



LIGHTENING YOUR LOAD

Repacking
Your Bags for
a Fuller Life

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

WHAT TO PACK

| | |
|---|----|
| INTRODUCTION - Packing Light? | 7 |
| CHAPTER 1 | |
| ENOUGH! Discovering the Upside of Downsizing | 9 |
| CHAPTER 2 | |
| ORDER: Managing Some Method in Our Madness | 19 |
| CHAPTER 3 | |
| GRACE: Putting a Face on Grace | 29 |
| CHAPTER 4 | |
| PATIENCE: Learning to Carry Some Wait | 39 |
| CHAPTER 5 | |
| RESOURCEFULNESS: Giving Back What You Have Been Given .. | 49 |
| CHAPTER 6 | |
| REST: Taking a Break So You Won't Fall Apart | 59 |
| CHAPTER 7 | |
| CONTENTMENT: Wanting Just What You Really Need | 69 |

WHAT TO UNPACK

| | |
|--|-----|
| CHAPTER 8 | |
| DEBT: Making Sense of the Dollars | 81 |
| CHAPTER 9 | |
| DISCOURAGEMENT: Being Lifted Out of the Pits | 91 |
| CHAPTER 10 | |
| PROCRASTINATION: Putting It Off for Good | 101 |
| CHAPTER 11 | |
| IDOLATRY: Solving the Case of the Missing God | 113 |
| CHAPTER 12 | |
| WORRY: Trusting God Who Is Always Up | 125 |
| CHAPTER 13 | |
| DISTRACTIONS: Finding Your Focus | 137 |
| PACKING IT IN: Activities to Enhance Your Study | 149 |
| ENDNOTES | 151 |

WHAT TO PACK

Author Charles Dudley Warner once said, “Simplicity is making the journey of this life with just baggage enough.” Packing just enough can be a real challenge. Often in our hurry to pack for life, we forget something important. Although some items are not necessities, others are crucial. In the following chapters are some things we shouldn’t miss putting on our packing lists.

PACKING LIGHT?



Hand me a bag, and I'll soon be packing to travel. Well, make that several bags. I always seem to pack too much stuff. I believe in being prepared to the extreme. I load up my bags to prepare for the “what ifs,” “maybes,” and “just in cases” of the trip. If I need clothes for a week, I'll throw in some extra in case of a tornado or hurricane. I mustn't forget a book to read—wait, what if I finish that one? I'll pitch in three more. Oh, and how about shoes—can you ever have enough shoes?

In my vocabulary, “pack” and “light” don't belong in the same sentence!

Unfortunately, my overpacking doesn't stop there. I've found that I also pack my life with too much stuff. My schedule is crammed with multiple to-do lists. Multitasking mania consumes me. My cabinets, closets, and garage are full of stuff, yet I buy more. Unhealthy habits like procrastination and discontentment clutter my life.

This clutter spills over into my spiritual life and crowds out God. Instead of looking to Him to take care of me, I burden myself with worry and overwork in an attempt to take care of any eventuality on my own. I lose my focus on what is important and get distracted from spiritual things. I become overextended, overwrought, and overwhelmed.

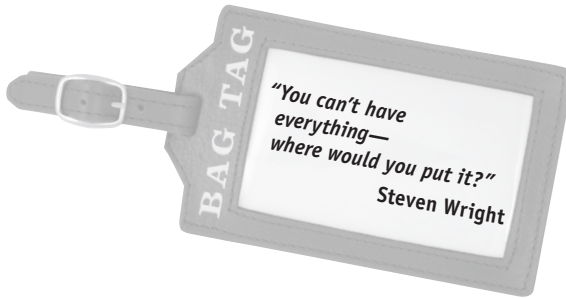
Are you like me? Are you going through life encumbered with excess baggage? Do you ever ask yourself, *How can I take on one more thing?*

Life is hard enough without burdening ourselves with more than we need. Overpacking our lives can be exhausting and exasperating. It can trip us up. It can even bury us in an early grave!

As we travel through life, it's too easy to pack more than we need. But Jesus offers us an alternative to our overpacked lives. He invites us to take on a fuller life with a lighter load. How can we pack "fuller" yet "lighter"? Such a paradox leads us to an exhilarating discovery of how to live a better way. Though each of us must carry her own burden, the Lord has promised to be with us and lighten our load. In fact, He offers us relief from our spiritual exhaustion—rest for our souls! I'm ready to learn how to lighten my load. Are you?

