

1.31.21

The Value of Simplicity**Matthew 6.24-34****Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

Is your living space neat, organized, and tidy, or is it somewhat overflowing with piles and stuff? If you have a garage, is there a vehicle in it, or stuff? Do you have stuff in storage in addition to what you have in your home? Have you reached a stage in your life when you're happier when things are leaving your home rather than coming in? As one person noted (Peter Walsh), *"Clutter is not just the stuff on your floor. It's anything that stands between you and the life you want to be living."* The truth is if we're not careful our possessions can end up possessing us which is one reason why the tenth commandment warns us against covetousness, the insatiable desire to have and to possess more and more which leads to greed, waste, corruption, deceit, warped priorities, stealing, and oppression. (Exodus 20:17), *"You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."*

Richard Foster writes in *Celebration of Discipline* (p. 79), "The Christian Discipline of simplicity is an ***inward reality*** that results in an ***outward life-style***. Both the inward and the outward aspects of simplicity are essential." Simplicity is part of our calling as a disciple of Jesus Christ. **The Value of Simplicity is it gives us Freedom.** **Jesus modeled an amazing simplicity of life.** He told his disciples as he sent them out (**Matthew 10:9-10**, NLT), *"Don't take any money in your money belts—no gold, silver, or even copper coins. Don't carry a traveler's bag with a change of clothes and sandals or even a walking stick."* He was trying to teach them radical trust in God and the freedom of simplicity. Many great teachers emphasize the value and freedom that comes with a simple life. The Greek philosopher Socrates said, *"Having the fewest wants, I am nearest to the gods."* **Ecclesiastes 7:29** (Jerusalem Bible) puts it this way, ***"God made man simple, man's complex problems are his own devising."***

Our tool to represent simplicity is a hammer. It is a simple yet essential tool that can be used to build up, renovate, or tear down; to drive a nail to hold something together, or remove nail and take something apart. Just a handle and hammer head, nothing more. Simple.

In the second half of Matthew chapter 6 in verses 19-34 Jesus emphasizes simple trust in our loving God, seeking first the kingdom of God, and not worrying about material things. This is easier said than done, isn't it? Jesus speaks of the futility of building up treasures on earth that will rot, wear out, or might be stolen or lost and the wisdom of storing up treasure in heaven. Jesus says we all choose who or what we serve in life and emphasizes the importance of where we place our trust.

Jesus says, **Matthew 6:24-34**, "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. 25 Therefore I tell you, do not **worry** about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 And can any of you by **worrying** add a single hour to your span of life? 28 And why do you **worry** about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—**you of little faith?** 31 **Therefore do not worry**, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' 32 For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 **But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness**, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 **"So do not worry** about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring **worries** of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

Some people are more or less likely to worry depending on their temperament and as a result have more or less difficulty with what Jesus is saying here. My mother worried about everything. However, we all must wrestle with the fact that whoever we are and however God made us, there are aspects of following Jesus and doing what he says that we may find easier or harder than others. Just as some of the Spiritual Disciplines will be easier or harder for us to engage in and practice. That doesn't change the fact that Jesus clearly, plainly, and repeatedly (**five times**) tells us in these

verses not to worry about what we will eat, drink, wear, the length of our life, or the future. Jesus invites all who follow him to a simple way of life in which seeking first the kingdom of God influences every other aspect of our life. The simplicity of Kingdom-first living gives us freedom from obsessing about ourselves, our appearance, our reputation, what we have in comparison to other people, or the opinions of other people. It centers our life on the Kingdom of God and gives us a calm, solid center from which we live our life in freedom and contentment. This is urgently needed by many people.

Richard Foster writes (86), ***“The central point for the Discipline of simplicity is to seek the kingdom of God and the righteousness of his kingdom first and then everything necessary will come in its proper order. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of Jesus’ insight at this point.”*** Jesus is not forbidding wise, prudent foresight. The Bible tells us in various places that we’re to work hard, to be diligent in our responsibilities, to care for our family, and to be generous and help provide for others. These things take dedication, purpose, and planning. Jesus is not advocating being foolish, thriftless, or lazy. What Jesus is discouraging is anxious, fearful worry, about our life, what we’ll eat, drink, and wear, how long we’ll live or the future. He discourages this kind of worry because it’s harmful and reflects a lack of faith in God.

