A Life of Giving Thanks

INTRODUCTION

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The four sessions of this Bible study help us get a glimpse of what it means to live a life of giving thanks—one permeated by a grateful heart that overflows to others. In the first study, “The Joy of Being Content,” we learn that we have more, but enjoy less. No matter how hard we work or how much money we accumulate, on the whole we are not happier. Why is that? Somewhere along the line we have entertained the notion that we are entitled to more, which has made us discontent. But contentment can be learned and overflow in thanks.

“Model Gratefulness” focuses in on the next generation. Most of us have heard that “values are caught, not taught.” We need to walk the truth before our children, not simply share it with them. Without learning thankfulness, children can grow up to look like the world around them. For those of you who aren’t parents, it’s still good to think about the example you are setting for the children in your church.

In “Simple Living” we learn we can 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). This study focuses on what it means to live simply, and how we can cultivate an attitude of contentment and gratitude.

The study “Come, Thou Fount” is based on the hymn of the same name. Written by a man who experienced a dramatic conversion from gang member to preacher, the hymn acknowledges God as the giver of every blessing. Who receives praise for the blessings we are given? How can we commemorate God’s actions on our behalf? How can we avoid wandering away from our Savior?
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 article or the participant’s guide for everyone in the group. If you would like your group to have more information, feel free to copy the leader’s guide for them as well as the article or instead of the participant’s guide.

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.
We have more, but enjoy less. No matter how hard we work or how much money we accumulate, on the whole we are not happier. Why is that? Somewhere along the line we have entertained the notion that we are entitled to more. Thoughts like this make us discontent.

Can contentment be learned? What prevents us from being thankful for what we have? Ultimately who is to blame when we are discontent? We will discuss these questions in this study.

Scripture: Exodus 16:11–18; 2 Samuel 11:2–4; Psalm 84:11, 145:15; John 21:17–22; 2 Corinthians 12:10; Philippians 4:11–13; 1 Timothy 6:8

Contentment is not a pie-in-the-sky, unattainable thing. God wouldn’t give us instructions to do something without giving us the ability to follow through. He encourages us many times in Scripture to be thankful, to be grateful, to be content. Could it be that the world is working against us attaining a healthy level of gratitude in our lives? Tim Kimmel says, “Keeping the average family unsatisfied is vital to our economic system. In order to lure me to a particular product, an advertiser must create a dissatisfaction for what I have—or a nagging desire for what I don’t need” (Little House on the Freeway, Multnomah Press, 1987). Although we live in this world, we are to follow a different set of rules. And the maker of those rules knows the temptations we face on a daily basis.

In Simplify Your Life, H. Norman Wright explains, “We have ad campaigns telling us how we need more stuff to fulfill our lives and make us ‘happy.’ We need campaigns to tell the ad campaigns we don’t believe what they’re saying and that we won’t buy into it. This means going against the voices in our culture.”

Discussion Starters:

[Q] The media send daily messages that perpetuate discontent. Why?

[Q] Name the messages we encounter in life that foster discontent.

[Q] How can we constructively fight these messages?

[Q] How can possessions affect our values? Are there excess things you can remove from your life that would help reveal your true values?

[Q] Everywhere we turn we see signs that encourage us to strive for more. Is it possible to have needs that are unmet, yet be content?

[Q] Describe someone you know who is a model of contentment. Has this person always been this way? What attitudes does this person have that helps him or her be content?
Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Contentment is a choice.

We are not the first who have struggled with contentment. We follow in the footsteps of our ancestors. Even Adam and Eve, when given everything in the garden with the exception of one tree, craved what they didn’t have.

Read Exodus 16:11–18.

Consider the Israelites and their desire for a change in their diet. It wasn’t enough that God fed them; they wanted to order off the menu. All through Scripture we see people who wanted more than they were given. God addressed that very issue when he gave his commandments. We are told to refrain from coveting, wanting what someone else has.

[Q] In what ways are you like the Israelites, who grumbled because they didn’t appreciate what God provided for them? When do you find yourself grumbling?

[Q] With which statement do you find yourself agreeing most?

1) Since God has given us everything, my ungratefulness is sin.
2) Contentment is attainable, but only with God’s help.
3) There’s nothing wrong with comparisons if I don’t become envious.
4) Having fewer things will make me godly.

Why did you choose the statement you did? Do you find yourself agreeing with more than one statement?

Read Philippians 4:11–13.

Paul chose to be content. That would be less challenging if we knew Paul sat with his choice of food, lodging, and ministry, but that wasn’t the case. Read 2 Corinthians 12:10. Paul explains that even in undesirable surroundings, he was content. How could he be content in adverse conditions? Why are people on the other side of the world, who have so much less, often happier than we are? The only way any of us can develop an attitude of gratitude and rest in a state of contentment is to realize everything we have is from God.

[Q] Paul mentions times when he was content in extremely undesirable circumstances. How is that possible? Give details of a time you found yourself at peace in adverse conditions.
Teaching Point Two: Comparisons ruin contentment.

Read 2 Samuel 11:2–4.

David coveted what was not his. Whenever we decide to sin, it starts in our minds. Pride tells us we deserve whatever it is we are coveting. Another word for coveting is lusting, and what we lust after covers a large gamut: food, sex, things, positions, even spiritual gifts or ministries.

Read John 21:17–22.

When Peter wanted to know if John (the disciple whom Jesus loved) would suffer too, Jesus rebuked Peter, basically telling him to concentrate on his own obedience and not to worry about John. It’s God’s choice, not ours, what he wants for us.

Contentment is difficult when we are looking around, making comparisons. There is no winning with comparisons. If we see someone who possesses more than we do, we are tempted to feel envious of that person. On the other hand, if we see someone who possesses less than we do, we are tempted to feel superior to the person.

[Q] What did David want that he didn’t have? What did it lead to? What was the final result of his lust?

[Q] In her article “Seeing Green,” Nancy Beach says that “envy occurs when you compare yourself with someone else, and in the comparison feel deprived or lacking.” Name some times in your life you felt lacking. How did you respond?

