

Living Simply



Gathering In (10 minutes)

Welcome people, provide treats, and give people a few minutes to catch up and get settled. (More specific suggestions for how this can be facilitated appear in the Introduction to the Leader Guide.)

Theme

You may want to either read this or paraphrase the theme and purpose before posing the opening question.

What does it mean to live simply? There are books, programs, and retreats—often costing thousands of dollars—that promise to explain how to create “balance” in our lives, thereby leading to success and happiness. Jesus talks about the futility of worry and the tug of material riches. Does living simply mean that we should give away all of our stuff and, like the song says, “Don’t worry, be happy”? There are so many demands on us. We have so much to do and so little time. Our choices of how to spend our time and money are seemingly endless. How can anyone living in twenty-first century America possibly live simply?



The purpose of this session is to explore one aspect of living simply, namely, making better choices. How can we intentionally and prayerfully consider the choices that confront us and then set our priorities so we won’t be at the mercy of every opportunity that presents itself? How can we make choices that honor our commitment to God, to those around us, and to our own physical and spiritual health? How can we support each other in setting our priorities and sticking to them? How can we manage the scheduling nightmare that modern life has become?

As the group moves through the session, encourage members to explore on a deeper level what this means for their faith walks.

Opening Question (10 – 15 minutes)

Use one or a combination of questions to open.

- What would be your most enjoyable way to spend \$30?
- If you had to leave your home and could only take three things (not people) with you, what three things would you take?
- If you could spend a day any way you wanted, what would you do?
- What is something that is important to you that you carry with you in your purse, wallet, or vehicle? What is something you carry that you could get along without?

Opening Prayer (1 – 2 minutes)

Read the following prayer.

Gracious God, you have created an abundant world in which there is enough for all. You have blessed us beyond anything that we could have imagined. As we see the bounty around us, help us be mindful of the way our material goods consume us and what we're missing as we invest so much time trying to hold on to them. We want to simplify our lives. We are grateful for choices as we realize that, in many areas of the world, people do not have choices. Lord, help us to make good choices on the basis of our relationship with you and with others. Work through us to help us to remember to put others first. As we look at the abundance that surrounds us, help us to realize that you are the one true thing that we cannot live without. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

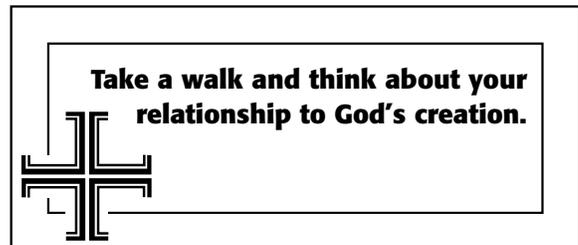
What does the Bible say? (20 minutes)

Read the following passages together or ask members of the group to read the passages while the other group members follow along.

Briefly introduce the reading, "In this passage, Jesus addresses two virtues of the Christian life, humility and generosity. Living simply requires us to be aware of the fact that we have received everything as a gift from God. We have choices every day about how we treat others and with whom we will share what God has given to us."

Luke 14:7-14

⁷When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸"When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."



¹²He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Briefly introduce the reading; "The writer of this letter to Timothy warns us that wealth is temporary and that it does the most good when it is distributed for the benefit of the community. This is a good reminder for us as we make choices about how we might best use the financial resources with which we have been blessed."

1 Timothy 6:17-19

¹⁷As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Think About...

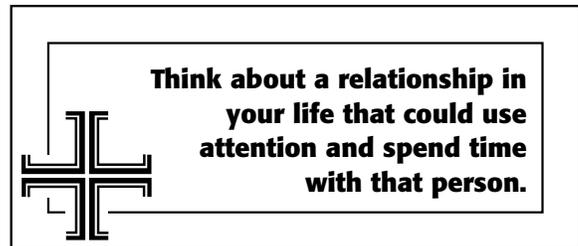
Provide a lead-in to the discussion, like "Before we look at what others have to say about these verses, let's take a few minutes to talk about our own interpretation."

- When have you encountered genuine humility? How did it affect you? (Luke 14)
- Can you imagine a specific example of how the world would be different if more of us took to heart the advice of Luke 14?
- How might adopting a simpler lifestyle help us to live out the kind of life that is outlined in the verses from 1 Timothy 6?
- What do you imagine "the life that is really life" to be? When have you experienced glimpses of that life? (1 Timothy 6)

What do others say? (40 minutes)

Read the following reflections together or ask members of the group to read a paragraph while the other group members follow along.

