

The Year without a Purchase

*One Family's Quest to Stop
Shopping and Start Connecting*



Guide for Study and Reflection

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INTRODUCTION

If you are reading this then, a) you have read the book and thought it might be worth digging deeper, b) are considering using the book as the basis for a small-group discussion, or c) are desperately searching for some help since you agreed to lead the book club discussion at your house tonight and totally forgot about it until fifteen minutes ago.

Whatever the case, we hope this guide can be a useful resource. It contains some additional notes from the author as well as some general questions to ponder. We suggest having a Bible handy as you reflect on the questions below so you can reference the Scriptures listed and integrate them into your discussion.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Option 1—Full Discussion: This Guide for Study and Reflection contains more thought-provoking questions than a single person can safely answer without going certifiably insane. However, if insanity is your thing, please dive into each chapter with wild abandon, discussing each question and reflecting on the corresponding scripture to see what it means for your life.

Option 2—Five Session Plan: The book is broken into five different sections of varying length (Living with Integrity, Owning What We Have, Growing in Faith Together, Serving God’s People, and The Results). If you prefer a more abbreviated discussion, you’re invited to select questions from each section that you believe will most interest your group.

Option 3—Customized Discussion: Whether you discuss the book in a single session, or break it up into multiple sessions, each chapter contains a mix of Scripture-based questions, values-based questions, and everyday application questions to suit your taste. We invite you to simply choose the ones that most interest you, dive in, and learn more about yourself and the world around you.

Thanks again for your interest in the book. We hope you find these questions both valuable and enjoyable.

PART ONE: LIVING WITH INTEGRITY



CHAPTER 3: HOW TO SCREW UP A GOOD THING

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Read Proverbs 13:7. What do you believe God means by “a pretentious and showy life” (*The Message*)? Does that describe you? If not, what does it look like and how can we avoid it (besides accepting a vow to NEVER AGAIN wear lime green leisure suits)?

- Have you ever taken an extended absence from family and friends? What was it like when you returned?

- The author mentions peaks and valleys of living in alignment with your purpose, and then living apart from that purpose. In what ways have you experienced these peaks and valleys in your own faith journey?

- What do you think about giving away your first fruits—the best of what you have? Why is that difficult? In what ways might that change your perspective on giving. And on the way you define those in need?

CHAPTER 4: THE RULES

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Read Romans 12:1. Sadly, there have been times when I have had a hard time placing a few bucks in an offering plate, much less my whole experience. What do you think it means to give your life as an offering to God? If you feel comfortable, please share your thoughts.

- Do you feel like rules stifle you, or provide stability for you? Why? What is the risk/reward in establishing a written set of rules for your everyday life?

- What are your thoughts on the rules the family developed for the year? Too permissive? Too restrictive? How might you have amended them for yourself if you were taking on a challenge like this?

- What do you think about the passage the author highlights from John 17 (pp. 25-26)? Where do you believe joy is found?

PART TWO: OWNING WHAT WE HAVE



CHAPTER 6: OUR LITTLE SCIENCE EXPERIMENT

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Gift giving is an art form, and sometimes I feel like I'm using finger paint. What do you think Proverbs 18:16 means when it says "ushers the giver into the presence of the great" (NIV)? How does God see our gift giving? What do you think is most important to God when it comes to giving?

- What are your feelings about giving charitable donations as gifts? How about receiving them? If there is a difference in how you feel giving vs. receiving, what do you make of that?

- What benefit comes from hosting lavish parties for birthdays and other events? What problems might we be creating?

- What do you think the author means when he characterizes purchases by saying, "We take a bunch of shiny junk and cover up the image of God that's been planted like a seed within each one of us, thinking we can improve on the original design" (p. 37)?

CHAPTER 10: THE POWER OF STUFF

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I worry so much that I had to create a new verb for what I do. I call it “awfulizing”—thinking about the most horrible things that could happen to me and imagining them coming true. In this way, Matthew 6:27-29 is one of the most convicting Scriptures in the Bible for us when it comes to our faith journey. Do you consider yourself to be a worrier? If so, how have you tried to overcome it? If not, did you used to be? How did you change, or what prompted the change?

