

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.

GENEROSITY



FAMILIES



MONK

- Have a clean out of everyone's stuff (including clothes, shoes, toys etc.). Give away all the things you don't need/use/wear/play with anymore. Then everyone in the family adds in one more thing to give away that they still really want.
- Record half an hour of commercial TV and watch it together, but instead of fast forwarding through the ads, watch all the ads and fast forward through the program. Write down how many ads there are and what the ads are for. Talk about what these ads are selling and the messages they are sending us - are they true? Then, write another list of all the good things you already have. See if your list of good things can equal the number of ads you saw.



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 God for an opportunity for each person in the family to lend something of theirs to someone else. Report back to the family what happened.
- Keep the junk mail for one week. As a family, go through all the catalogues and cut out all the things you **need** as well as all the things you **would like** to have. Take a large piece of paper and draw a picture of a see-saw on it. Stick the pictures of things you actually need on one side and the pictures of things you'd like to have on the other. Talk about what your see-saw looks like.



ACTIVIST

- Write a list of all the things your family owns. Now have a look at the pictures and stories of [other families around the world with all the things they own](http://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2010/08/10/129113632/picturingpossessions) (<http://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2010/08/10/129113632/picturingpossessions>) and talk about how your lives would be different if you had more or less 'things'.
- Each member of the family can decide on an amount of money they would like to give away this month. Put all the money into your Big Year jar. As you go through the month, everyone can be on the lookout for ways to be generous or opportunities to give. Talk about these together and decide on where you will give your money - you might choose one option or many options.