

The Gift of Simplicity

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Matthew 6:19-34

Sermons Series:
Best Spiritual
Practices

*This frantic,
cluttered life
reflects a lack
of priorities
and conten-
tment and the
belief that it's
up to me.*

I love the poem by Judith
Viorst entitled *Self-
Improvement Program*.

I've finished six pillows in
needlepoint
And I'm reading Jane
Austen and Kant,
And I'm up to the pork with
black beans in Chinese
Cooking.
I don't have to struggle to
find myself
For I already know what I
want.
I want to be healthy and
wise and extremely good-
looking.

I'm learning new glazes in
Pottery Class,
And I'm playing new chords
in Guitar,
And in Yoga I'm starting to
master the lotus position.
I don't have to ponder
priorities
For I already know what
they are:
To be good-looking,
healthy, and wise.
And adored in addition.

I'm improving my serve
with a tennis pro,
And I'm practicing my verb
forms in Greek
And in Primal Scream
Therapy all my frustrations
are vented.

I don't have to ask what I'm
searching for
Since I already know what I
seek
To be good-looking,
healthy, and wise
And adored. And contented.

I've bloomed in Organic
Gardening,
And in Dance I have
tightened my thighs,
And in Consciousness
Raising there's no one
around who can top me.
And I'm working all day
And I'm working all night
To be good-looking,
healthy, and wise.
And adored. And contented.

And brave. And well-read.
And a marvelous hostess.
And bilingual.
And athletic. And artistic...
Oh God, won't someone
please stop me?

I like this poem because it
reflects the frenetic, driven
nature of the times we live in. It
hits home in reflecting a person
who is pulled in so many differ-
ent directions by a compulsive
need to achieve and succeed,
and to be liked. This frantic,
cluttered life reflects a lack of
priorities and contentment and
the belief that it's up to me.
This is a life that has no center.

He [God] knows that we have an almost compulsive need to take care of ourselves by means of earthly things.

If we don't know who we are or what we are about, we will be pulled into living as if more of anything and everything must be better.

Our lives are complex. We cannot escape the need to juggle the many responsibilities, relationships and realities of our lives. But I believe we can avoid the fractured and fragmented state of so many in our times by stepping back from the cultural drive for more activity and more stuff. G.K. Chesterton wrote, "There are two ways to get enough: one is to continue to accumulate more and more. The other is to desire less." The desire for less is the essence of simplicity. In his book, *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster defines "The Christian discipline of simplicity as an inward reality that results in an outward life-style."

Our passage for today from Matthew 6 is from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus wants to teach us about the life of discipleship—how to live my life as he would live it if he were me. This may be the best on simplicity as Jesus reveals the problem we face, the perspective we need and the practices that lead to a life of simplicity.

Jesus begins his teaching with a negative and positive command that reveals the problem we face in living a life of simplicity. He says "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth but do lay up for

yourselves treasures in heaven." The "treasures" in view here are not just great riches but all those things that we trust in and cling to.

God knows our problem. He knows that we have an almost compulsive need to take care of ourselves by means of earthly things. Materialism is a rampant cancer that is now a worldwide temptation because so many look to bank accounts, property, retirement funds, or myriad things to provide security and significance.

In his book, *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster says this: "Because we lack a divine Center, our need for security has led us into an insane attachment to things. We really must understand that the lust for affluence in contemporary society is psychotic.... We crave things we neither need nor enjoy. We buy things we do not want to impress people we do not like. We are made to feel ashamed to wear clothes or drive cars until they are worn out. The mass media have convinced us that to be out of step with fashion is to be out of step with reality. It is time we awaken to the fact that conformity to a sick society is to be sick. Until we see how unbalanced our culture has become at this point, we will not be able to deal with the mammon spirit within ourselves nor will we desire Christian simplicity. We need to understand that Jesus declared war on the materialism of his day. And I would suggest

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that he declares war on the materialism of our day as well.”

Now listen carefully. I am *not* suggesting that material things are bad. Indeed, material things are a part of God’s good creation, and they are to be enjoyed as gifts from God. The *problem* is when we look to them to provide for us what only God is meant to provide.

The *problem* is when we hold too tightly to earthly treasure, because it is bound to disappoint. As the passage says, earthly things can be destroyed, stolen, and even affected by a weak economy and a changing stock market.

The *problem* with fixing our focus on earthly treasure is that it will become the very thing we will set our heart on. Jesus was not saying that it is *hard* to serve two masters. He was making it clear that it is impossible to serve two masters. If our treasure is in a bank account or educational diploma or any possession or property, our mind will not be on God.

So how do you know where your treasure is? Look at your calendar and your checkbook. How do you spend your time and your money? This will reveal what your priorities are, where you have set your heart. The way we order our lives reflects where our treasure is and who or what is the master of our lives. Let me say that again.

Once we have addressed the problem we face in being pulled away from God to trust

other things to be our master, we may say, Well, I have a real life with real needs. Who will take care of my daily needs on earth? Jesus answers that question. Jesus tells us, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear.... Your Father knows that you need all these things. But strive for (or seek) first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

This reflects the perspective we need for living a life of simplicity. We will all have a real life that we are concerned about, but worry is inappropriate because it indicates a lack of trust in God. We cannot overestimate the importance of Jesus’ words. The kingdom is the only thing that can be central in the life of discipleship. As we are faithful to this calling, everything else will be given its proper attention.

How, then, do we cultivate the inward reality of joyful unconcern from possessions or worry over life concerns? How do we maintain the perspective of simplicity reflected by Paul, who said, “I have learned to be content with whatever I have” (Philippians 4:11). It can be summed up in these words: Grace, gratitude, and generosity.

To receive what we have as a gift from God is what grounds us in grace.

If we recognize that all of life is a gift of grace, then we will respond with gratitude toward God and generosity toward others.

The perspective we need first and foremost is to believe that everything—including our very lives—are a gift of God’s grace. This is not only true for salvation but for all of life—even when it comes to daily bread. What we have is not the result of work, or jobs, or pay checks. What we have we receive as the gracious care of God. The birds of the air and the lilies of the field all witness to an order in the Kingdom in which our gracious God provides for the needs of His creatures. All of life is grace. And simplicity is characterized by an inward awareness and reliance on God’s grace—God accomplishing for us what we cannot accomplish for ourselves.

If we recognize that all of life is a gift of grace, then we will respond with gratitude toward God and generosity toward others. Foster goes so far as to state, “If our goods are not available to the community when it is clearly right and good, then they are stolen goods.” We are greedy and cling to our possessions when we are anxious about tomorrow. But when we come to see God as the almighty Creator and our loving Father, we are grateful. And we are willing to be generous in sharing with others because we know that He will care for us. If someone is in need, we are free to help them.

When we are seeking first the kingdom of God, grace,

gratitude and generosity will characterize the inward reality of our lives—the perspective we need to have in order to live a life of simplicity.

You may be thinking, well that is well and good if things are going well, but you don’t know the circumstances I’m facing. That is true. But let me tell you about a recent encounter I had with a man at the Lamb’s Center. I happened to be standing near one of the staff as one of the guests or clients shared what had happened to him. He had been homeless, but somehow had gotten an opportunity to do some gardening for a woman. He did a good job and was affordable, so she continued to find jobs for him to do. He was so responsible and trustworthy, that she offered him a place to live as well as the ongoing responsibility of being the caretaker of her property.

This story was so amazing to me, but what struck me most were his words. He said, “I always tell people that if you trust the Lord and follow the principles of the Lord, he will take of you and you will be blessed.” Now think about this: This is coming from a man whose external reality had previously consisted of being jobless and homeless. His outward lifestyle might have resulted in an inward reality of fear, anxiety and resentment. But I can tell you, his face was radiant and filled with love and

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joy and peace and enthusiasm in sharing what God had done.

I've been thinking about him a lot. It dawned on me that he is a living illustration of Christian simplicity—an inward reality that results in an outward life-style. He was seeking the kingdom first. He recognized God's love and care and relied on His grace even when things weren't going his way, and was grateful to God and gave Him the glory when his life turned around.

The perspective of seeking first the kingdom of God is relevant and applicable no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in. In fact, this perspective gives order to our lives in ever—changing circumstances.

So how do we seek first the kingdom? What are the practices that lead to a life of simplicity? Richard Foster has some wonderful ideas in both of his books, *Celebration of Discipline* and *Freedom of Simplicity*, which you can find in the bookstore and in our library.

But I want to turn to Henry Nouwen's book, *Spiritual Direction*, which gives a helpful illustration or image that helps answer that question of how we arrange our lives to practice simplicity. "I like to think of the spiritual life as a wagon wheel: when we run along the rim, we can reach only one spoke at a time, but when we start at the hub, we are in touch with all the spokes

at once as well as the rim. What does the wheel represent? The hub is communion with God in our heart, connecting with the many spokes of community, on out to the rim of the wheel of ministry (or our outward experience). If we are too active in (our lives and even in) our ministry, it's like we are running around the rim trying to reach everybody at once, all the time. But God says, 'Start in the hub; live in the hub. Then you will be connected with all the spokes. And when you get to the rim, you won't have to run so fast.'"

That's good advice for all of us who, like the person in the opening poem, are tempted to run very fast and try very hard. If we focus on external experiences, even in ministry, we will try to do too much and be pulled in many different directions. This illustration points to simplicity as a way of cultivating an inward reality that results in an outward lifestyle. It shows us how to seek first the kingdom of God.

Start at the hub or center. Make it your first priority to know Christ and to live in communion with him. We spent a whole sermon series this spring on sacred rhythms that enable us to center our lives in Christ. Find the intentional practices that enable you to cultivate the inward reality of simplicity and a life centered in Christ. Practices like prayer, silence, solitude and Sabbath will help you

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focus on the hub of your life. Find the intentional practices.

The spokes of the wheel are the *relationships* that help us to keep company with Jesus—the family, friends and faith community we connect to that help support us in our lives in Christ through worship, small groups, or mentoring relationships. We need others to support us in our aim to seek first the kingdom of God. So make it a priority this fall to connect with others intentionally. There are myriad opportunities listed in the bulletin today that are meant to help you connect the practices and relationships that will help cultivate this inward reality of a life centered in Christ. Find the one that meets you where you are and don't hesitate to ask me or any of the staff to help you in this if needed.

Finally, the rim of the wheel represents our ministry. This is not just our volunteer time at the church. Ministry is the outward lifestyle that flows from the inward reality from marriage, parenting, vocation, justice, hospitality, and on it goes. Ministry is the outward lifestyle that reflects our grateful and generous response to God's grace.

We have myriad opportunities to do this, some of them listed in the bulletin. But I encourage you to sign up specifically for the Labor for Your Neighbor event and be a part of a church-wide experience to generously give and

serve our community in the name of the Lord.

The gift of simplicity is to order our lives from the center so that the inward reality can result in an outward lifestyle. Simplicity is key in enabling us to obey Christ's Greatest Command: "To love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love others as ourselves." Let us pray.