Jesus uses the phrase ***“You of little faith”*** in verse **Matthew 6:30** to describe those who are wracked with anxious worry. ***“You of little faith”*** is a phrase Jesus uses repeatedly in Matthew’s Gospel to describe and chide the disciples. In **Matthew 8:26** the disciples are with Jesus in a boat during a storm and they cry, *“Lord, save us! We are perishing!”* And he said to them, ***“Why are you afraid, you of little faith?”*** In **14:31** when Peter begins sinking in the water and cries out, *“Lord, save me!”* Jesus reaches out and catches him saying, ***“You of little faith, why did you doubt?”*** Finally, in **16:8** after Jesus fed 4,000 people, a frustrated and exasperated Christ says to the disciples, ***“You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread?”*** In all these situations Jesus wants us to understand we can trust him, and we can trust God, so we need not anxiously worry about our life our or needs. I don’t know about you, but I’d rather not be known for worrying and being called, ***“You of little faith.”***

Worry doesn't help anything, but it hurts everything. Worry is useless and can raise our blood pressure, lead to headaches and other stress induced ailments, even heart attacks. Worrying doesn't add to our life, it is more likely to shorten it. When Jesus encourages us to look at the birds and to consider the lilies of the field, it is a way of saying, *"Open your eyes, look up and look down, look all around you and you will see God at work, and reasons not to worry but to have faith and to trust God with your life."* Even with all we're facing right now, this is not only still true, but also probably even more important for us to remember for our own physical, mental, and spiritual health.

When Jesus says, "Look at the birds of the air," many of us who are bird lovers are happy to do so. Jesus, who was such an astute observer of nature and everyday life, notes that birds don't sow, reap, or gather into barns, yet God feeds them. Some of us might say, *"God feeds them through me because I put out seed and suet,"* and that would be true. God often provides for birds and for people through others. Birds don't sit in their nest expecting food to fall into their mouths unless they're babies. Mature birds look for food every day, but they don't worry about it as far as I know, it's just what they do. I've never seen a chickadee with a worried look on its face. Mature Christians act the same as mature birds; we go about our daily business trusting that the God who gave us life can be trusted to preserve our life by providing for our needs. This is simple, but it's not easy.

Clarence Jordan was a terrific and courageous Christian who in 1942 founded Koinonia Farm (<https://www.koinoniafarm.org/>) in south Georgia as an experiment in Christian communal living which **proclaimed that in Christ walls of culture, race, and status have been torn down**. This was a very radical stance to take in segregated Georgia in 1942. The establishment of Koinonia Farm was an illustration of today's text from Matthew 6. Jordan wrote, "In the establishment of Koinonia Farm, I remember quite well that we were supposed to pay the fellow \$2,500 down. Martin England, who was a missionary under the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society to Burma, and I started it together. We agreed on the common purse and I had the idea that Martin was loaded. I don't know why I should think that, he being an American Baptist missionary, but he talked about, *"Let's do this and let's do that,"* and I said, *"Yeah, let's do"* and I

thought he had the money. And so I said, *“Let’s do this and let’s do that”* and he said, *“Yeah, let’s do,”* and when we finally pooled our common assets, we had \$57.13. We were three weeks from the time we had agreed to pay \$2500 down! To make a long story short, we put down that \$2500. A fellow brought it to us and said the Lord had sent him with it. I didn’t question him – we took it right quick before the Lord changed his mind.

Years later, a newspaper reporter came out there and asked, *“Who finances this project?”* Well, all along, folks who had helped us said that the Lord had sent them, so I said this to this newspaper reporter, *“The Lord does.”* *“Yeah,”* he said, *“I know. But who supports it?”* I said, *“The Lord.”* *“Yeah I know,”* he said, *“but who, who, who, uh, who – you know what I’m talking about. Who’s back of it?”* I said, *“The Lord.”* He said, *“But what I mean is, how do you pay your bills?”* I said, *“By check.”* *“But,”* he said, *“I mean – hell, don’t you know what I mean?”* I said, *“Yeah, friend, I know what you mean. The trouble is you don’t know what I mean!”*¹

If one is outside the kingdom of God, it is hard to understand the simple trust that is part of believing in God and following Christ. Those of us who have committed ourselves to Jesus understand that there is no way we can give more to him, who gave his very life for us on the cross, than he has already given to us. What we give financially and of our time can be significant, but it still pales in comparison to the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf. We trust that God who did not withhold even the life of God’s own Son, will take care of the necessities we need to live as we seek to live simply and faithfully with the kingdom of God as our priority.