Mr. Rogers was a hero to thousands of kids who were born in the 70s and 80s. Public Radio recently aired a piece in which the writer proposed that our lives would be less stressful if we followed the rules of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. The piece sent me tripping down memory lane, but as I came back to the present, I realized the concept wasn't so crazy after all. Mr. Rogers always presented the idea that we do have choices about what we do, but we have to remember that our choices always have an effect on those around us. In short, the rules of the Neighborhood say that we need to live simply and humbly, thinking not only about what will be good for us, but also about what will be good for others.



What do Mr. Rogers and his Neighborhood have to do with living simply? Well, didn't life always seem simpler in the Neighborhood? When did you ever see Fred Rogers in a frazzle, trying to figure out how he could be two places at once? Fred knew the secret of prioritizing. He helped kids look at the choices they had to make on a day-to-day basis. He told kids to slow down, talk to others, get out their feelings and, when they hurt someone else, to apologize. Our lives seem so much more complex than life in Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, but the basic principles still apply.

Each day, we are faced with many choices about how we spend our time and our money. We are bombarded with endless advertisements that tell us to satisfy ourselves, do what makes us feel good, and buy anything we want. However, Jesus teaches exactly the opposite. The teachings of Jesus Christ remind us that right living is seeking God, loving our neighbors, and making choices that honor God, others, and ourselves—in that order.

Maybe one way to live simply is to honor the gift of creation that God has so graciously provided. We may choose to spend time walking or biking rather than driving everywhere. This includes encouraging our kids to bike to a friend's home. Maybe we choose to turn down the volume and simply listen to the sounds of nature all around us. Have you had a chance to reflect on how God might be speaking in your life in the peace of nature? Have you listened to the song of the frogs in the spring, the soothing sound of the rain on the windows during a summer shower, or the silence of a snowfall? It can be magical!

In the push and shove of life in the twenty-first century, there is a lot of pressure to make choices that presumably make life easier for us, enable us to accomplish more, and reward ourselves for our hard work or accomplishments. Living simply could mean that we realize we live in community with others and, to honor that relationship, start to place the importance of others' needs and comforts on a par with our own. As an example, we could choose to take the parking place at the back of the parking lot rather than parking in the front row, taking joy in the fact that we've left that close-up spot for someone else. Think of it as a kind of modern-day version of the banquet story in Luke 14. You're giving an anonymous gift to that next person who comes along.

We have so many choices that it is humanly impossible to take advantage of all opportunities that present themselves. Taking a few moments to think about what is really important in our lives and the lives of our families may give us some insight about the choices that we make. How do our choices to be at meetings every night affect our kids? What's the message to kids who are signed up for every activity offered, spending time with their parents only during drive time? Living simply means getting our priorities straight and intentionally making choices in line with those priorities. What are your priorities? Make a list and rank them, then take a few minutes to look at one week of your personal or family calendar. Use a check mark to indicate each appointment that is in line with your priorities. Count the marks. Let's hope there are many. If not, think about what it would take to arrange your schedule to truly reflect your priorities. It's a first step toward living simply.

Think About...

Groups that have been together for one or more years may want to use the questions with 

- If you had to choose one thing to give up in order to have more time for yourself and your family, what would it be?
- Is there something you own that makes your life simpler and that you absolutely couldn't part with? Is there something that you own that complicates your life, but you absolutely couldn't live without it?
- What personally draws you toward the concept of living simply?
- What aspects of our culture make it difficult for you to live simply?
-  The Western world seems to have a strong propensity for ownership. When have you enjoyed something that you did not own?
- Who is a role model or mentor for you as you explore ways to prioritize your time?
- What words immediately come to mind when you hear the phrase "living simply"? How do your ideas of living simply connect with your faith journey?
-  When most people talk about living simply, they think of the outward manifestations of the concept, such as owning fewer material possessions. How might the character traits of humility, generosity, and love for others lead to living more simply? What's one character trait you would like to work toward?

- How do you make choices about how you will spend your time? What would you list as your top priorities? How does what you do reflect those priorities?
- What are some of the difficult decisions you face on a daily basis in making your life work? How do they reflect a struggle in what's important for your life?
- What helpful insights about living simply did you gather from other small group members in this session?