[Q] Beach further explains, “Envy devalues our self-worth and the uniqueness of God’s creation, gradually distancing us from him and others.” How does this occur? Share a time in your life when you felt distanced from God as a result of your envy or covetousness. What did you do to rectify the situation?

[Q] Beach writes, “One way to fight envy is to talk to the person you are envious of.” Mention a time you struggled with envy. What exactly were you envious of? How did you get victory over it?

Teaching Point Three: Greed is the opposite of contentment.

When John D. Rockefeller was asked how much money it would take to make him happy, he responded, “Just a little more.” The children’s story The Fisherman’s Wife portrays this lack of contentment. A fisherman caught a magic fish that granted him three wishes. When he shared his experience with his wife, she looked around at her meager surroundings and demanded he ask for a larger house. The husband complied, but shortly his wife demanded an even larger house. This story captures the dark monster in each of us—greed. We just want more.
Remember sitting across the table from your brother, sister, or friend eyeing the piece of cake before you? You were told you could have it if you shared. The well-known rule was: if one cuts the piece, the other gets to choose. Funny how the other piece always looked larger.

God has wired us for life with him, and when we are in our heavenly home, we will finally be satisfied. Here on earth, we also must realize he is the only one who will satisfy us.

**[Q]** What is tempting you to believe you will be happier once you possess it? Share a time you longed for something. How long did the joy of getting your prized possession or achievement last?

**[Q]** Complete one of the following sentences: *If only I had …* or, *If only I could be more like …* As you continue in your walk with God, do you see yourself as becoming more satisfied, or less? Explain your answer.

**[Q]** Kimmel (*Little House on the Freeway*) says, “An unsatisfied heart in a life with much blessing is sin.” What state is your heart in now? Share some of the blessings God has bestowed on you. Why is it so easy to overlook them?

**[Q]** Share a childhood memory of when you were ungrateful. What was the situation? What was the outcome?

**Teaching Point Four: Contentment comes only if we believe God has our best in mind.**

When our focus is on anything this world offers as a means of satisfaction, we will be disappointed. God chooses what he gives us. When we are dissatisfied, we are saying that what he has chosen for us is insufficient.

Read 1 Timothy 6:8. We are to be satisfied if we have the bare necessities. Paul, who earlier told us of his contentment with weaknesses, hardships, and persecutions, wrote the Book of Timothy. Like Paul, we too can learn to be content.

One of God’s names in Scripture is “Jehovah Jireh,” which means “the Lord will provide.” We struggle when what God gives us differs from what we wanted. Or perhaps we don’t agree with God’s timetable. We are tempted to listen to the advertisements around us, believe we deserve whatever it is we want, and pull out our plastic.

Read Psalm 145:15. When God gives us our desires, he decides the timing. We find that hard to accept at times, becoming anxious and sometimes taking things in our own hands. Waiting on God is paramount to being content. Resting in God, knowing he is all knowing, good, and more than capable of meeting our needs, provides the perfect environment for the seeds of
contentment to grow. Then, when weeds of anxiety and doubt try to sprout up, we can rest in God’s truth.

Read Psalm 84:11. There are times God chooses to withhold something because it would not be good for us. Here again, we need to know his character so we can trust him when we don’t understand.

[Q] Share something in your life you are waiting for. How long have you been waiting for it? How will it change your life? On a scale of 1–10, where waiting well is 10, where are you regarding this situation?

[Q] Share a time God withheld something you prayed for. Did you find yourself strengthened by the wait, angry by his decision, or are you still wondering about it?

[Q] Tell about a time you withheld something from someone. What were your reasons? What was the outcome?

[Q] What can you do to help you focus on God’s goodness the next time you are waiting? How will that help you in your spiritual walk?

[Q] Give an example of a time in your life when you were patient. What were you waiting for? Was it worth your wait?

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

In Get Serious, Tony Evans says, “One of the tragedies today is that we don’t have enough Christians who know how to give thanks for what they already have.” He goes on to say, “You may not have much, but if you have a compassionate Christ who can get to an all-powerful Father, you have everything you need” (Crossway Books, 1995).

God, the Creator of the universe, made each of us and put us here on earth. He promised to take care of us and meet every need we have. The All-Sufficient One listens as we pour out our requests, and he answers lovingly in his timing and in his way. When we agree, we thank God; when we disagree, we may get quiet. And yet, when we have another need, we know where to go.

The longer we get to know him, the more we will trust him. And the no’s in life will become easier to hear. Not that we will ever like the word, but we love the One who speaks it. Contentment is a result of a mature life. It isn’t a matter of getting what you want, but instead, wanting what you get. And the more we practice it, the easier it will become. Gratefulness, thankfulness, and contentment will emanate from us as we become like Jesus.
Name five things God has given you that you are thankful for. How have they blessed your life?

What tangible things can we do to promote a grateful attitude in our hearts? Share something that has helped you in this area.

What can't you get enough of? Describe what you think heaven will be like. Compare and contrast heaven with the Garden of Eden.

If you have children, how do you cultivate gratitude in their lives?

— Study prepared by Anne Peterson, poet, speaker, and ongoing student of God's word.

Recommended Resources

- ChristianBibleStudies.com
  - When God Says No
  - It’s All About Joy
  - Does God Always Bless Believers?
  - Too Much Stuff
  - Prosperity and Faith
  - A Biblical Perspective on Money

- Cultivating Contentment, Jill Briscoe (Cook Communications, 2003; ISBN 0781439523)


- The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment, J. Burrohs (Banner of Truth, 1998; ISBN 0851510914)

Seeing Green

Don’t let envy color your view of life.

By Nancy Beach, for the study “The Joy of Being Content”

According to the dictionary, *envy* is defined as: “desire for something possessed by another.” Envy occurs when you compare yourself with someone else, and in the comparison, feel deprived or lacking.