- The author uses the phrase “You are what you own” (p. 57). In what ways is this statement true? In what ways is it false?

- In this chapter, the author reveals what he calls his biggest learning thus far, and it’s an “ugly truth”—that his fear of being judged for his possessions may stem from the fact that he is the one judging others? In what ways have you seen this play out in your own life?

- What did you think of the interaction at the end of the chapter? What do you think led to this chance meeting? Do you think the author did all he should have to connect with the woman at breakfast? What other opportunities might he have missed?

CHAPTER 13: TWO, FOUR, SIX, EIGHT, WHAT DO I APPRECIATE?

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Read Colossians 3:16. What are some of your favorite Bible verses, hymns, or songs? What makes them special to you? Do you have a special verse about gratitude?

- Have you ever created a gratitude journal? If so, what did you think of the experience? If not, what do you like about the concept? What might make it difficult?

- What material items do you value the most? What intangible items?

- At the end of the chapter, the author asks, “What am I grateful for that can never be taken away?” (p. 80). How would you answer that question?

CHAPTER 15: TRUE CONFESSIONS

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I've had a hard time forgiving an airline for misplacing my bags. In Luke 23, Jesus asks God to forgive (us) at his crucifixion. That's a pretty high bar to set for us. Have you ever had to forgive a grave sin? Were you able to? If not, why?

- The author mentions growing up Catholic and changing faith traditions. Did you grow up going to church? Was it the same faith tradition that you adhere to today? In what ways, if any, does it differ now? In what ways did your early faith tradition shape who you are?

- What are your thoughts on the family's purchase of the cup and shoes, returning a defective lunchbox, and allowing their kids to use money gifted from the previous year to buy books? Is this a failure, a loophole, or a necessity? How might you have dealt with the situation?

- The author writes that he believes "God delights in our repentance" (p. 90). When do you think that asking for forgiveness is a genuine act of spiritual growth, and when do you think it's just an excuse for poor behavior?

CHAPTER 16: THE WORST PARENTS EVER

AUTHOR'S NOTE: In Isaiah 49:15-16, God has “engraved you on the palms of His hands” (NIV). What does that mean to you? And what do you think that means in terms of how we often use things as a means to reflect ourselves to the world?

- When the author told his friends about the purchases they made in the previous chapter, they agreed with the decision. Do you believe the couple was right to use their friends' opinions as a measuring stick for whether they were successful? Why or why not?
- There is a fine line between providing for your family and overindulging. Where do you draw that line? Do you believe that line should be different for those who profess to follow Christ and those who do not? Consider these Scriptures: Matthew 19:16-26, Mark 10:17-27, Luke 16:10-15, Hebrews 13:5.
- When discussing their decision to not purchase things for their children, he explains his reasoning by stating, “What we're doing is taking their lives out of our own hands and placing them in God's. Back where they belong” (p. 96). What do you make of the idea that we sometimes try and control our lives by purchasing things to fit in or make us feel better? Is there some truth to that? In what ways might trying to fit in to society demonstrate a lack of faith in God?
- Parents often measure their success by being able to provide things they never had for themselves as children. But the truth is, very few people grow up getting everything they want. Rather than thinking in terms of lack, what valuable lessons did you learn by not having the things you wanted?

PART THREE: GROWING IN FAITH TOGETHER



CHAPTER 17: YOGA PANTS AND JOCK STRAPS

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I often call myself the Rembrandt of humiliation. And Proverbs 22:4 talks about rewards from God for “humility and fear of the Lord” (NRSV). Do you believe this to be true? Have you seen this played out in your life or the life of others?

- The author suggests that buying the swim fins was their “first official fail.” Do you think it was more important that the family keep their promise to their daughter, or that they stay true to their “no purchase” challenge to get back in touch with their family mission statement? What other alternatives might they have considered?

- The author shares an embarrassing story in this chapter, calling it a “pride-swallowing endeavor” (p. 106). How might this type of vulnerability strengthen a person’s faith? When is vulnerability dangerous?

