

## Session: Asceticism

### Description

Years ago, as part of my work with a large church I ran a food bank and a clothing bank. A wonderful Eagle Scout volunteered to build me a large clothing drop box so that people could leave donations when the church was closed. While some of the donated items were clean and in good condition, I was disheartened to see that many of the donations left in the box were worn-out, badly stained or threadbare.

Do we give our best or our worst?

Part of the practice of Stewardship is to appreciate and lovingly care for the things we steward and to practice living simply. Being grateful for the things we have and generous toward others are characteristic behaviors of people who are living with their hands open versus closed.

It can be easy for us to sit in our comfortable homes, aware of suffering in the world but not personally *feeling* it. This can happen in part because we are detached from those in need culturally or because it can feel to overwhelming to engage at a deeper level. We might think "Someone else will respond". And although we like to think of America as the land of opportunity, we are not actually all afforded the same opportunities.

Woolman, in his Major Essays, spoke to the idea that if we were guided by love and if we use only what we need, no one would be in want of anything.<sup>i</sup> If we want to live in a just and peace-filled world we need to dig deep enough to admit that if some of us don't have food, clean water, are oppressed or disempowered, we are not living in just world<sup>ii</sup>. We can do good things without doing things in a good way.<sup>iii</sup>

Are we choosing self over love?

This week we will be exploring asceticism, which comes from a Greek word meaning exercise or training. Asceticism is the spiritual and personal discipline of self-denial. You might be saying "Let's skip this activity." But self-denial, or living simply, can free us up to give more to others which can bring us great joy! To be clear, this isn't about legalism. It's about simplicity and generosity.

### Materials Needed

Self-discipline, determination and a generous heart.

### Handouts

None

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## Are we giving our best or our worst?

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### Read aloud the quote or scripture

“One person gives freely yet gains even more. Another withholds unduly but comes to poverty. A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.” - *Proverbs 11:24-25*.=

### Questions for discussion (10 minutes)

1. Name some things you are grateful for. Other than saying thank you, what are some outward signs of gratitude?
2. What are some of the distractions in your life? Which do you think are healthy and which are unhealthy? How would you eliminate some of the unhealthy ones?
3. Do you feel addicted to anything? Explain. We all have *needs* and *wants*. Are there some *wants* you feel you couldn't live without? Explain.
4. Have you ever manipulated someone to get something you wanted? Explain. Have you ever envied something that someone else had? How did that feel?
5. Do you know if any of your *wants* lead to the oppression of others? Is so, is that your fault? Explain.

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### Rule of life activity

#### Giving our best, not our worst

1. Before you start this activity sit down as a family and name some things that you have, that others might consider a luxury.
2. As a family spend about ten minutes writing out a budget for Mary.
  - a. Mary is a single mom. Her husband Ned passed away three years ago.
  - b. Mary was a stay at home mom, so she didn't have many job skills. When her husband died she had to go back to work.
  - c. She works as a waitress and takes home \$1600 per month.
  - d. Mary's rent is \$850 per month.
  - e. What are the other items (on top of rent) that she probably needs to pay for each month?
  - f. Add it all up and figure out how much (if any) Mary has left over for extras.
3. Now that you've done a budget for Mary, discuss some of the things that Mary and the kids may have to go without based on their budget.
4. Discuss this: Why do you think some people have less than they need, and some have more than they need? What do you think is meant by the phrase “God's economy”?

# Practice

## STEWARDSHIP



5. Now each person is going to (independently, either now or at an agreed-upon time) select five things that they are going to give away.
6. Four of the items can be nice (like new) things that you no longer have need for, or you can do without. These are things that would be a blessing for someone like Mary or her kids.
7. One of the items should be something that you treasure. It should be something nice (like new) that you use (or wear) regularly and will miss greatly when it's gone. This is an item that you feel someone else would dearly treasure.
8. After each family member has their five items, come back together for a discussion.
9. Each family member gets to share what they chose and why.
10. After each person shares, take some time for discussion. This isn't a time for judgment, it's a time for accountability. As a family we are accountable to each other. Did family members really select treasured items? Would those items truly bless others?
11. Now get your calendars and schedule a time (as a family) to give these items to another family, or your charity of choice.

## Examen

How did it go? Debrief highs and lows

1. Each person shares their favorite part of the conversation / activity and why.
2. Each person shares their least favorite part and why.
3. Did you do a Serving/Giving activity last week? How did it go?

Serving /giving ideas for any time this week: Choose one or create your own. These can be done individually or as a group. You will be sharing your serving experience in the next session.

- Make sidewalk chalk messages for your neighbors
- Create a “You Are Awesome!” trophy and give it to someone. Tell them they get to keep it for a month and then they need to award it to someone else.
- Set up a neighborhood scavenger hunt. This could be for adults or kids.
- Write encouraging little notes for the Meals on Wheels volunteers to include with their deliveries.
- Do a neighborhood food drive then deliver to your local food bank.

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<sup>i</sup> Woolman, John, and Phillips P. Moulton. 2001. *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press.

<sup>ii</sup> Most **Christians** would be aware that the Hebrew word **Shalom means** peace. However, this is only a small part of the real **meaning**. Strong's Concordance defines it's **meaning** as 'completeness, wholeness, health, peace, welfare, safety, soundness, tranquility, prosperity, perfectness, fullness, rest, harmony, the absence of agitation.  
<https://jdlaw75.wordpress.com/2011/03/04/what-does-shalom-mean/>

<sup>iii</sup> Randy Woodring, Shalom and the Community of Creation