Unfortunately, it’s an all-too-human tendency to look over our shoulder to see who gets the office with the window, who has a new sweater on, who has the most gifted children, or who gets to go to the Caribbean while we freeze in Chicago. Too many of us live in a perpetual state of discontent, whimperingly wondering, *Why you and not me?*

While envy is a normal—and unavoidable—emotion, that doesn’t mean God treats it casually. The reality is, he’s so set against it that he prohibited it: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor” (Exodus 20:17).

Most of us don’t spend our energy envying other people’s oxen, but we *do* envy their hair, car, income, personality, achievements, lifestyle—even spiritual gifts.

Although the sin of envy doesn’t get as much press as adultery, murder, or stealing, its effects can be disastrous. Envy devalues our self-worth and the uniqueness of God’s creation, gradually distancing us from him and others.

If you’ve been seeing green lately, here are some practical suggestions on how to change the way you look at things.

**Call a spade a spade.** Admit to your feelings, but remember, envy has many disguises—constructive criticism, self-pity, even fake praise.

How do you know if what you’re really feeling is envy? Ask yourself:

- Do you get upset when acquaintances advance professionally or socially?
- Do you belittle the accomplishments, talents, or appearance of others?
- Do you feel tempted to sabotage a person to whom you feel inferior?
- Do you feel secretly pleased when a friend, even a loved one, suffers a setback?

Examine yourself carefully. If what’s really going on is envy, say it out loud: “I’m feeling envious.” Once you own up to envy, you can receive God’s forgiveness for it and the strength to change.

**Stop hiding, start talking.** If possible, talk to the person you envy. Bring your secret out into the light, and see if you can work together to dispel it. Chances are, you’ll even discover that person envies something about you!

Do you know what else you’ll learn when you get up close to the people you envy? Often you’ll discover their lives aren’t as wonderful as they appear. You’ll find they struggle with things about which you had no idea.
Get off the comparison track. I run laps at my local Y.M.C.A., and its track has three lanes: the inside for walkers, the outside for speed demons, and the middle for the rest of us. Sometimes I notice that when a fast person comes along, I become competitive. *I'm not going to let her beat me,* I think, so I begin running faster and faster. The trouble is, I run too fast for my own pace, and by the end of my run, I'm completely out of steam.

I'm learning I don't have to compare myself with the really fast runners—or the slower ones, either. I just need to run my race. If you're a Christ follower as I am, we're running a race to build God's kingdom in our hearts and in the world. But runners who look over their shoulders take the risk of stumbling or falling before they make it to the finish line.

Tap into the positive. The destructive side of envy is self-hatred, resentment, and covetousness. But if you can convert your envy into something positive, such as admiration, you can become motivated to emulate instead of envy someone else.

For example, my college roommate, Laura, inspired me to begin exercising. Laura was a runner, and at first I envied her consistency. But when I transferred my negative feelings into emulation, I decided to follow Laura's example.

Reevaluate what you want in life. If what you envy is attainable, such as a firmer, fitter body, start working out! But if what you want is unattainable—all the voice lessons in the world won't make me a singer—learn to accept your limitations. Keep in mind you don't have to be good at everything.

Savor your uniqueness. The truth is, our Creator longs for us to be content with how he made us and with what he chooses to give us.

When I envy others, I waste precious energy focusing on what I can't do instead of celebrating what I can do, such as lead and encourage others in my church.

It's impossible to have a grateful attitude when you're envious; you're too busy feeling deprived. But God designed us each as “one of a kind”—and no other human being being exactly like you and I will ever walk the face of this earth again.

Crank up the celebration. Have you ever noticed how it's easier to mourn with those who mourn than rejoice with those who rejoice? That's because envy is divisive, spoiling our ability to enjoy others. Single people envy marrieds; married envy singles. Those who don't have children envy those who do. Sometimes I'm tempted to envy the freedom and solitude of my friends who don't have young children—until I remember how at peace I am with my choice to have a family.

Remember that a friend's victories are your victories. So when he receives a promotion or buys a new car, learn to say, “I'm so happy for you” without gritting your teeth. Don’t let the stab of envy rob you of the joy of shared celebration.

Discover the crux of true contentment. In Psalm 73, the psalmist laments how much the godless people around him had. He was disillusioned until he met God and realized that what he had was far more important. Verses 23–28 describe a heart that wrestled with envy yet ultimately arrived at peace and contentment: “Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into your glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”
Our culture drives us to seek significance in all the wrong places, so for most of us, it’s a lifelong battle to keep returning to the simplicity of desiring only God. But God longs for you and me to have hearts at peace. He knows how deadly envy is, and he asks us to get rid of it for our sake, the sake of our relationship to him, and the sake of our relationships with others.

Don’t let envy color your world. If you’ve been seeing green, admit it to God. He’ll help you find contentment.

—Nancy Beach is the programming director and a teaching pastor at Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois. She and her family live in the Chicago area.

“Seeing Green,” by Nancy Beach, Today’s Christian Woman magazine, September/October 1999, page 82
Model Gratefulness

How to avoid having entitled children

Within moments of turning on the TV, commercials blare what society values. Newspaper and magazine titles reflect a longing for more. Materialism permeates our everyday life. Success is idolized. It’s what you own, what you do, and who you know that defines you. How can we live godly lives in such an ungodly world? And more importantly, how can we raise godly children?

Most of us have heard that “values are caught, not taught.” We need to walk the truth before our children, not simply share it with them. As parents, we want to do all we can to shape these impressionable lives God has given us. Without knowing God’s truth, children can grow up to look like the world around them.

Part 1 Identify the Issue

Note to leader: Provide for each person the participant’s guide included at the end of this study.

No parent sets out to raise an ungrateful, materialistic child who is totally wrapped up with things. Nor does a parent hope to have a child who is always striving for elusive success. Modeling truth is more effective than simply sharing it. Jesus led by example, and we are instructed to follow suit. Someone once said, “God created us to love people and use things, but sadly we live in a world where others use people and love things.” To raise a thankful child, we need to be intentional; it won’t just happen.

