



ADULT STUDY

from www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com

LEADER'S GUIDE Session 1

Jesus and Possessions: An Adult Lenten Study

Worrying about Enough

Goal for the Session

Participants will explore scriptural teachings about God's provision for our needs and ponder trusting in God's care.

Preparing for the Session

- Read through the entire six-session study to get a sense of its scope. Pray for yourself and the participants.
- Adapt this session, and all sessions in this study, for the needs of your group. There are often more activities suggested than you may have time to do. Also, read the Teaching Alternatives at the end of each Leader's Guide and consider whether or not to substitute activities.
- If possible prior to the study, contact participants and ask them to bring a journal—either a paper version or an electronic tablet—to class. Plan to provide paper and pens for those who do not bring a journal. Send the study to them as an attachment and ask them to read over session 1 prior to the first class meeting.
- On newsprint or a board, print the following questions to be used in the opening activity: Does God notice me? Does God care for me? Will God meet my needs?

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Address questions
- Pray

EXPLORING

- Examine the basic necessities and worry
- Explore Jesus' message about worry
- Discuss the message of Job

RESPONDING

- Consider kingdom living
- Commit to steps for opting out

CLOSING

- Sing a hymn
- Close with prayer

- In a hymnal or online, obtain the lyrics and music to the hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" and arrange for accompaniment. Recordings of the hymn can be found online if no accompaniment is available.

Materials Needed

- Newsprint or board
- Markers
- Copies of the Participant Handout
- Paper
- Pens or pencils
- Bibles
- Copies of the hymn “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”
- Copies of the session 2 Participant Handout

Teaching Tip

Consider how the following participants might perceive this session’s messages: persons concerned about their next meal or their future in old age; working providers now facing the loss of livelihood; persons with an abundance of possessions.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Address Questions

Welcome participants to the study. Invite each person to introduce him or herself and respond to the following:

One thing I worry about a lot is . . .

Call the group’s attention to the three posted questions. If they have not already done so, invite them to read the stories of Margie and Kiki found at the beginning of the Participant Handout. Say that the writer suggests that both Margie and Kiki struggle with these same questions. For each question, ask for a show of hands as to whether that particular question is one with which they also struggle. Discuss:

- With which of the three questions do you resonate most strongly? Why?
- If someone asked you what it means to have enough, how would you respond?

Tell the group that in this study, they will be exploring what Jesus’ words and actions tell us about possessions. In this first session, they will explore what Scripture can tell us about trusting that God will provide for our needs.

2. Pray

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

Loving God, we give thanks for your steadfast love. As we consider the relationship between

our material possessions and our faith, open our hearts to a deeper understanding of what it means to live an abundant life. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Exploring (20 minutes)

3. Examine the Basic Necessities and Worry

Ask participants to make a list of things they *want*. After a minute or two, invite volunteers to name one thing on their list. Ask participants to list things they *need*—basic necessities required for a person to survive. Discuss:

- What things are on your list of wants that are a source of worry for you? If you have to do without something on that list, how will it affect your life?
- On the list of needs, what did you include that is beyond what we call the basic necessities? How would living without that item affect your life?
- Point out that in our culture, many of the things that we think we need, and about which we worry, are actually not necessary for life.

4. Explore Jesus’ Message about Worry

If they have not already done so, have participants read the material in the Participant Handout under the headings, “God Feeds the Birds” and “God Clothes the Grass.” Ask a volunteer to read aloud Luke 12:22–34. Discuss:

- What, if anything, was surprising to you or was new information in what you read?
- The writer quotes Anne Lamott, who calls this passage Jesus’ antianxiety discourse. What is your response to characterizing the passage in this way? How are Jesus’ words here different from the sentiment, “Don’t worry; be happy”?

Point out that the writer acknowledges that there are many people like Margie, who is worried about meeting her basic needs today, and Kiki, who is concerned about meeting her needs in the future.

5. Discuss the Message of Job

Ask a volunteer to briefly summarize what the writer tells us about the story of Job. If time allows, ask the group to quickly scan Job 1 and 2 and then have volunteers name the misfortunes that fell on Job, who, according to Scripture, was blameless and upright. Discuss:

- The writer calls our attention to God's response to Job, ending with these four statements: "God provides for the ravens. God provides for the ravens' young. God provides for Job. God provides for you." If you were in the position of Margie or Kiki, how would you respond to those statements?
- How have you experienced God providing for your needs? Out of your personal experience, how do you respond to these affirmations?

