

Introduction

There was once a very wealthy man, who had everything you could ever want. A fantastic mansion on his own private island with massive swimming pools, water slides, even his own roller coaster; a choice of helicopters to get there, a private jet, a huge warehouse full of snazzy cars. He had his own cruise ship, and there was even a room full of every kind of chocolate in the world, just for him. But one day God told him, "Tomorrow you're going to die. You can be with me in my kingdom, but you can't bring any of this with you." "What?!" said the billionaire, "but I've worked so hard to get all this stuff. It's worth a fortune! I can't just leave it." "Sorry," said God, "rules are rules. You can't bring a thing." But then, the man had a brilliant idea. "What if I just brought one suitcase? Just one." "Well alright then," said God. That night the billionaire sold everything he had and he turned it into gold bars and he placed them in a very big suitcase. Then he died. He entered God's kingdom, dragging his heavy suitcase. "Welcome!" said God, and then said, "I'm curious. Can I see what you put in your suitcase?" So the man opened up his suitcase and showed God the gold bars. And God laughed, "Why'd you bring pavement?"

In our world today, many people think you're cool if you have lots of things - expensive clothes, nice cars, a big 3D Plasma with 600 channels, iPads and PlayStations, a new house in a hip suburb, box seats at the footy, maybe a jet ski, and so on. It gets to the point sometimes when we even judge ourselves like that. Many women feel more valuable when they're wearing an expensive new dress; many men feel like they'd be worth more if they had a job with a six-figure salary; many kids feel like they're a loser because they don't have an iPod Touch. But it's not true at all.

One of the very first messages in the Bible is that we are all valuable simply because we are made in God's image. No matter who we are, what we have or what we can do. But mostly we don't live with this in mind. Instead we constantly compare ourselves to others, usually people who have more things than us. And then we compete, not just to keep up with others, but to make ourselves better than them, cooler, with newer and better stuff. "You've got an iPhone 5? Cute. Mine's a 5S." It's like we're in a real-life monopoly game, trying to win the most stuff. I don't know about you but whenever I've played Monopoly it's always ended in a fight. My wife and I have made a vow never to play monopoly together again. This kind of competing is terrible for friendships, especially in real life. And really, what's the point?

In Luke 12 Jesus tells a story very similar to the joke we started off with, about a wealthy man who spent his life building bigger and bigger barns for all his stuff... and then he died. "Why spend your life doing this?" Jesus points out. "You can't keep any of it anyway." Better to spend your life on more important things, things that really are valuable. Jesus lived totally differently from all this. He had no house, no transport, and seemingly no possessions apart from his clothes. If he had other things, he held them very loosely and could easily give them away. "Think about the flowers, the birds, the grass that grows," he told his followers. "They don't own anything, they don't worry about anything, they don't do anything but look pretty, and God takes great care of them." Well sure, you might say. My life would be so simple if all I had to do was find a worm each day. Everything would be much simpler if we had no house to maintain, no kids to feed, no homework to do, no business to run, no need to drive anywhere. We can't exactly sell everything and give it to the poor. Does Jesus really expect us to do that?

The answer from Jesus seems to be no, and also maybe. There is one occasion where Jesus tells a rich young man to do exactly that, and you might like to discuss the story as a group this month. But generally he doesn't require people to have nothing in order to follow him. Instead, Jesus set the example of living simply and holding your possessions loosely. He taught people to be extravagantly generous with what they have, whether they had a little or a lot. He led the way in giving to people who really need it - like the poor and the sick. He cheered when people gave so much it hurt. And he told people not to spend their lives accumulating stuff, but to chase after more valuable things - things that last forever.

Have a think this month about what these things might be. Following Jesus means living differently, more simply, holding our possessions loosely. It means being content when we don't have the latest, or greatest, or most expensive stuff. It means facing up to our greed and kicking it to the curb. It means deciding to live generously instead, even when it hurts. And the beautiful part is that when we do this, it frees us from all the competition, and lets us have a glimpse of how God sees us instead. After all, if God cares about the tiniest little sparrow, how much more does he care about us.

Challenges

GENEROSITY



hold your possessions loosely



ADULTS



MONK

- Read the parable of the rich farmer (Luke 12:13-21). Write down all the things that stop you from being generous. Ask God to help you change one of these this week.
- For one week this month when you're on your way to work, count all the advertisements you see (billboards, bus stops, internet etc.) that tell you **need** something to make your life better. When you get to work, take a moment to reflect on the 'good' that is already in your life. See if you can write down one good thing for each advertisement you saw.
- Ask God to give you an opportunity this month to lend something of yours to someone else. It might be a car, lawnmower, fishing rod, bike, book or even your house. Could you live with it if you didn't ever get it back?



CHEERLEADER

- Spend an afternoon with friends or family doing something that doesn't cost money - eat in, play a board game, watch an old movie, play some backyard cricket.
- Ask some of your big year crew about the charities they support and give something to that charity or attend one of the charity's functions with them.
- Ask God to show you ways to practise being generous in your everyday life – with friends, families, neighbours and strangers. Give yourself a 'generosity target' for the month. It might be that you aim to give away a certain amount of money over the course of the month, or to increase the number of times you practice generosity, or to spend 8 hours engaged in activities that are about others. Either way, focus on getting more pleasure out of being generous than buying things or getting bargains.



ACTIVIST

- Walk around your house and find something that you really like and give it away.
- Look at the current [GivIt list](http://www.givit.org.au/) (<http://www.givit.org.au/>) needs for your area and commit to giving or buying something to help someone else. If you can, offer to deliver it yourself so that you can meet the people who are involved.
- Listen to this story [The Generosity Experiment](http://acumen.org/idea/the-generosity-experiment/) (<http://acumen.org/idea/the-generosity-experiment/>) and try it out. Say 'Yes' this month whenever anyone asks you for money. It might be a letter in the mail, a phone call, a friend or a person on the street.