ENOUGH!

Discovering the Upside of Downsizing



What would it be like if you owned just the clothes on your back? You lived from one day to the next? You welcomed an invitation to visit friends because you didn't have a home of your own?

Sounds like you would be a homeless person, right? It's actually a description of Jesus. Christ doesn't call us to be homeless with only one set of clothes. But He does exemplify for us a simpler lifestyle, a life void of excess and pretense.

Someone might think, *Sure, it would be easy for him. He didn't live in the complicated, stress-infested society we experience today.* It's true that on earth Jesus didn't face smog-filled rush hour traffic, mind-boggling technology overload, and heart-breaking mass shootings. But he did encounter dysfunctional families, rampant crime, and political upheaval in the Middle East. He knew the ever-present dichotomy of the powerless versus the powerful. He observed firsthand the chaos in people's lives when they didn't know God. He saw their wasted lives from a lack of purpose and peace. He sought to offer a better alternative.

LIFESTYLES OF THE RICH AND HOARDING

When Jesus came to earth, His life and teaching showed us what was really important. He told one story about a man who thought

he was ready to live it up. This rich farmer had grown such an abundant crop that he made grandiose plans of tearing down his old barns and building bigger ones, just to hold his bumper crop and goods. His future looked bright for years to come and an easy “eat, drink, and be merry” lifestyle was within his grasp. However, that night he died and God demanded an account of his greedy life that stored up things for himself but not toward God (Luke 12:16-21). The rich fool had an opportunity to share his wealth with God and others. Instead, he hoarded it for himself. In the end, he never was able to enjoy his newfound riches. He totally misunderstood where his priorities should have lain.

Is Jesus teaching in this parable that we should not store anything for the future? Proverbs 21:20 specifically points to the wisdom of storing goods in preparing for the future: “The wise store up choice food and olive oil, but fools gulp theirs down.” Likewise, ants are praised for being extremely wise for storing up their food in the summer (Proverbs 30:24-25). Through God’s direction, Joseph stored grain in Egypt in preparation for the seven years of famine (Genesis 41:46-57). The five wise virgins exemplified farsighted thinking by storing extra oil so that they would be ready to meet the bridegroom (Matthew 25:1-13).

What then was the Lord condemning in the rich fool? If we closely examine the rich fool’s thinking, we see he focused on what *he* would do with *his* barns, grain, and goods. He never saw beyond himself or his world. It is not wrong to be rich or to store things for the future. Rather, it is wrong to store things only for ourselves and forget about God and others.

SQUIRRELING STUFF AWAY

Jesus’ story is as timely today as it was then. Though we might not hoard in the same way as the rich fool in Jesus’ parable, we need to examine why we buy and keep stuff. Do we have tendencies to buy more stuff than we will ever use? When we have been blessed, are we more likely to stockpile the surplus instead of sharing with

others? Do we hoard things because we do not trust in God to provide? Let's meet some ladies who go nuts squirreling stuff away.

Hideaway Heidi has this thing for shoes and can't stop buying them. In her mind, the shoes make the outfit. She's running out of innovative ways to hide her new purchases from her husband, who has said they can't afford any more.

Resale Renee bargain shops at consignment boutiques so her wardrobe is less expensive than it would be at regular cost. She "makes up the difference" by buying more clothes. Now her closet is so full she can't find a thing to wear.

Online Olivia is a computer-shopping junkie who is proud of all the money she saves with online deals. When a purchase don't work out, she hates the hassle of returning them, so she just stashes them.

Bargain Betty can sniff out grocery bargains all over town. Her dilemma comes when she gets home and finds she already has so many of the same things in the pantry that she will never use them all before the expiration dates.

Collectible Colleen's collection of novelty pigs is taking over her house. She buys one wherever she sees one she doesn't own, and her friends keep giving her more. Her husband has started dreaming about attack oinkers.

These ladies definitely have problems with buying and storing stuff. It is easy to think that bringing one more thing home won't make a difference, but sometimes we have to say, "Enough! No more!" When we head for the store, flea market, or website and find something we want, let's be intentional and ask these questions:

- Why do I want this?
- How many do I already have?
- Do I have somewhere to put it?
- Do I really need one (or two or five or ten)?