Ask participants to quickly scan Job 42:7–17. Ask:

- What happens to Job at the end of his story?
- What would happen if you experienced great hardship and suffering and did not have Job's experience of vindication and restoration? How do you think you would respond?

Refer the group to the story of Richard Wurmbrand in the Participant Handout. Discuss:

- The writer observes that in the most horrendous circumstances, Wurmbrand came to recognize God as the gracious Father who feeds and sustains. How?
- How do you imagine Wurmbrand's son and wife would respond if you asked them about God's care for them?
- In response to the question of whether God will meet our needs, the writer tells us that Jesus' answer is "Of course!" The writer asserts that our worry is wasted, because God provides regardless. What has been your experience?

Responding (15 minutes)

6. Consider Kingdom Living

Ask participants to review the information under the heading, "Living in Relation to a Father Who Is Rich." Invite them to think about their own lives and what concerns cause them the most worry. Then ask them to respond in writing in their journals to the following questions posed by the writer:

- As you think of these three—food, clothing, and shelter—where does your mind most often dwell?
- What fills your thoughts during the day? What keeps you up at night?

- Do worries flood your mind because you don't have enough, or do you devote your thoughts and energy to your more-than-enough?

After allowing time for participants to record their thoughts, invite a volunteer or two to make observations about their anxieties concerning meeting their own needs and those of their families. Conversely, someone who is comfortably off and has no concerns about meeting immediate needs may want to speak to what about their possessions induces anxiety.

Note that the writer tells us that Jesus' confidence in God's desire and ability to meet our needs is no hollow slogan. She observes: "Rather Jesus assures you that the One who feeds the ravens and clothes the fields is the One who cares for you."

In the days before the next session, ask the group to reflect on how these statements might sound to the following:

- the fifty-five-year-old woman whose job was eliminated months ago and whose savings have run out. She is unable to find another job. Now the mortgage company is foreclosing on her house;
- the man whose job in the coal fields is gone for good and who must choose between paying steep medical bills and feeding his family;
- the child whose family is living on less than \$2.00 a day;
- the couple making six figures who find themselves obsessed with buying more expensive cars, a bigger house, and the most up-to-date electronic devices.

Also encourage them to think through how they think God's care and concern for people's needs are expressed. Encourage participants to note in their journals the questions they may have, and explain that in the coming sessions they will dig deeper into their questions and others.

7. Commit to Steps for Opting Out

Call the group's attention to the options the writer suggests for opting out of worry. Invite them to reflect on the writer's final question: What will be different for you, this week, if you take Jesus at his word?

Ask participants to read over the three suggested options and make a tentative choice of one they may try in the days before the next session. Then have them form

three groups based on their choices. In their groups, ask them to discuss how they might support each other in taking this step. They may want to exchange e-mail addresses to send reminders.

Distribute copies of the session 2 Participant Hand-out (or plan to e-mail it) and encourage participants to read it prior to the next session.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Sing a Hymn

Sing "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" together.

9. Close with Prayer

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

Great is your faithfulness, O God, and for that we are thankful. Guide us as we seek to discern more fully how you are present in our lives, loving us and caring for our needs. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Teaching Alternatives

Engage in Imaginative Visualization

Point out the writer's musings in which she imagines Jesus speaking to the folks at the church Margie and Kiki attend. The group that we imagine gathering around Jesus, she observes, is surely no less diverse than his first-century audience, sharing many of the same concerns.

Ask someone to read aloud the second paragraph under the heading "Living in Relation to a Father Who Is Rich" (beginning, "Margie's stomach is rumbling, . . ."). As they listen to the passage from Luke being read aloud, invite participants to assume the persona of one of these persons the writer describes or to imagine another person they think might be a member of the church Margie and Kiki attend. Then read Luke 12: 22–31 aloud. Following the reading, invite volunteers to describe the person they imagined being. Discuss:

- From the perspective of the persona you assumed, what was your reaction to what Jesus was saying? What was going through your mind as you heard his words?
- The writer observes that Jesus exhorts his followers to refocus their attention away from the frantic scramble to acquire what they need and to

pursue the kingdom Jesus ushered in. She asks, "What would that look like for Margie or Kiki? For the teen or the businessman?" If you were one of these persons, or another person you imagined, would you trust Jesus' assurance that striving for the kingdom would ensure your other needs would be met? Why or why not?