- This author also writes that “we are constantly putting up artificial barriers between ourselves and others” (p. 105). What are some of those barriers for you? And how do they get in the way of creating a genuine connection between people?

CHAPTER 19: THE PURGE

AUTHOR'S NOTE: We are our own worst critics. I know I can beat myself up better than anyone else—my own Rocky Balboa. The good news is that in 2 Corinthians 8:7, God acknowledges our accomplishments. Have you ever thought of God being proud of you every day? What choices have you made that you think God is proud of?

- The family chose to give away their china that they received as a wedding present. Is there anything that you don't use very often that you would still have trouble giving away? What importance does sentimental value have for you?

- The Loaves and Fishes story from Mark 6 is usually thought of as one of the great miracles of Jesus. What do you think of the author's reframing of the story as a lesson for defining "enough"?

- In this chapter, the author mentions changing the questions he asks when considering whether or not to give something away. Whereas he used to ask, How might I use this? he now asks, What harm will come if I give this away? and Who needs this more? How might asking these different questions influence the way you think of the items you own?

CHAPTER 20: GOOD-BYE NANA CLAUS

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Read Corinthians 16:14. It's humbling (and daunting) to think that "everything" or "all" we do should be "done in love" (NRSV). In what ways can everything be done in love? How might avoiding purchases be an act of love?

- This is the first discussion of how the challenge has impacted friends and family. In what ways do you believe your actions as a Christian influence close friends and family? How about acquaintances?

- Some people show love by giving gifts. What do you personally like about giving gifts? Have you ever seen gift giving backfire like it did with Nana?

- The author writes "we often give material gifts more power than they actually have. We expect gifts to bring us together. To give us joy. To satisfy us. We want the gifts to be God for us. But they're not God. They are just gifts, with the power to help and also the power to drive a wedge between us. Distracting us. Or creating confusion as to what is important" (p. 128). What do you believe is true about this statement? What do you believe is false?

CHAPTER 21: OUR DISCIPLINE PROBLEM

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Discipline is like exercise for your accountability muscle. And some days, I'll admit that the couch of contentment beckons. Hebrews 12:11 addresses the reality of the need for discipline. When does discipline work for you and when doesn't it work?

- The author's experience in a Muslim country prompted his focus on discipline. Have you been exposed to other faith traditions? If so, what do you admire from those traditions? How might such exposure help to strengthen your own faith?

- This chapter mentions the *Daily Mail* survey (p. 133) that suggests families are not spending much quality time together. What do you feel is the biggest obstacle to having quality time with your own family? What one change could you make to increase the amount of quality time together as a family?

- The author mentions several things that helped them grow closer as a family (walking to school, dinner questions, devotionals) What things do you do as a family that help you stay connected? What ideas would you like to add to a daily or weekly schedule to integrate more discipline into your life?

CHAPTER 22: THE MOST AWKWARDLY AWESOME PROM EVER

AUTHOR'S NOTE: It's the thought that counts, right? Read Philippians 1:3-5. We all have people we love and think of often. In what ways are those relationships made more special through faith? In what ways does faith make relationships more challenging?

- During the year, the family had to get creative with gift giving since they were only allowed to give experiences. What do you like about the Family Prom idea? Why do you think a stranger was so eager to help make the gift become a reality?

- What if the family's rules had been different, and they allowed themselves to buy tangible items, but they had to be purchased used instead of new (like their extended family who bought prom outfits at a thrift shop)? Do you think the challenge would have been more or less difficult?

- What are some creative gifts you have given in the past? Do you think they were more appreciated and fostered more connection than something that could have been purchased from a store? Why do you think people tend to buy gifts instead? What creative ideas can you dream up that you might be able to offer as gifts in the future?

CHAPTER 23: THE PERFECT BIRTHDAY—JUST ADD AQUA VELVA

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I've done some wonderful things in the name of love. And I've also done some incredibly stupid things. (Decorating a highway overpass, for example.) 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 talks about life without love. What crazy things have you done in the name of love? What might be some things you would be willing to give up for love? After you answer, think about the neighbors we are meant to love. Are you willing to sell things or give them away (including time) to those neighbors? What might make this more difficult?