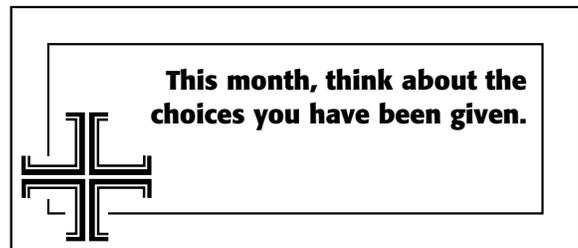
Finalizing Your Group Covenant (10 minutes)

At this point in the evening, take time to finalize your covenant for the coming year. Walk through the information that you captured at your first meeting. Invite comments from the group.

What's my response?

Point out this section to the small group. Read through the choices as a group and ask members to choose an activity that they would like to try for the month ahead. Group members don't need to choose the same response. Members may talk about their response and how they used it through the month at the next session, if they wish.

This month, think about the choices that you have been given. Evaluate the way that you make choices. Which activities enrich your life and the life of your family socially, intellectually, spiritually? Which activities merely take up time? Pick one or two of the following activities to try this month to help you live more simply.



- Choose one thing you can do to simplify your life to give you more time to appreciate God's gifts.
- Think about a relationship in your life that could use attention. It could be a relationship with a friend, parent, even a child or spouse. Make it a priority to spend time with that person, really being present with that person and listening with your ears and heart to what he or she is saying.
- Make a list of the simple things that you love, things that make you happy (working with wood, seashells, a great cup of coffee, cross-country skiing, falling snow, the sound of the ocean, a mountain trail, chocolate chip cookies, a favorite piece of music, etc.). Put this list in a place where you can refer to it to remind yourself to make choices in line with your priorities.
- Put some of your possessions away and experience a month of living with less "stuff." At the end of the month, decide if there are things you can live without. Give these things away to someone who can use them.
- Divide a piece of paper in half. On one side list people, events, situations, and things that stress you out. On the other side, list people, events, situations, and things that calm you. How can you get more of the calming things into your life? Are there ways that you can turn the stressors into calming influences that simplify your daily living?
- Make a list of the things that you want to include in your life each day or each week. Practice following that list this month.
- Reduce the clutter in one area of your home or your life. Notice the difference in the space or in the rhythm of your day.

- Take a walk and think about your relationship to God's creation as you walk. What things in nature (rocks, tree bark, water, plants, etc.) have special meaning for you? Explore how you might be able to incorporate this element into your home to remind you of a commitment to live more simply. You may want to use the actual object, a photo, or an artistic representation of the object.
- Check out The Simple Living Network on the web at www.simpleliving.net. It offers tools, examples, and contacts for conscious, simple, healthy, and restorative living.
- Check out the Earth Ministry website at www.earthministry.org. This website focuses on mobilizing the Christian community to play a leadership role in building a just and sustainable future.
- Make an appointment with yourself this month. Spend one night this month doing only things you enjoy. Write it on your calendar.

Closing (10 minutes)

Provide information about the session next month. Point out the importance of making the commitment to attend each session. Reiterate that one of the most important aspects of these groups is the relationship with other group members.

Read the closing prayer or pray the Lord's Prayer together.

Closing Prayer:

Jesus, Savior, thank you for coming among us to model the richness and life-giving properties of living simply. You have taught us that our priorities are loving you and loving others, not amassing power or material things. Lord, thank you for your word and for family members and friends who remind us what is really important in life. Help us to discover each day your will for us. When we are tempted to choose too many things, remind us to choose activities that reaffirm our life in you. When our lives become hectic and cluttered, help us to keep our eyes focused on you. We pray in your name, Amen.

If you'd like to read more...

"The Abundant Life," *Alive Now*, May/June, 2002. Nashville, TN: The Upper Room, 2002.
www.upperroom.org/alivenow

DeGrote-Sorensen, Barbara. *Tis a Gift to be Simple: Embracing the Freedom of Living with Less*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1992.

Dillard, Annie. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1974.

Dominiguez, Joe and Vicki Robin. *Your Money or Your Life*. New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2000.

Foster, Richard. *Celebration of Discipline*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1978.

Schut, Michael, Ed. *Simpler Living, Compassionate Life: A Christian Perspective*. Denver, CO: Living the Good News, 1999.