Place Yourself on a Continuum

Invite the group to evaluate their own responses to Jesus' words. At the far left of your space, post a sign saying "I trust Jesus' words fully, that God will see that my needs are met." At the far right, post a sign saying, "I want to trust Jesus' words, but I worry that my family will not have everything we need."

Read Luke 12:28–32 aloud. Ask participants to line up along a continuum, placing themselves in a line from one side of your space to the other depending on how completely they agree with one or the other of the statements. When everyone has found a place on the continuum, invite persons at various places to explain why they placed themselves as they did. Then invite the group to reflect on this question posed by the writer: What will be different for you, this week, if you take Jesus at his word?

Consider Your Treasure

Read aloud Luke 12:16–21, the parable of the Rich Fool. Then ask participants to imagine that they have an abundance of possessions, so many that they must rent large storage spaces. Ask them to list all the things they would put in storage in order to keep those possessions safe. After allowing time for participants to respond in writing, ask someone to read Luke 12:33–44 aloud. Ask group members to write responses to the following:

- We are told that those who store up treasures for themselves are fools. What do you think it means to be rich toward God?
- Luke tells us that where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. What do you consider your treasure? Is that treasure material possessions? If so, in what ways is your treasure controlling your life?
- If what you consider your treasure is more intrinsic, then what is it? How are you using that treasure?

Key Scriptures

Job 1–2; 38:4, 12, 26, 39–41; 42:7–17

Psalm 147:9

Luke 9:10–17; 12:13–34

cal guide for living in sustainable ways that keep the future of the planet in mind. Thirty years later, it is being released as a way to celebrate and honor Longacre's foresight and vision for a new generation.

For More Information

Living More with Less: 30th Anniversary Edition (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010). Written in 1980 by Doris Janzen Longacre, *Living More with Less* was a practi-

Martha Bettis Gee, a writer, editor, and educational consultant, is retired from the Presbyterian Mission Agency, where she was Associate for Child Advocacy and Networking.

SAMPLE SESSION



ADULT STUDY

from www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com

PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 1

Jesus and Possessions: An Adult Lenten Study

Worrying about Enough

Introduction

Two women attend the same church.

Margie, nineteen years old, is the single mother of two young boys. Her mother has died, and her father, who's not involved in her life, lives out of state. Margie didn't graduate from high school and recently lost her job at a fast food restaurant. She lives in a small government-subsidized apartment with her sons and worries daily about keeping her apartment and being able to feed and clothe her children.

Kiki, a sixty-four-year-old mother of four grown children, attends the same church as Margie. She has a master's degree in education, and her husband recently left her. Kiki had been working part-time in a special education classroom, but now she is searching for a full-time job to make ends meet. Kiki hasn't been able to sell her family's four-bedroom home and struggles to pay the mortgage every month. At night she lays awake worrying about how she'll support herself in her later years.

The questions on Margie's heart are the same questions on Kiki's heart: *Does God notice me? Does God care for me? Will God meet my needs?*

Will I Get Mine?

A physician named Luke, a companion of Paul and the author of the third Gospel, also penned the first history

of the early church in the book of Acts. He was writing at the end of the first century. In his Gospel, Luke offers a compelling portrait of Jesus, and in Acts, Luke provides a glimpse into how the earliest church lived out the Jesus way.

In the twelfth chapter of his Gospel, Luke describes Jesus' rise in popularity among the people. Jesus is teaching the crowds when someone hollers, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me" (Luke 12:13). After making it clear that he wasn't a financial mediator, Jesus warns the crowd about the danger of storing up riches while being stingy toward God.

Jesus knows that just as money was on the mind of this man who was convinced he wasn't getting his fair share, his disciples were also concerned about receiving what they needed: food, clothing, shelter—the basic necessities of life.

Jesus seizes the moment to address the deep concerns of their hearts, assuring them, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing" (12:22–23).

If we're honest, at first blush Jesus' teaching is reminiscent of Bobby McFerrin's jaunty 1988 chart-topping

lyrics, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.” It echoes of the trite “wisdom” of Disney’s lighthearted Timon and Pumbaa in *The Lion King* (1994). Footloose and fancy free, the vapid pair live by the cheerful motto “*Hakuna matata*,” a Swahili phrase roughly translated as, “No worries.”

The crowd of thousands who’d gathered to hear Jesus wouldn’t have profited from what could be heard as a weak assurance, though, unless Jesus was able to offer some evidence.