- What are some of the best gifts you remember receiving in your life? What made them special?

- What if you received a gift like the CD the author's wife made for him? What might it mean to get notes from family and friends letting you know what you mean to them? What might it mean for your own family and friends to receive such a gift from you? What resources do you have (friends and connections) that could help you do something special and significant for someone you love?

- The author was also gifted with a surprise party. Why do you think it is so important for us to connect with people who know us well?

CHAPTER 25: GALA PEOPLE?

AUTHOR'S NOTE: We used to keep track of our kids' growth using a Sharpie on a door frame in our house (much to the chagrin of the next owner). But faith is something that's tough to measure. In 2 Thessalonians 1:3, Paul writes to the church he helped create. Do you have a mentor who lifts you up and gives you strength in your faith journey? How did you meet? How has this person changed your life? How have you been able to measure your growth in faith through them?

- The author jokes that his wife felt guilty about using tithing money at a charity auction. What do you think of his choice to use a tithe for this purpose?

- This chapter tells the story of how a random act (winning an item at a charity event) led to a beautiful baptism for the glory of God. How have you seen God use something ordinary and turn it into a random, happenstance blessing in your own life?

- The author references feeling nervous about baptizing someone else, and cites Scripture from Matthew 28 for his justification to do so. What does it look like to you to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (NIV)?

PART FOUR: SERVING GOD'S PEOPLE



CHAPTER 27: MY BETTER HALF

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I often say that I wish I was the kind of person my dog thinks I am, instead of the kind of person I am around my family. Deuteronomy 4:9 cautions us to be careful not to forget the important things we have learned and then to teach them to our children. Do any of your life lessons have to do with your relationship to material things? If so, what are they?

- The author struggles with the decision to help a couple that may or may not truly need help. With that said, what is the purpose of giving? Do we truly expect nothing in return? Or do we sometimes give with strings attached? Do we discriminate between the “worthy” and the “unworthy” poor, and would Jesus agree with this distinction?

- In this story, the author’s decision to give to the couple seems to be motivated more by the fact that he’s being watched by his son, and less because it’s a God-given call. Does this diminish his act of charity in any way? What affect, if any, does one’s reason for giving have on the ultimate value of the action?

CHAPTER 28: BRAINIACS REVISITED

AUTHOR'S NOTE: "God loves a cheerful giver" (NIV), says 2 Corinthians 9:7. Have you had instances when you were cheerful and times you weren't? How did you feel after giving in both situations?

- Does knowing the scientific basis for our charity increase your faith that God is the grand designer of our lives, or is science a threat to faith in a higher power?

- What benefits do you derive from giving of your time, talent, or treasure? Which of these motivates you the most?

- Do you think God cares whether or not we focus our giving efforts in one area or not? And if God doesn't care, then why do you think the author felt compelled to gain more focus on the family's giving? Do you think those are valid reasons?

CHAPTER 29: FILLING

AUTHOR'S NOTE: "We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works" (Ephesians 2:10, NIV). Have you thought much about good works being one of the reasons God created us? How does that make you feel? What do you think it means?

- The author writes, "And this is the trouble with abundance. If we are around it too long, it starts to seem normal somehow, as if that is how it has always been and that is how it will always be" (p. 183). Do you agree that abundance can be troublesome? How does this idea relate to the problem of food waste mentioned in this chapter.
- The family chooses hunger as their main service focus. What cause would you say is #1 in your list for support and why?
- In this chapter, the author's kids have an "aha moment" where they come close to truly understanding the magnitude of the need in their community. What experience can you recall where Christ provided such an aha moment for you. And did that moment lead to lasting motivation for you? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 30: A HOMEMADE HALLOWEEN

AUTHOR'S NOTE: 2 Corinthians 10:12 tells us not to compare ourselves to others, but we all do it anyway. Why do you think that is? How do you think God feels about our need for competition and comparison?

- There is a fine line between doing it yourself and creating undue stress for yourself. Where is this line for you? What benefit, if any, is derived from voluntarily making things harder on yourself in order to be more resourceful and own what you have?

