepared by Richard A. Kauffman, pastor, former associate editor of
CHRISTIANITY TODAY and regular contributor to ChristianBibleStudies.com.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

📖 For more studies like this, go to ChristianBibleStudies.com.

- [A Biblical Perspective on Money](#)
- [A Look at Things](#)
- [When Money Comes Between Us](#)
- [The Joy of Being Content](#)
- [Prosperity and Faith](#)

📖 [Celebration of Discipline](#), Richard J. Foster (Harper San Francisco, 1988; ISBN 0060628391), chapter 6 on simplicity

📖 [First Fruits: An All-age Worship Anthology on Generosity and Giving](#), Robin Stevens, Adrian Mann, John Wilmington (Canterbury Press, 2001; ISBN 1853113921)

📖 [Generous Living: Finding Contentment Through Giving](#), Ron Blue and Jodie Berndt (Zondervan Publishing House, 1997; ISBN 0310223997)

📖 [The Law of Rewards: Giving What You Can't Keep to Gain What You Can't Lose](#), Randy Alcorn (Tyndale House Publishers, 2003; ISBN 0842381066)

📖 [Money, Sex and Power: The Spiritual Disciplines of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience](#), Richard J. Foster (Hodder & Stoughton Religious Books, 1999; ISBN 0340756233), part 1 on money



THE “REAL” SIMPLE LIFE

Discover emotional and financial freedom through an often-neglected spiritual discipline.

By Matt Bell, for the study “Simple Living”

Not long ago, a good friend went through his closet and gave away literally half of his clothes. Rather than missing the items, he feels a new sense of freedom.

In a *Town & Country* magazine article, Jane Hammerslough describes a similar experience. A roof repair gone wrong forced her family to frantically pack what they could and move to a small, sparsely furnished rental house for six months. She writes of their surprise that they didn’t miss much of what they had left behind. Rather than feeling depressed or deprived due to their “hideous living room” and “mismatched plates,” they felt liberated. And when they returned home, she felt “overwhelmed by the utter excess of stuff.” A purging of things soon followed. She concluded that “when ‘enough’ is always just a little more than you already have, you don’t have a lot of room left for the truly great pleasures of life: family, friends, and the time to enjoy them.”

Of course, too much stuff can also leave too little room for God. With the time required to shop for, move, insure, use, store, clean, maintain, organize, and worry about our stuff, time in God’s Word, time to minister, time for church, and time to reach out to others can easily get edged out; hence, the call for simplicity.

While the concept of simplicity has been around for a long time, the growth of the self-storage and closet organizer businesses would seem to cast doubt on its popularity.

In *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster argues that “the majority of Christians have never seriously wrestled with the problem of simplicity, conveniently ignoring Jesus’ many words on the subject. The reason is simple: this Discipline directly challenges our vested interests in an affluent lifestyle.”

Foster makes an important distinction when he describes the Christian discipline of simplicity as “an inward reality that results in an outward lifestyle.” In other words, focus too quickly on the externals—the doing without—and it’s the good intention that is likely to be cast aside instead of the extra blender.

But simplicity is more than just uncluttered closets. “It is possible for a person to be developing an outward lifestyle of simplicity and to be filled with anxiety,” according to Foster.

He describes simplicity as “a life of joyful unconcern for possessions” and suggests that it “is the one thing that sufficiently reorients our lives so that possessions can be genuinely enjoyed without destroying us.”

It is that tendency of possessions to destroy or, at least, worry us that Solomon refers to when he says, “The abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep” (Ecclesiastes 5:12).

On the other hand, Foster believes there are three inner attitudes related to possessions that lead to peace. “If what we have we receive as a gift, and if what we have is to be cared for by God, and if what we have is available to others, then we will possess freedom from anxiety.”

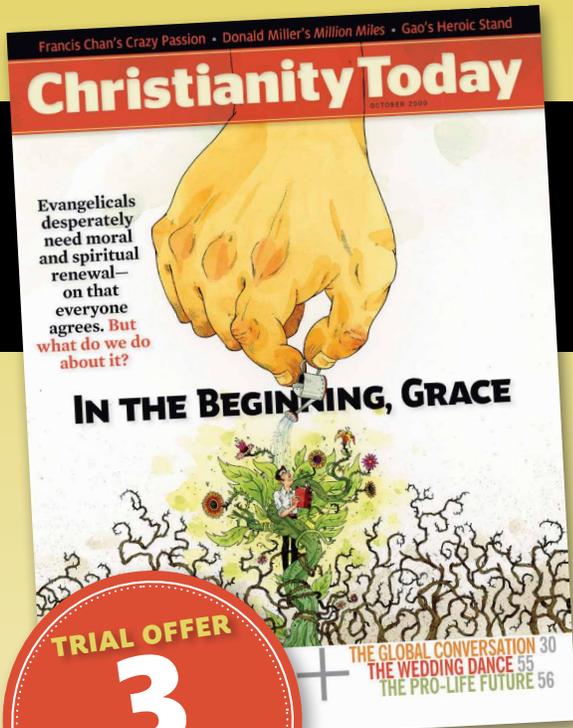
Once we have begun to cultivate the inner reality of simplicity, what might our outer reality look like? Foster offers 10 principles.

- Buy things for their usefulness rather than their status.
- Reject anything that is producing an addiction in you.
- Develop a habit of giving things away.
- Refuse to be propagandized by the custodians of modern gadgetry.
- Learn to enjoy things without owning them.
- Develop a deeper appreciation for the creation.
- Look with a healthy skepticism at all “buy now, pay later” schemes.
- Obey Jesus’ instructions about plain, honest speech.
- Reject anything that breeds the oppression of others.
- Shun anything that distracts you from seeking first the kingdom of God.

In our materialistic, marketing-saturated world, simplicity isn’t, well, so simple. But as Richard Foster points out, it begins on the inside with the attitudes of our hearts and minds. And those attitudes are cultivated through prayer and meditation on the truth of God’s Word.

—Matt Bell is founder and president of Financially Speaking, Inc., and writes and speaks on topics related to the biblical approach to money management.

“The ‘Real’ Simple Life,” by Matt Bell, ChristianityToday.com, 2005



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