Because we are bombarded with the world’s beliefs on a daily basis, we need to make an extra effort to balance them with God’s truth. Values disintegrate every day. The further an individual moves away from God’s principles concerning material possessions, the more he or she will adopt society’s values concerning success. Satan is subtle as he conforms people to the world. Little by little a person becomes desensitized. In order to teach God’s perspective on money, we must know what it is.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] What were some of the values your parents had concerning material possessions? Do you still hold them?

[Q] Share such a value that your parents didn’t teach you. Where did you learn it?

[Q] Is there anything in popular culture (television, bestselling books, etc.) that exemplifies Christlike attitudes toward material goods?

[Q] What are some of the lies about material things that children (and their parents) are exposed to?

[Q] In what ways do you struggle with materialism?

[Q] In what ways do your children struggle with materialism?

[Q] What would make you feel successful in life?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Only God’s truth can refute Satan’s lies.

Without knowing what God says about worldly goods, a parent will certainly get sucked into society’s lies. If from the beginning you need the most expensive baby equipment and designer
clothes for your children, they will start life with the message that they are entitled to the best the world has to offer. What makes this even subtler is that the world praises parents for being this way. Many parents are glad to sacrifice things for themselves to give the best to their children. But that can often communicate to a child that he or she is so important that everyone should sacrifice for them. If that is their thinking, what kind of adults will they grow into? We must learn to lavish love and attention rather than things on our children. We also must model a non-materialistic attitude in our own choices. Read 2 Timothy 1:13–14.

Satan is the father of lies. His deception prevents people from growing in their relationship with God. One of his tactics is using half-truths, giving just a morsel of truth with the lie in order to make it more palatable. Knowing God’s Word is our only chance for identifying and refuting his lies. No Christian is exempt from Satan’s attempts. Even Jesus withstood Satan’s temptations by using Scripture.

One of Satan’s lies is: *This is the only life we have.* If he can get people to accept this, their lives will reflect it. Advertisers willingly supports this lie with phrases like “you deserve it” and “you’re worth it.” We respond with pride, “Yes, I do deserve it; I am worth it.”

But this world is not our home; it is only temporary. God is preparing a place for us with him. Remembering this truth gives us the right perspective. Without this knowledge, we easily fall prey to the many lies we hear.

**[Q]** Share an example from the Bible of when Satan deceived someone. What were the circumstances? Why did the person accept this deception as truth?

**[Q]** Share a time you believed one of Satan’s lies. How long did it take you to realize you were being deceived? How did you break free from that deception?

**[Q]** Give an example from Scripture of someone who lived as if this world was his or her only home.

**[Q]** What does your standard of living communicate to your child about what you value?

**[Q]** What kind of balance should we have between wanting to be good providers for our children and making them feel entitled?

**Optional Activity:**

*Imagine that you have been assigned to write a handbook for Satan’s demons entitled “Lies we need to perpetuate.” On a whiteboard or poster board, come up with at least six lies that Satan tells believers to discourage them in their relationship with the Lord (an example could be: God doesn’t want us to enjoy life). After you have written down the lies, share verses that refute them (such as John 10:10).*
Teaching Point Two: Gratitude has to be taught.

Children who grow up receiving everything they want become ungrateful people. Concerning material possessions, Henry Cloud and John Townsend say, “Sometimes children learn that goals and desire can be a good thing, but you still do not give them what they want. They have to earn it. Parents who merely give children whatever they want and do not teach them how to work for things they desire are reinforcing entitlement in a major way.”

There is a sense of entitlement that permeates our society. Even before our children can understand the world is loaded with things to enjoy, young parents unwittingly school them in this thinking by their own choices. Then, when a child is old enough to sit in front of a TV, he or she is shown exactly what is needed to be happy according to the world. A child who gets everything she wants develops the attitude that she deserves it.

Teaching children they cannot immediately have what they want helps them become patient instead of reinforcing their desire for immediate gratification. Children need to learn the value of waiting for things, working for things, and trusting God, who is the giver of everything good. Read Psalm 84:11–12.

When God chooses to withhold something from us, it is for our ultimate good. A spoiled child will struggle in life because he has not learned how to hear no. Some parents believe they are showing love to their children by giving them everything they ask for, because that is the way their parents showed them love. They are entitled adults who are creating entitled children. Still other parents overindulge their children because of an unmet need they had when they were youngsters, thinking: My child will never suffer like I did. They are not entitled adults, but wish that they were.

A sense of entitlement can be seen in other areas as well. Whenever pride rears its ugly head, underneath lies the attitude that we are somehow above others. This attitude is feeling entitled and is contrary to what Scripture teaches us. Read Philippians 2:3–8.

If anyone was entitled to anything, wouldn’t it have been Jesus? Yet, he gave up that right. For us to think that we are entitled is actually exalting ourselves above him.

A sense of entitlement also leads us to greed. A person cannot be both greedy and thankful at the same time. One way to encourage children to be thankful is to have them make a list of God’s provisions. Thanking God on a regular basis is contagious. While we ponder what God has done for us, we are less likely to dwell on what we lack. Read Matthew 14:19–21.

1 Boundaries with Kids, Zondervan, 2001
When Jesus fed the five thousand, he gave thanks. He focused on what he had before him. He didn't ask why it wasn't more.

[Q] Has there ever been a time you had to trust God for a need? If so, what did that do for your faith?

[Q] If you have never had to trust God with a need, how might that have hindered your faith?

[Q] Recall a time that getting a material possession you wanted failed to satisfy you. What did that teach you?

[Q] What is the first thing you remember being thankful for as a child? What about it made you feel thankful?

[Q] When do you find it most difficult to be grateful? Share a time when you struggled with gratitude. What turned the situation around for you?

[Q] How does comparing ourselves to others affect our ability to be content? Are comparisons ever helpful in this area? Why or why not?

Optional Activity:

Take a few moments to write down the things you are most thankful for at this point in your life. How many of those things are material? And if they are material, why are you so thankful for them?

Teaching Point Three: The things we own do not define us.