- This chapter mentions websites like Facebook and Pinterest. What do you make of this idea that these sites encourage us to compare the “‘highlight reels’ of others to our own cutting room floor” (p. 195)? And, if this is a case, what is our responsibility as Christians in using these sites?

- In this chapter, the children sacrificed the “perfect” costume for ones they had a hand in creating. When, if ever, do you think perfection is important, and when do you think “good enough” is OK.

CHAPTER 31: CHRISTMAS TREE CARNAGE

AUTHOR'S NOTE: One of my favorite sayings is “God won’t give me anything I can’t handle, I just wish He didn’t trust me so much.” In Jeremiah 29:11, we are told the Lord has plans for each of us to prosper, giving us hope and our future. What do you think that means? How do trials and tribulations fit into this for you?

- In this chapter, the author called the family’s Christmas tree hunt an adventure in “overblown expectations.” What role do you believe your expectations play in your peace, joy, and contentment?
- Is it possible to adjust expectations to increase your level of satisfaction with your life’s circumstances? What role does your faith play in helping you gain perspective in these situations?
- What stories can you share about your own family when things weren’t perfect? What value do you derive from those stories today? How do those stories help knit you together as a family?

CHAPTER 32: THE SANTA CLAUSE

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I wish I could say that I am constantly prayerful, but I must admit that I tend to “step up my prayer game” when I feel like I really want or need something. With that in mind, read Psalm 37:4 (NIV). How do you take “delight in the Lord”? Is it in a special activity or space? And what do you think is meant by receiving “all the desires of your heart”? How can this verse be misconstrued in our culture?

- Were you surprised by the amount of money that Americans spend on Christmas? Do you feel like this money is wasted, or do you see value in the gifts we give? And how about the gifts themselves—what gifts do you remember from your Christmases past?

- What do you think of the family’s “Santa Clause?” What might have been the risk/reward had the family opted for no purchased gifts at all?

- How can we put more “Christ” back in Christmas?

CHAPTER 33: THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

AUTHOR'S NOTE: John 1:6-10 talks about John the Baptist, who was an incredible prophet and even more important to me because of his humility. Do you know someone who you find unusually humble? What can we learn from people who are comfortable being vulnerable and admitting their failings?

- What do you think about the couple's decision to buy this one non-experience gift for their daughter? Is it a cop-out? What might have happened had they purchased a less expensive option? Or not bought it at all? Where do we draw the line between Scrooge and sane consumer?

- The author's mother describes how her childhood doll had genuine meaning for her. In what ways can "stuff" help us to reconnect with one another. How can we assure this kind of connection happens more often?

- Why do you think the author chose the John 1 passage as the epigraph for this chapter?

CHAPTER 34: CHRISTMAS PRESENT

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I tend to overcomplicate things. And frankly, sometimes Jesus' words can be confusing. But in Matthew 22:37-39, Jesus cuts through the clutter for the most hard-headed folks like me, and gives us the Greatest Commandment to make things simple and clear. How do you live this out? What is the most difficult for you? What is the easiest? Why?

- What do you think of the family's "Jesus Gift" tradition? Do you think such a thing would be good for your own family? How might you modify the idea for your own family?

- Through their savings, the couple was able to donate twice as much as they had in years past. Did you expect they would have given more? What if they had chosen to avoid purchases altogether (including experiences), and given that money away? What would they have missed out on? What might they have gained?

- The family took time to give back on Christmas Day. In what ways does your family honor the life of Christ on Christmas Day?

PART FIVE: THE RESULTS



CHAPTER 35: YEAR IN REVIEW

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Read Romans 12:2. What does it mean to conform? Do you? If you have chosen during times in your life to step out of the norm, what did you do? How did it feel? Was it Scripturally motivated?

- The family bought four items during the year. Do you consider their experiment a success or a failure?
- The author writes that friends and family were also influenced by their challenge, which embodies the quote “Your life may be the only Bible people ever read.” What practical challenge could you undertake that would demonstrate to others that you are a Christ-follower without being preachy?
- Of all of the things the family says they learned as part of this experiment (three things on pages 233-34, the kids’ lessons about worth and worthlessness on page 236, the “secret” on page 238), which is the most profound to you?