DIAGNOSIS: WE HAVE “STUFFITIS”

Americans are infected with a clear case of “stuffitis,” the malady of owning too much stuff. A UCLA study reported that Los Angeles middle class families are “battling a nearly universal overaccumulation of goods.”¹ Sociologist Juliet Schor reported that the average consumer in America buys a new piece of clothing every five and a half days. That seems extreme but a look in our closets makes us wonder.²

While reality TV viewers see people who go to extremes of hoarding, its various forms can also touch our lives because we are so materially blessed. For example, just take America’s dependence on self-storage units that dot our landscape. These units were originally intended for those in transition (moving, divorcing, or settling an estate), but now people use them who don’t have enough room for their stuff at home. A 2007 Self-Storage Association study found that 50 percent of customers use these units for their extra belongings, even though the average size of an American home has doubled in the last 50 years. Many of these units are used for stuff people don’t want or need.³

For many people, self-storage units have become the “bigger barns” of Jesus’ parable. The Lord reminds us that our treasures on earth can get moth-eaten, corroded, and stolen in temporary storage units and any other earthly place. For eternal things that are really important, it’s much better to use the only sure and safe storage unit—heaven (Matthew 6:19-21).

DON’T OPEN THAT DOOR!

Let’s face it—if we can’t find something after a search requiring an archeological dig, it’s lost to us, and we don’t have it. Often we can’t locate what we own because of our clutter. Nowhere is this more evident than in our garages, attics, and basements, the “no man’s land” of our homes. Our motto is, “Don’t open that door.” We are ashamed of what people will think, muddled on how to keep the stuff corralled, and afraid of falling debris. As an

unknown wit once observed, “Only in America do we leave cars worth thousands of dollars in the driveway and put our useless junk in the garage.”

To avoid “open door shame,” send the packrat packing by embracing these broad decluttering strategies:

Weed the excess so you own less. Make a schedule (consider 12 weeks as a possible goal with two-hour sessions on a timer). Go through your home with three heavy-duty bags deciding what to toss, donate, and decide on later. Ask yourself if you have used it in the last year. Be decisive and move quickly.⁴

Everything needs a space to put it in its place. Store what you have efficiently, attractively, and when possible, out of sight. For example, in the garage, map out and designate centers on paper first (think sports, tool, yard/garden, recycling, activity, and car care centers). Then put like items on the wall, ceiling, and shelves with labeled boxes and see-through containers.

Put it back—don’t spread or stack. When you see a pile of stuff, it represents deferred decisions. Someone decided not to put each item back in its place. So break the cycle, take the few extra minutes, and put the item back or in a basket to return to later when you can. Flat areas are clutter magnets, so don’t put it down; put it back.

John Ruskin, Victorian social critic, once said, “Every increased possession loads us with a new weariness.” Think about it: Every purchase we make may need to be washed, ironed, dry cleaned, insured, waxed, polished, maintained, updated, secured, dusted, vacuumed—and that’s only the beginning. All these added together demand more of our money, time, space, and energy. It fills up our lives with more stuff to do and remember. It is easy to see how more stuff complicates our lives exponentially.

So is more really better? Do we have to own the best or can it be good enough? Do we have to possess the biggest or can it be big enough? Do we have to have the most or can we have just enough?

A FULLER, YET LIGHTER LOAD

What if we could find fullness in life that wasn't based on accumulating stuff? Jesus said, "...I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). The Greek word for the expression "abundantly" means "over and above, more than enough superabundance."⁵ We know that an eternal life in heaven will be beyond our wildest dreams. But Jesus also offers us a superabundant life now full of joy, power, and fellowship with God. This means that we can enjoy a life "over the top" without materialistic trappings and pitfalls. Jesus turns the world's mantra that "bigger is better" upside down with revolutionary, paradoxical ideas like these:

- Less is more (Matthew 6:19-21).
- Giving can bring abundant returns (Acts 20:35).
- Just enough can be more than enough (Matthew 6:33-34).

Along with this superabundant life, Jesus also offers relief from crushing burdens like crippling anxiety, a guilty conscience, and a sense of futility and frustration. Instead of the heavy baggage we pack and lug around by trying to do things on our own, Jesus offers a lighter alternative to our overloaded lives:

"Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

Only Jesus can offer a fuller, yet lighter load. He can give us rest and peace the world can't provide if we follow Him, take on His yoke, and learn from His teaching (John 14:27). His yoke is not like the cumbersome load of the Pharisees, who tried to obey hundreds of man-made rules and regulations (Matthew 23:1-4). Rather, the path of Jesus ultimately offers a lighter load because our obedience is based on love (1 John 5:3-4).