We live in a world of plenty. The temptation to want more is exacerbated by the misbelief that who we are is determined by what we have.

Many of us remember a bumper sticker that read, “He who dies with the most toys wins.” The main purpose of advertising is to convince consumers they need a certain product. If we don't own the newest technology, drive the best vehicle, or wear the latest fashions, we feel out of the loop. No longer are we keeping up with the Joneses next door; instead we are in competition with everyone. Society tells us that what we own defines who we are. Yet, the Bible says the opposite. Read Luke 9:57–58; Matthew 6:19–24; and 1 Timothy 6:6–10.

The question boils down to this: Who do we want our children following, the one the world esteems or the carpenter's son?

[Q] What are some practical ways we can help our children have the right perspective about things?
[Q] Share a time one of your belongings seemed to own you. What did you do to rectify the situation?

[Q] What are some telltale signs that our things are too important to us?

[Q] Is it possible for someone with little money to struggle with loving things too much? Explain your answer.

[Q] If our possessions do not define us, what does?

**Teaching Point Four: Success is relative.**

The definition for success changes, depending on who’s defining it. The world’s definition involves what a person has or what he does. Read James 2:2–7 and think about who we would identify as the successful one.

If Jesus walked the earth in this century, by the world’s standards he would be considered a loser. God is not impressed with the world’s measuring stick. Society tells us, “be all you can be,” “reach for the stars,” and “you’re number one.” Jesus said, “He who would be first should be last,” “we need to lose our life to gain it,” and “without him we can do nothing.” No wonder there is confusion regarding the issue of success. People attempting to straddle both worlds soon discover it doesn’t work.

When Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days, Satan tried to tempt him by offering him all the kingdoms of the world if he would bow down and worship him. But Jesus turned him down. He lived before an audience of One.

Our identity doesn’t come from what we have; it comes from *whose* we are. Read 2 Corinthians 10:17–18.

The person who has Christ doesn’t need society’s approval; she has the approval of the creator of the universe.

[Q] Who do you see as a successful person? What makes him or her a success?

[Q] If you have always defined your own success in terms of possessions, what practical steps can you take to begin to redefine your success?

[Q] How might you begin to live before “an audience of One”?
It is a challenge to raise godly children in an ungodly world. Everyday our children receive messages that contradict God's Word. It's our job as parents to help our children learn discernment. Without God's values instilled in them, they will quickly conform to the world. The most effective way to teach our children about godliness is to model it. Teaching them Scripture will enable them to recognize when they are being deceived. If our children become grounded in the truth, they will have a chance at refuting wrong thinking and poor values. When our children learn contentment and experience God meeting their deepest needs, they will be less likely to search for other things to fill their longings.

We can encourage our children to develop an attitude of gratitude for what they have received by being grateful ourselves. Reminding them that believers are fully accepted and totally pleasing to God can diminish their attempts to find acceptance and approval elsewhere. By teaching our children God's values, helping them recognize and refute the world's lies, helping them develop the right perspective about things and teaching them what success is according to God, we can develop disciples who will one day follow Jesus. Isn't that what we really want?

**Action Points:**

- Evaluate whether your children have a spirit of entitlement or an attitude of gratitude. Buy a spiral notebook for each of your children and one for yourself. Title it “My Thankful Journal.” Each day encourage them to make an entry, date it, and list something they are thankful for. When one of your children struggles with discontent, encourage them to write in their journal. Small children can participate also, making drawings if they are too young to write. Then enjoy watching your little disciples grow into contented children.

- The next time you are watching commercials, ask yourself:
  1) What need or desire will this product meet?
  2) What are the consequences if I don’t purchase this product?
  3) Will this product help or hinder me in my walk with God?
  4) Will buying this product lead me to want more?

- Sit down with your children for the same exercise. As commercials that advertise products directed to them appear, ask the following questions:
  1) Would you like to have this product (toy, breakfast cereal, etc.)? If so, why?
  2) What if you were never able to buy this product? Would you always be unhappy?
3) Will this product help you to love God more? Why or why not?

4) Will you be happy once we buy this product, or will you then want something else?

— Study by Anne Peterson, a poet, freelance author, and speaker

Recommended Resources

ChristianBibleStudies.com

- A Biblical Perspective on Money
- Faithful Finances
- Money & the Christian
- Millions – a movie discussion guide
- Biblical Parenting 101
- Little Blessings
- Single Parenting
- Developing the Spiritual Life of Children


- Loving Your Child Too Much: Raise Your Kids Without Overindulging, Overprotecting or Overcontrolling, Dr. Tim Clinton, Dr. Gary Sibcy (Thomas Nelson, 2006; ISBN 1591450454)

- Parenting Is Heart Work, Scott Turansky, Joanne Miller (David C. Cook, 2006; ISBN 0781441528)

- Raising Great Kids, Dr. Henry Cloud, Dr. John Townsend (Zondervan, 1999; ISBN 0310235499)

Revolutionary Parenting, George Barna (Tyndale House, 2007; ISBN 1414307608)

The Values Driven Family, Marc Carrier, Cynthia Carrier (Tate Publishing, 2006; ISBN 1598865277)
How to avoid having entitled children

Within moments of turning on the TV, commercials blare what society values. Newspaper and magazine titles reflect a longing for more. Materialism permeates our everyday life. Success is idolized. It’s what you own, what you do, and who you know that defines you. How can we live godly lives in such an ungodly world? And more importantly, how can we raise godly children?

Most of us have heard that “values are caught, not taught.” We need to walk the truth before our children, not simply share it with them. As parents, we want to do all we can to shape these impressionable lives God has given us. Without knowing God's truth, children can grow up to look like the world around them.

Part 1 Identify the Issue

No parent sets out to raise an ungrateful, materialistic child who is totally wrapped up with things. Nor does a parent hope to have a child who is always striving for elusive success. Modeling truth is more effective than simply sharing it. Jesus led by example, and we are instructed to follow suit. Someone once said, “God created us to love people and use things, but sadly we live in a world where others use people and love things.” To raise a thankful child, we need to be intentional; it won’t just happen.

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Only God’s truth can refute Satan’s lies.

Teaching Point Two: Gratitude has to be taught.

Teaching Point Three: The things we own do not define us.

Teaching Point Four: Success is relative.

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

• Evaluate whether your children have a spirit of entitlement or an attitude of gratitude. Buy a spiral notebook for each of your children and one for yourself. Title it “My Thankful Journal.” Each day encourage them to make an entry, date it, and list something they are thankful for. When one of your children struggles with discontent, encourage them to write in their journal. Small children can participate also, making drawings if they are too young to write. Then enjoy watching your little disciples grow into contented children.

• The next time you are watching commercials, ask yourself:
  1) What need or desire will this product meet?
  2) What are the consequences if I don’t purchase this product?
  3) Will this product help or hinder me in my walk with God?
  4) Will buying this product lead me to want more?
• Sit down with your children for the same exercise. As commercials that advertise products directed to them appear, ask the following questions:

1) Would you like to have this product (toy, breakfast cereal, etc.)? If so, why?

2) What if you were never able to buy this product? Would you always be unhappy?

3) Will this product help you to love God more? Why or why not?

4) Will you be happy once we buy this product, or will you then want something else?

— Study by Anne Peterson, a poet, freelance author, and speaker

Recommended Resources

- ChristianBibleStudies.com
  - A Biblical Perspective on Money
  - Faithful Finances
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  - Millions – a movie discussion guide
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The Values Driven Family, Marc Carrier, Cynthia Carrier (Tate Publishing, 2006; ISBN 1598865277)
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 will focus 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 Issue

**Note to leader:** Prior to the class, provide for each person 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.


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? In one survey, people came to the conclusion they’d feel more secure with just $10,000 more. Do you really think so? How long would the security that comes with another $10,000 last for you?
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? Think about this question the next time you go to the mall and try to discern why you are really going.

Compare Revelation 3:17–20 (especially the first and last verses of this passage) to Ecclesiastes 5:17ff.). Why does wealth make us become self-sufficient? 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.”

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 well-being 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] Do 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?

[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? Do you give what's leftover after taking care of your own needs, or do you give God your first-fruit offerings?

[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.


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.
A Life of Giving Thanks
Simple Living
Leader’s Guide

[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? 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?

Leader’s Note: Consider that Americans are the wealthiest people on earth, yet Christians here often give much less of their income to God’s work than Christians in third-world countries.

[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?
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.

Some people regularly go through their closets or other storage areas to discern what they no longer need, giving things away to Goodwill or the Salvation Army or some other social service agency. Other people find it difficult to get rid of things—“hoarders” they are called. What would you consider yourself? What things do you have in your possession that you don’t really need, that someone else could benefit from? Consider pledging to yourself or your group that you will give these things away.

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?

To wrap up, 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?

Recommended Resources

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


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


A Life of Giving Thanks
The “Real” Simple Life
Article

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 recent 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.
1. Buy things for their usefulness rather than their status.
2. Reject anything that is producing an addiction in you.
3. Develop a habit of giving things away.
4. Refuse to be propagandized by the custodians of modern gadgetry.
5. Learn to enjoy things without owning them.
6. Develop a deeper appreciation for the creation.
7. Look with a healthy skepticism at all “buy now, pay later” schemes.
8. Obey Jesus’ instructions about plain, honest speech.
9. Reject anything that breeds the oppression of others.
10. 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
“Come, Thou Fount” was written by a man who experienced a dramatic conversion from gang member to preacher. The hymn acknowledges God as the giver of every blessing. It praises the God who seeks us out when we are straying and asks him to unite our hearts with his so that we never wander away again.

Who receives praise for the blessings we are given? How can we commemorate God’s actions on our behalf? How can we avoid wandering away from our Savior?

Scripture: Deuteronomy 8:6–20; 1 Samuel 7:2–13; Ephesians 1:3–10
A Life of Giving Thanks
“Come, Thou Fount”
Leader’s Guide

Part 1 Identify the Issue

Robert Robinson strained his neck to get a glimpse of the great preacher, George Whitefield. The 17-year-old had come not to hear God’s Word but to scoff at the Methodists. “Those poor saps,” he thought, “believing Christ could change lives!” Yet as he stood there, he could not deny the power of Whitefield’s preaching and the pull at his heart. That very day, Robinson was won over by the love of Christ.

On September 27, 1735, Robert Robinson was born in Swaffham, Norfolk, England. The boy lost his father when he was only eight, and at age fourteen his mother sent him to London to learn the barbering trade. In London he began to hang out with a notorious gang of hoodlums. It was this gang that went to harass George Whitefield, and Robinson’s life totally changed.

Several years after his conversion, Robinson felt called to preach. He first entered the ministry in the Methodist church, but later moved to Cambridge and became a Baptist pastor. He was known as both a theologian and a hymn writer.

Robinson’s story does not have a happy ending, however. His later years were unstable, as he lapsed into sin and false doctrine. It is said that one day Robinson was riding in a stagecoach when he noticed a woman absorbed in a hymnbook. She started humming “Come, Thou Fount” and turned to Robinson, asking his opinion of the hymn. He broke down in tears and sobbed, “Madam, I am the poor unhappy man who wrote that hymn many years ago, and I would give a thousand worlds, if I had them, to enjoy the feelings I had then.”

Come, Thou Fount

Come, Thou Fount of every blessing / Tune my heart to sing Thy grace /
Streams of mercy, never ceasing / Call for songs of loudest praise /
Teach me some melodious sonnet / Sung by flaming tongues above /
Praise the mount—I’m fixed upon it / Mount of Thy redeeming love.

Here I raise mine Ebenezer / Hither by Thy help I’m come /
And I hope by Thy good pleasure / Safely to arrive at home /
Jesus sought me when a stranger / Wand’ring from the fold of God /
He to rescue me from danger / Interposed His precious blood.

O to grace how great a debtor / Daily I’m constrained to be! /
Let Thy goodness like a fetter / Bind my wand’ring heart to Thee /
Prone to wander—Lord, I feel it / Prone to leave the God I love /
Here’s my heart—O take and seal it / Seal it for Thy courts above.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] When good things happen in your life, who gets the credit? Give an example.

[Q] Why is it important to remember the times when God has been our source of help, even if we feel abandoned at the moment?

[Q] There are multiple reasons someone wanders from the faith. What are some of causes, in your opinion?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: God, the source of all our blessings, is worthy of praise.

“Come, Thou Fount of every blessing / Tune my heart to sing Thy grace / Streams of mercy, never ceasing / Call for songs of loudest praise”

“How priceless is your unfailing love! Both high and low among men find refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light” (Psalm 36:7–9).

God is the fountain of life; the giver of every blessing. He gives “food at the proper time” (Ps. 145:15). He provides clothes and shelter, family and friends. Meaningful work and enjoyable leisure are among God’s gifts. He grants peace, joy, and love through knowing him. “From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another” (John 1:16).

Yet we often take God’s blessings for granted. We may even take credit for earning those blessings. Our hard work put food on the table. Our ingenuity secured the pay raise. Our bargain hunting skills netted that stylish new suit. Sometimes we forget that our occupational abilities and our creative capacities are also gifts from God. He is the Fount of every blessing. Let us praise our Father as the giver of all good things.

Not only do we frequently attribute God’s blessings to our own capabilities, we often spend more time searching for earthly rewards than seeking spiritual blessings. Bruce Wilkinson tells about true blessings in *The Prayer of Jabez*: “To bless in the biblical sense means to ask for or to impart supernatural favor. When we ask for God’s blessing, we’re not asking for more of what we could get ourselves. We’re crying out for the wonderful, unlimited goodness that only God has the power to know about or give to us.”

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God’s unlimited goodness longs to bestow gifts that will never be devalued by inflation. Riches that will never need paint or polish. Blessings that will never go out of style. Seek out everlasting blessings from our bighearted God. He promises to provide for all our physical needs as we search for the treasures of his kingdom.

Paul wrote a prayer of praise for spiritual blessings. Read Ephesians 1:3–10.

[Q] Recording your answers on a whiteboard or poster board, list all of the spiritual blessings named in this passage.

[Q] Which blessing on the list do you most appreciate, and why?

[Q] Which blessing do you often take for granted? How can you change that attitude?

[Q] Think of your prayer time in the past week. Evaluate how much time was spent asking for blessings versus thanking God for gifts already received. Do you need to change that balance?

• What about time spent seeking spiritual blessings instead of physical or earthly blessings? Do you need to make a change in your focus?

Teaching Point Two: It is important to remember times in our lives when God has been our source of help.

“Raise mine Ebenezer!” What does that mean? This unusual expression comes from 1 Samuel 7, where the Lord aided Israel in defeating their long-time enemies, the Philistines. After the victory, the prophet Samuel erected a stone pillar to commemorate God’s victory. He named it Ebenezer, which means “stone of help,” and said, “Thus far has the Lord helped us” (1 Sam. 7:12).

The Israelites often erected monuments and altars to celebrate God’s help. Abram built an altar after arriving in Canaan, when the Lord appeared to him and promised the land to his descendants (Gen. 12:7). Jacob recognized God’s presence when he was on the run from Esau and the Lord spoke to him in a dream. Jacob took the stone he had used for a pillow, set it upright like a pillar, poured oil over it and named it Bethel, which means “house of God” (Gen. 28:18). When the people of Israel were returning to the Promised Land under Joshua’s leadership, they had to cross the Jordan River, which was at flood stage. God told them to proceed, and as the priests carrying the ark of the covenant set foot in the river, the waters stopped flowing and stood in a heap. While the priests stood on dry ground in the middle of the river, the whole nation of Israel hiked to the other side of the Jordan. Joshua instructed 12 men, one from each tribe, to go to the middle of the river bed, pick up one stone each, and pile them up as a monument so that when their children asked, “What do these stones mean?” the people could tell them of the Lord’s miraculous intervention on their behalf (Josh. 4:4–7).
King David regularly recalled God's help in the past when he encountered difficulties. Once when he was in distress and it seemed his prayers were not reaching heaven, he encouraged himself to “remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago” (Ps. 77:11). And when an enemy was pursuing him, he affirmed his faith in God, stating, “I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done” (Ps. 143:5b).

Times may be tough and our faith may appear to be shrinking, but our trust in our faithful God can be supported by looking back on how he has helped us in the past. We may not erect a stone pillar in the backyard, but as we think of how God provided financial help when money was tight or how he healed a loved one, we are strengthened. As we recall how God has come through in the past, we can be assured he will assist us in the future.

Read 1 Samuel 7:2-13. As you read, note what Samuel asked the Israelites to do and how they prepared for battle.

Before the events of this passage, the Philistines had captured the ark of the Lord. When they began experiencing disease and death, the Philistines sent the ark back to Israelite territory via oxcart. When the ark returned, the people didn't take it to its proper place, the tabernacle, but stored it like an unwanted box in someone's house. Now they were ready to make things right.

**[Q]** Why do you think Samuel erected the Ebenezer stone?

**[Q]** What purpose do you think it held for those who saw it afterward?

**[Q]** What are some ways we can erect an Ebenezer stone today? In other words, what can we do to commemorate and remember times when God has helped us?

**[Q]** Give an example of when remembering what God did in the past helped you trust him with the future.

**[Q]** The Israelites’ battle preparations were a bit unorthodox. Review what they did before they fought the Philistines, and discuss how we might apply their “basic training” to the struggles in our lives.

**Optional Activity:**

*Before the session, obtain permanent markers and rocks that are large enough to write on. Have each participant recall times in their lives when God has been their help, and instruct them to write on their “Ebenezer” stone key words to aid them in recalling God’s miraculous intervention. (If stones are difficult to get, make posters on colorful paper instead, using pictures and phrases cut from magazines.)*
Teaching Point Three: We need to guard against wandering from the Lord.

“Prone to wander—Lord, I feel it / Prone to leave the God I love /
Here's my heart—O take and seal it / Seal it for Thy courts above.”

Robert Robinson knew his heart was capable of wandering. The third verse of “Come, Thou Fount” is almost prophetic of his later life. Drifting from true doctrine, Robinson fell into the sins of his past.

The nation of Israel was also prone to straying from the Lord. Before Israel entered the Promised Land, God pledged that he would bless them if they walked in his ways, but that they would be destroyed if they turned away from him and worshiped other gods. The Old Testament is filled with their stories of victory in times of faithfulness and accounts of loss in times when they deserted the one true God.

Judges 2 summarizes the cycle of obedience and blessing, disobedience and defeat that the nation experienced during the period they were ruled by judges. During Joshua’s lifetime, the people faithfully served the Lord. The next generation, however, began to serve Baals and abandoned the true God. The Lord then allowed raiders to plunder and overtake them. They cried out to Yahweh, and he raised up a godly judge to lead them to victory and back to their Savior. But when the judge died, the people turned once again to the false gods of the nations around them and the cycle was repeated.

What was one difference between the generation that followed the Lord and the generations that turned to idols? Joshua’s generation “had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel” (Judges 2:7), while the next generation “knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel” (Judges 2:10). The straying people did not remember God’s protection and provision, and in fact did not even know the Lord!

If we are to stay close to our Redeemer, we must keep our relationship with him vital through worship, prayer, and study of his Word. We must remember when his strength has empowered us in tough times, when his presence has comforted us, and when his protection has kept us safe. Read Deuteronomy 8:6–20.

These verses are part of Moses’ instructions to the people of Israel before they entered the Promised Land. Moses was trying to keep the nation loyal to the Lord.

[Q] When are we in danger of forgetting the Lord (vv. 10–11)? Why is that?
[Q] What steps should we take to remember the Lord our God (vv. 10–11)?
[Q] What attitude may lead us away from God (v. 14)? How can we guard against that attitude?
[Q] What is one purpose of “desert experiences” in our lives (vv. 15–18)?

[Q] Reread this passage and summarize what we can do to avoid wandering away from God.

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

God is the Fount of every blessing in our lives. Nothing we do can earn these blessings; he gives them freely. His generosity is the source of our wealth, peace, and happiness.

“God’s blessing makes life rich; nothing we do can improve on God” (Prov. 10:22, The Message).

[Q] Talk about one of God’s blessings that makes you feel rich.

The hymn “Come, Thou Fount” requests that God would “Tune my heart to sing Thy grace.” Let’s ask God to adjust the pitch of our hearts to the melody of worship and thanksgiving instead of unresponsiveness and ingratitude. May our souls vibrate in praise of the giver of all good things. May our minds be tuned to remember God’s faithfulness and help in the past. When we are struggling to hold on to our faith, let’s recall the times the Lord has provided and protected. Raise an Ebenezer stone by passing on the stories of God’s miraculous assistance to encourage your family and friends.

And may our hearts be set on God so that we never get “out of tune.” Let the melodies of our hearts sing of our devotion to our Savior. May our souls continually be pitched to praise the “Fount of every blessing.”

Action Points:

• Compose a two-verse song or free verse thanking God for his blessings. Praise him for physical and earthly gifts in the first verse, and express gratitude for spiritual blessings in the second.

• Think about the instructions Moses gave the Israelites in Deuteronomy 8 to avoid forgetting the Lord. Choose one command to put into practice. For instance: Moses taught the people to observe God’s commands. One application would be to memorize the Ten Commandments or post them in a prominent place in your home.

• Sing “Come, Thou Fount” in appreciation of God’s countless blessings.

— Sharla Fritz is a pastor’s wife and Christian speaker, and a piano teacher and church musician with bachelor’s and master’s degrees in music.
Recommended Resources

- ChristianBibleStudies.com
  - Music


“Come, Thou Fount” was written by a man who experienced a dramatic conversion from gang member to preacher. The hymn acknowledges God as the giver of every blessing. It praises the God who seeks us out when we are straying and asks him to unite our hearts with his so that we never wander away again.

Who receives praise for the blessings we are given? How can we commemorate God’s actions on our behalf? How can we avoid wandering away from our Savior?

Scripture: Deuteronomy 8:6–20; 1 Samuel 7:2–13; Ephesians 1:3–10
A Life of Giving Thanks

“Come, Thou Fount”

Participant’s Guide

Part 1 Identify the Issue

Come, Thou Fount

Come, Thou Fount of every blessing / Tune my heart to sing Thy grace / Streams of mercy, never ceasing / Call for songs of loudest praise / Teach me some melodious sonnet / Sung by flaming tongues above / Praise the mount—I’m fixed upon it / Mount of Thy redeeming love.

Here I raise mine Ebenezer / Hither by Thy help I’m come / And I hope by Thy good pleasure / Safely to arrive at home / Jesus sought me when a stranger / Wand’ring from the fold of God / He to rescue me from danger / Interposed His precious blood.

O to grace how great a debtor / Daily I’m constrained to be! / Let Thy goodness like a fetter / Bind my wand’ring heart to Thee / Prone to wander—Lord, I feel it / Prone to leave the God I love / Here’s my heart—O take and seal it / Seal it for Thy courts above.

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: God, the source of all our blessings, is worthy of praise.

“Come, Thou Fount of every blessing / Tune my heart to sing Thy grace / Streams of mercy, never ceasing / Call for songs of loudest praise”

Teaching Point Two: It is important to remember times in our lives when God has been our source of help.

“Here I raise mine Ebenezer / Hither by Thy help I’m come”

Teaching Point Three: We need to guard against wandering from the Lord.

“Prone to wander—Lord, I feel it / Prone to leave the God I love / Here’s my heart—O take and seal it / Seal it for Thy courts above.”
Part 3 Apply Your Findings

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Recommended Resources

- [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com)
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