Living simply and trusting are part of *“Striving first for the kingdom.”* The first people who followed Jesus gave a great deal of themselves in every way and gave up a lot to follow Christ and to pursue the kingdom of God. They left their homes, families, and in some cases, their jobs to be with and to serve the Lord. Others who believed in Jesus and the work God was doing through him gave significantly of their resources so

¹ 1 The Substance of Faith and other Cotton Patch Sermons By Clarence Jordan, Edited by Dallas Lee, (New York: Association Press, 1972), page 85.

that the Lord could carry on his ministry. The level of commitment of the disciples can be heard in Peter's statement to Jesus in **Luke 18:28-30**, "*Look we have left our homes and followed you.*" And Jesus said **to them**, "*Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.*"

You notice that Peter asks the question, but Jesus says, "to them," because Peter is expressing a question that's on the minds of all the disciples, "*What's in it for me? What are we going to get?*" Jesus assures them that when we put "the kingdom of God," first in our lives then we will be blessed both in this age and in the age to come with eternal life. It's hard for me to believe that it was 15 years ago that several dozen BBC folks spent part of the month of January 2006 in Biloxi, Mississippi helping rebuild and fix several homes and a small church that had been damaged by Hurricane Katrina. It was an eye-opening experience to see the scope of the devastation first-hand. I have never seen anything like it in my life. We heard from many people how grateful and thankful they were that Christians from all over the country and as far away as Cape Cod would care enough to come and help them. All of us who went on that trip or another one to an area ravaged by a hurricane have been reminded what is truly important – even more than our clothes, cars, possessions, and homes – that is life in the kingdom of God. All the other things we can spend so much time worrying about are temporary and can be lost in a moment, but life in the kingdom of God is eternal so that is the wisest and best place to invest our trust, time, passion, and resources because what we invest in God's work, we have for keeps.

"Live simply so others may simply live," is not a cliché, but a truth that is becoming more urgent every day not just for our sake, but for the sake of other people, and for the precious planet God created to sustain life. A practical idea that combines a couple spiritual disciplines is fasting from a meal once a week, praying, and donating the food or money you save to hunger relief locally or globally. Thomas G. Pettepiece writes, in *Visions of a World Hungry: Study, Prayer and Action*, "**A simpler life-style** is not a panacea. It may be embarked upon for the wrong reasons – out of guilt, as a substitute for political action, or in a quest for moral "purity." But it can also be

meaningful and significant: as an act of **faith** performed for the sake of personal integrity and as an expression of a personal commitment to a more equitable distribution of the world's wealth; as an act of **self-defense** against the mind polluting effects of our overconsumption; as an act of **solidarity** with the majority of humankind, which has no choice about life-style; as an act of **celebration** of the riches found in creativity, spirituality, and community with others rather than in mindless materialism."

A group of young working adults got together to visit their favorite college professor. The professor was happy to see them all again. The conversation soon turned to complaints about stress in work and worries in life. The professor just smiled and went to the kitchen and got a pitcher of spring water and an assortment of cups - some porcelain, some plastic, some glass, some plain looking and some looked rather expensive and exquisite. The professor invited his former students to take a cup and pour a drink for themselves. When all the students had a cup in hand filled with water, the professor said, "If you notice, all the nice looking, expensive cups are taken up, leaving behind the plain and cheap ones. While it is normal that you only want the best for yourselves, that is the source of your problems and worries. What all of you wanted was water, not the cup, but we unconsciously went for the better cups. Just like in life, if Life is Water, then the jobs, money and position and symbols of status in society are the cups. They are just tools to hold Life, but **it is the quality of Life that matters most**. If we concentrate on the cup, we won't have time to enjoy the water in it." **The key is to simplicity is to enjoy the water, not the cup.**

The Value of Simplicity is it gives us freedom. Enjoy life in the kingdom, seek it first, and everything else in life falls into its proper place. As the prophet Isaiah said (26:3), ***"Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace – in peace – because they trust in you."***

Blessing: "Always remember the essence of Christian holiness is simplicity and purity: one design, one desire: entire devotion to God." John Wesley

Questions for Discussion or Reflection:

1. Is clutter and an excess of “stuff” and material things a challenge for you at all? If so, how does it impact your life?
2. How would you describe the value or benefit of simplicity?
3. Richard Foster writes in *Celebration of Discipline* (p. 79), “The Christian Discipline of simplicity is an ***inward reality*** that results in an ***outward life-style***. Both the inward and the outward aspects of simplicity are essential.” How would you describe the inward reality and outward lifestyle of simplicity?
4. As a group or on your own describe what the Bible teaches about possessions and our attitude toward them. In addition to Matthew 6:24-34, consider Exodus 20:17, Proverbs 15:16-17, Luke 9:25 and 12:13-34, 1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19, and Ephesians 5:5.
5. Review and discuss the “ten controlling principles for the outward expression of simplicity” on pages 90-95 of *Celebration of Discipline*. Which is the easiest or most helpful for you? Which would be the hardest? Which one(s) can you try to practice in a more diligent manner in the future?
6. List one thing you will do in this week to simplify your life. Do it.