God Feeds the Birds

Jesus has already fed the five thousand in Bethsaida (9:10–17), and he wants his audience to discover the character of the One he knew to be a faithful provider. He begins by asking his listeners to consider the ravens.

The raven is a brute of a bird. Ravens hover over land searching for road kill. They don’t have a lot of friends like some of the other birds; they’re more likely to be alone or in pairs. If God feeds these critters, Jesus admonishes, don’t you think God will care for you? In *Consider the Birds: A Provocative Guide to Birds of the Bible*, pastor and author Debbie Blue observes,

The raven is a creature of need, of want, of desire. It is voracious. And God feeds it, takes care of its needs, so Jesus would have us believe. . . . It’s one thing to believe God feeds the little pretty birds of the air. They have small appetites. They need a few seeds. Everybody loves them. It’s not that much to feed. They do not seem needy. But what if you’re ravenous?¹

That’s us. We’re ravenous, like the raven. Blue goes on:

God feeds the ravens, the ravenous, the mixed-up greedy glutton carrion eater. That’s saying a lot more, somehow—something more shocking, maybe, than that God’s willing to give bird food to light eaters. And how much more will God feed us? We need a lot. A lot of food and attention and love and healing.²

Jesus’ listeners back then and now know ourselves to be needy and hungry for food and attention and love and healing. God feeds the ravens, Jesus assures us, and God feeds *you*.

God Clothes the Grass

If the raven is a sturdy brute, the fields of the grass are just the opposite.

Jesus draws the gaze of his audience to the wispy fields of grass to remind them how frail and fleeting their lives are:

“Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith!” (12:27–28)

In the ancient near east, Jesus’ listeners would have used dry grass to fuel the fires in their bread ovens. François Bovon observes, “The text describes the lot of grass that flowers in the fields but disappears tomorrow in the fire. When they heard these words, the earliest Christians remembered the brevity of their lives and the suddenness of the end of their life.”³

God not only sustains the frail dry grass, Jesus claims, but God dresses it in robes finer than Solomon’s. Solomon was the lastborn of David’s sons and the wealthiest king of Israel. The Greek word Luke chose for “clothed” suggests being adorned in ornate clothing.

Anne Lamott calls this passage Jesus’ antianxiety discourse, writing that “all striving after greater beauty and importance, and greater greatness, is foolishness.” Lamott continues, underscoring the value Jesus is bestowing on those of us who receive his

If God feeds these critters, Jesus admonishes, don’t you think God will care for you?

words, confirming, “It is ultimately like trying to catch the wind. Lilies do not need to do anything to make themselves more glorious or cherished.”⁴

Jesus was assuring his audience that the reason they need not worry is because they mattered to his Father.

The Ancient Tradition

Throughout the history of God's people, there have been people like Margie—fearing that she does not have enough for today—and Kiki—who fears she does not have enough for tomorrow. In the crowd around Jesus, there were mothers and fathers and daughters and sons who were worried about receiving and providing what they and their families needed. What, they feared, would happen if God did not provide?

One man who could answer that question, whose story told in the Hebrew Scriptures would have been familiar to the crowd surrounding Jesus, was Job. When God's blessings were taken away from Job, he remained faithful despite the counsel of his friends.

Does God notice me? Does God care for me? Will God meet my needs?

When God finally speaks, God confirms that God is the one who laid the foundation of the earth (Job 38:4) and makes the sun to rise (38:12) and brings needed rain (38:26). And in the midst of God's soliloquy, confirming that God is the One who provides, God asks Job, "Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, when they crouch in their dens, or lie in wait in their covert?" (38:39–40).

The rhetorical answer, of course, is no.

Jesus knew this story. The words of the Hebrew Scriptures had been knit into Jesus' frame since he was a boy. He knew God to be the One who provided for all living creatures.

The Almighty continues to expound, demanding of Job, "Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food?" (38:41). God reminds Job that the One who does mighty acts of wonder also stoops to offer food to a raven. And to the raven's young. The psalmist also confirms God's steadfast faithful provision, "He gives to the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry" (Ps. 147:9).

God provides for the ravens.

God provides for the ravens' young.

God provides for Job.

God provides for you.

You Matter

One who knew God to be a faithful provider was Richard Wurmbrand, founder of Voice of the Martyrs, an organization aiding Christians around the globe who are persecuted for their faith. Wurmbrand, a Romanian Christian minister of Jewish descent, was himself imprisoned and tortured by the Communist regime of Romania for his faith in Christ. One day Wurmbrand received a letter saying that his fifteen-year-old son, Mihai, would be allowed to visit him in prison. The two had been separated for six years.

Led to a large hall, Wurmbrand sat in a box with a tiny window. When the guard shouted for his son, Mihai, pale and thin, sat down beside the window. Not knowing how long the visit would last, the boy blurted, "Mother says even if you die in prison you must not be sad because we'll all meet in paradise."

Wurmbrand was encouraged that his boy was keeping the faith on which he'd staked his life. Concerned about how his wife and son were faring, Wurmbrand quickly asked, "How is she? Have you food at home?" The obviously frail boy explained of his mother who'd been ill, "She's well again." Then he added, "And we have food. Our Father is very rich."⁵ The guards assigned to monitor their conversation grinned, thinking that Wurmbrand's wife had remarried!

Though the guards knew nothing of God as a gracious provider, Mihai Wurmbrand had—in the most horrendous circumstances—come to recognize God as the gracious Father who feeds and sustains.

Worry

When Jesus assures his readers that God feeds the bullish raven and the fragile grass, he is speaking to the deep-seated worries of the human heart:

Does God notice me?

Does God care for me?

Will God meet my needs?

Jesus' answer to Margie, to Kiki, to Richard and Mihai Wurmbrand, is a winsome, proven, deep, rich, "Of course!" *You matter, your needs matter, so much to God.*

Your worry is wasted, Jesus seems to say, because God provides *regardless*. He says,

“And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.” (Luke 12:29–31)

Your Father, Jesus assures us, knows that you need them.

Living in Relation to a Father Who Is Rich

I imagine Jesus speaking to the folks at the church Margie and Kiki attend. The group that gathers around Jesus, surely no less diverse than his first-century audience, share many of the same concerns.

Margie’s stomach is rumbling, because there was only enough food in the house for her boys. Kiki knows she has four days to come up with enough money for the mortgage. A teen in the congregation, a recent immigrant from Mexico, has a job interview the next day but is worried about not having the right clothes to wear. The mind of a successful businessman wanders as he thinks about buying a larger home for his family.

As embodied souls, our minds are naturally occupied with the triad of indispensable possessions: food, clothing, shelter. But Jesus exhorts his followers to tip their minds away from the frantic scramble to acquire what they need and to pursue the kingdom Jesus ushered in.

What would that look like for Margie or Kiki? For the teen or the businessman? What would it look like for you?

Maybe you worry about having enough money to pay rent each month. Or about buying your child’s requisite new soccer cleats. Perhaps you’ve had to decline invitations to eat out with friends because you can no longer afford to say yes.

Or perhaps you’re like that businessman. Maybe you have *plenty*, and your mind is still fixed on the next savory meal, the most contemporary fashions, or the neighborhood that’s a little nicer than the one you’re in.

As you think of these three—food, clothing, and shelter—where does your mind most often dwell? What fills your thoughts during the day? What keeps you up at night? Do worries flood your mind because you

don’t have enough, or do you devote your thoughts and energy to your more-than-enough?

In his teaching, Jesus is inviting you to tip the eyes of your heart toward his Father, and yours, who is a gracious provider. Jesus’ confidence in God’s desire and ability to meet your needs is no hollow slogan. Rather Jesus assures you that the One who feeds the ravens and clothes the fields is the One who cares for you.

What will be different for you, this week, if you take Jesus at his word?

Suggested Reading to Dig Deeper: *Living More with Less*, Doris Janzen Longacre

3 Opt-in Experiments:

1. Baby Step

Decide to embrace the reality that God cares for you.

2. Toe-in-the-Water

Take a walk through your neighborhood and—looking down and looking up—notice the wild flowers and birds that God sustains.

3. All In

Agree that God has provided “enough” for you and opt out of “extras” this week: desserts, sodas, alcohol, coffee.

Notes

1. Debbie Blue, *Consider the Birds: A Provocative Guide to Birds of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), 200–201.
2. Ibid.
3. François Bovon, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, trans. Christine M. Thomas, *Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2002), 218.
4. Anne Lamott, *Grace Eventually* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 79.
5. Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ* (Living Sacrifice Book Co., 1998), 128–29.

Margot Starbuck is a Presbyterian minister, the author of six Christian living books, and a collaborator on others. She lives in Durham, North Carolina, with her three teenagers. Connect at www.MargotStarbuck.com.