The commentator William Barclay tells of a legend that Jesus had a carpenter shop in Nazareth with a sign outside that read “My yokes fit well.” According to the legend, customers would come to the shop from all over the country because Jesus was known for carving well-fitting yokes for their animals.⁶ While we don’t know if this legend is true, we do know that in Matthew 11:30, the Greek work for “easy” means “good, gentle, easy to use or bear...having nothing harsh or galling about it.”⁷ Perhaps Jesus was using this image of a yoke to show that the life He offers is not a burden to break us under its load, but is measured to fit us well. As Barclay explains, “Whatever God sends us is made to fit our needs and our abilities exactly...The burden which is given in love and carried in love is always light.”⁸

So Jesus is not calling us to a life of careless ease or painful drudgery. Rather, He invites us to live a full life of joy in which we empty ourselves to others. We can know true rest and peace by wearing the yoke of Christ. We can delight in our lighter load, for it is one we can gladly bear. For what is lighter than a burden that can actually unburden us? Where else can we take on a yoke that gives us rest?

ARE WE THERE YET?

1. Why do you think Jesus chose to live such a simple lifestyle on earth? What are some ways we could live a simpler lifestyle so that others could simply live?
2. What is the difference between hoarding and storing? What are some different ways we can hoard our blessings?
3. Why did Jesus condemn the rich farmer? How is his “eat, drink, and be merry” philosophy lived out today in our world?
4. In another of Jesus’ parables, who else was rich and self-absorbed with no thoughts of the poor (Luke 16:19-31)? How does Matthew 16:26 apply to him?
5. In this chapter, what were some problems of the five women who stored stuff? How do you think they could solve these problems?

6. Why is it important to stop and think before making purchases? Why is this especially difficult in today's consumer culture?
7. Why are we so prone to "stuffitis"? How does accumulating more stuff add to our already burdened lives?
8. What are three broad strategies we can use to declutter our homes and lives?
9. How do the blessings of the superabundant life in Christ contrast with what people consider as "the good life" today?
10. What are some paradoxes in Jesus' invitation in Matthew 11:28-30?

TRIP TIPS: Preventing "Stuffitis"

To prepare for the worldwide famine, Joseph filled the Egyptian storehouses with so much grain "that he stopped keeping records because it was beyond measure" (Genesis 41:49). Before your possessions mushroom "beyond measure," it's time to cut the clutter to prevent "stuffitis."

Chasing Paper ~ Drowning in information? To stay afloat in the sea of paper in our lives, use the RAFT method (Refer, Action, File or Toss) of mail sorting. If it's junk mail, toss it in the recycling bin or trash right after you pick up your mail. Otherwise, refer it to someone who can act on it, act on it yourself, or file it for future reference. ⁹

Saving Trees ~ Magazines, newspapers, and catalogs accumulate in no time. "Rip and read" it, file it, and then recycle the rest or pass it on to others to enjoy. If you must save a whole catalog, file only the most recent and weed the rest. Better still, read and order online to save paper and trees. Whether or not you are reading more digital or paper books, take a look at your bookshelf. Will you really read all the books there or could you donate some of them to a library or charitable organization? You can also order many titles from your public library through interlibrary loan.

Remembering Aunt Susie ~ Sometimes a gift's value lies in its sentimental connection of the giver to us. Treasure the gift if your memories of it are precious. But don't feel obligated to keep something just because a relative used/loved/valued it. Instead value the precious memories you have of the person because they will last longer.

BAGGAGE CLAIM

"One cannot collect all the beautiful shells on the beach. One can only collect a few, and they are more beautiful if they are few."

Anne Morrow Lindberg

"It all depends on whether you have things, or they have you."

Robert A. Cook

"My motto is 'enough' not only for me but that all people would have enough to have a good life. 'Enough' has an upper as well as a lower threshold." Claire Mayer

"God prospers me not to raise my standard of living, but to raise my standard of giving." Randy Alcorn

"God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are too full to receive them." Augustine

BRING IT ON HOME

What one thing can you do this week to lighten your load by packing some simplicity in your life? Write it here:
