



The Discipline of Simplicity

By Richard J. Foster

Simplicity is freedom. Duplicity is bondage. Simplicity brings joy and balance. Duplicity brings anxiety and fear. The preacher of Ecclesiastes observes that "God made man simple; man's complex problems are of his own devising" (Eccles. 7:30). Because many of us are experiencing the liberation God brings through simplicity we are once again singing an old Shaker hymn:

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'Tis the gift to be free,
'Tis the gift to come down where you ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gained,
To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed.
To turn, turn will be our delight
'Till by turning, turning we come round right.

The Christian Discipline of simplicity is an inward reality that results in an outward lifestyle. Both the inward and the outward aspects of simplicity are essential. We deceive ourselves if we believe we can possess the inward reality without its having a profound effect on how we live. To attempt to arrange an outward lifestyle of simplicity without the inward reality leads to deadly legalism.

Simplicity begins in inward focus and unity Experiencing the inward reality liberates us outwardly. Speech becomes truthful and honest. The lust for status and position is gone because we no longer need status and position. We cease from showy extravagance not on the grounds of being unable to afford it, but on the grounds of principle. Our goods become available to others. We join the experience that Richard E. Byrd, after months alone in the barren Arctic, recorded in his journal, "I am learning ... that a man can live profoundly without masses of things. "

Contemporary culture lacks both the inward reality and the outward life-style of simplicity. We must live in the modern world, and we are affected by its fractured and fragmented state. We are trapped in a maze of competing attachments. One moment we make decisions on the basis of sound reason and the next moment out of fear of what others will think of us. We have no unity or focus around which our lives are oriented.

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. It is psychotic because it has completely lost touch with reality. We crave things we neither need nor enjoy. We buy things we do not want to impress people we do not like. Where planned obsolescence leaves off, psychological obsolescence takes over. 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.

This psychosis permeates even our mythology. The modern hero is [one] who purposefully becomes rich rather than [one] who voluntarily becomes poor ... Covetousness we call ambition. Hoarding we call prudence. Greed we call industry ...

Courageously, we need to articulate new, more human ways to live. We should take exception to the modern psychosis that defines people by how much they can produce or what they earn. We should experiment with bold new alternatives to the present death-giving system. The Spiritual Discipline of simplicity is not a lost dream, but a recurrent vision throughout history. It can be recaptured today. It must be.

THE BIBLE AND SIMPLICITY

Before attempting to forge a Christian view of simplicity it is necessary to destroy the prevailing notion that the Bible is ambiguous about economic issues. Often it is felt that our response to wealth is an individual matter. The Bible's teaching in this area is said to be strictly a matter of private interpretation. We try to believe that Jesus did not address himself to practical economic questions.

No serious reading of Scripture can substantiate such a view. The biblical injunctions against the exploitation of the poor and the accumulation of wealth are clear and straightforward. The Bible challenges nearly every economic value of contemporary society. For example, the Old Testament takes exception to the popular notion of an absolute right to private property. The earth belongs to God, says Scripture, and therefore cannot be held perpetually (Lev. 25 :23). The Old Testament legislation of the year of Jubilee stipulated that all land was to revert back to its original owner. In fact, the Bible declares that wealth itself belongs to God, and one purpose of the year of Jubilee was to provide a regular redistribution of wealth. Such a radical view of economics flies in the face of nearly all contemporary belief and practice. Had Israel faithfully observed the Jubilee it would have dealt a death blow to the perennial problem of the rich becoming richer and the poor becoming poorer.

Constantly the Bible deals decisively with the inner spirit of slavery that an idolatrous attachment to wealth brings. "If riches increase, set not your heart on them," counsels the Psalmist (Ps. 62: 10). The tenth commandment is against covetousness, the inner lust to have, which leads to stealing and oppression



Jesus declared war on the materialism of his day. (And I would suggest that he declares war on the materialism of our day as well.) The Aramaic term for wealth is "mammon" and Jesus condemns it as a rival God: "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Luke 16:13). He speaks frequently and unambiguously to economic issues. He says, "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" and "Woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation" (Luke 6:20,24) ... He saw the grip that wealth can have on a person. He knew that "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also," which is precisely why he commanded his followers: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth" (Matt. 6:21,19). He is not saying that the heart should or should not be where the treasure is. He is stating the plain fact that wherever you find the treasure, you will find the heart.

He exhorted the rich young ruler not just to have an inner attitude of detachment from his possessions, but literally to get rid of his possessions if he wanted the kingdom of God (Matt. 19: 16-22). He says "Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). He counseled people who came seeking God, "Sell your possessions, and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail..." (Luke 12:33). He told the parable of the rich farmer whose life centered in hoarding—we would call him prudent; Jesus called him a fool (Luke 12: 16-21). He states that if we really want the kingdom of God we must, like a merchant in search of fine pearls, be willing to sell everything we have to get it (Matt. 13:45,46). He calls all who would follow him to a joyful life of carefree unconcern for possessions: "Give to everyone who begs from you; and of him who takes away your goods do not ask them again" (Luke 6:30).

Jesus speaks to the question of economics more than any other single social issue. If, in a comparatively simple society, our Lord lays such strong emphasis upon the spiritual dangers of wealth, how much more should we who live in a highly affluent culture take seriously the economic question?

The Epistles reflect the same concern. Paul says, "Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction" (1 Tim. 6:9) ... A deacon is not to be "greedy for gain" (1 Tim. 3:8). The writer to the Hebrews counsels, "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never fail you nor for sake you'" (Heb. 13:5) ... Paul calls covetousness idolatry and commands stern discipline against anyone guilty of greed (Eph. 5:5; 1 Cor. 5: 11) ... He counsels the wealthy not to trust in their wealth, but in God, and to share generously with others (1 Tim. 6:17-19).

Having said all this, I must hasten to add that God intends that we should have adequate material provision. There is misery today from a simple lack of provision just as there is misery when people try to make a life out of provision. Forced poverty is evil and



should be renounced. Nor does the Bible condone an extreme asceticism. Scripture declares consistently and forcefully that the creation is good and to be enjoyed. Asceticism makes an unbiblical division between a good spiritual world and an evil material world and so finds salvation in paying as little attention as possible to the physical realm of existence.

Asceticism and simplicity are mutually incompatible. Occasional superficial similarities in practice must never obscure the radical difference between the two. Asceticism renounces possessions. Simplicity sets possessions in proper perspective. Asceticism finds no place for a "land flowing with milk and honey." Simplicity rejoices in this gracious provision from the hand of God. Asceticism finds contentment only when it is abased. Simplicity knows contentment in both abasement and abounding (Phil. 4:12)...

Simplicity is the only thing that sufficiently reorients our lives so that possessions can be genuinely enjoyed without destroying us. Without simplicity we will either capitulate to the "mammon" spirit of this present evil age, or we will fall into an un-Christian legalistic asceticism. Both lead to idolatry. Both are spiritually lethal.

Descriptions of the abundant material provision God gives his people abound in Scripture. "For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land ... a land... in which you will lack nothing" (Deut. 8:7-9). Warnings about the danger of provisions that are not kept in proper perspective also abound. "Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth'" (Deut. 8: 17).

The Spiritual Discipline of simplicity provides the needed perspective. Simplicity sets us free to receive the provision of God as a gift that is not ours to keep and can be freely shared with others. Once we recognize that the Bible denounces the materialist and the ascetic with equal vigor, we are prepared to turn our attention to the framing of a Christian understanding of simplicity.

THE OUTWARD EXPRESSION OF SIMPLICITY

To describe simplicity only as an inner reality is to say something false. The inner reality is not a reality until there is an outward expression. To experience the liberating spirit of simplicity will affect how we live. As I have warned earlier, every attempt to give specific application to simplicity runs the risk of a deterioration into legalism. It is a risk, however, that we must take, for to refuse to discuss specifics would banish the discipline to the theoretical... So, I suggest ten controlling principles for the outward expression of simplicity. They should never be viewed as laws but as only one attempt to flesh out the meaning of simplicity for today.



First, buy things for their usefulness rather than their status. Cars should be bought for their utility, not their prestige. Consider riding a bicycle. When you are considering an apartment, a condominium, or a house, thought should be given to livability rather than how much it will impress others

Consider your clothes. Most people ... buy clothes because they want to keep up with the fashions. Hang the fashions! Buy what you need If it is practical in your situation, learn the joy of making clothes John Wesley writes, "As ... for apparel, I buy the most lasting and, in general, the plainest I can. I buy no furniture but what is necessary and cheap."

Second, reject anything that is producing an addiction in you. Learn to distinguish between a real psychological need, like cheerful surroundings, and an addiction If you have become addicted to television, by all means sell your set or give it away. Any of the media that you find you cannot do without, get rid of: radios, stereos, magazines, videos, newspapers, books. If money has a grip on your heart, give some away and feel the inner release. Simplicity is freedom, not slavery. Refuse to be a slave to anything but God.

Remember, an addiction, by its very nature, is something that is beyond your control. Resolves of the will alone are useless in defeating a true addiction. You cannot just decide to be free of it. But you can decide to open this corner of your life to the forgiving grace and healing power of God. You can decide to allow loving friends who know the ways of prayer to stand with you

Third, develop a habit of giving things away. If you find that you are becoming attached to some possession, consider giving it to someone who needs it. I still remember the Christmas I decided that rather than buying or even making an item, I would give away something that meant a lot to me. My motive was selfish: I wanted to know the liberation that comes from even this simple act of voluntary poverty. The gift was a ten-speed bike. As I went to the person's home to deliver the present, I remember singing with new meaning the worship chorus, "Freely, freely you have received; freely, freely give." When my son Nathan was six years old he heard of a classmate who needed a lunch pail and asked me if he could give him his own lunch pail. Hallelujah! ...

Fourth, refuse to be propagandized by the custodians of modern gadgetry. Timesaving devices almost never save time Most gadgets are built to break down and wear out and so complicate our lives rather than enhance them. This problem is a plague in the toy industry Often children find more joy in playing with old pots and pans than with the latest space set. Look for toys that are educational and durable. Make some yourself.

Usually gadgets are an unnecessary drain on the energy resources of the world. The United States has less than six percent of the world's population, but consumes about thirty-three percent of the world's energy Environmental responsibility alone should keep us from buying the majority of the gadgets produced today



Fifth, learn to enjoy things without owning them. Owning things is an obsession in our culture. If we own it, we feel we can control it; and if we can control it, we feel it will give us more pleasure. The idea is an illusion. Many things in life can be enjoyed without possessing or controlling them. Share things. Enjoy the beach without feeling you have to buy a piece of it. Enjoy public parks and libraries.

Sixth, develop a deeper appreciation for the creation. Get close to the earth. Walk whenever you can. Listen to the birds. Enjoy the texture of grass and leaves. Smell the flowers. Marvel in the rich colors everywhere. Simplicity means to discover once again that "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Ps.24:1).

Seventh, look with a healthy skepticism at all "buy now, pay later" schemes. They are a trap and only deepen your bondage. Both Old and New Testaments condemn usury for good reasons. ("Usury" in the Bible is not used in the modern sense of exorbitant interest; it referred to any kind of interest at all.) Charging interest was viewed as an unbrotherly exploitation of another's misfortune, hence a denial of community. Jesus denounced usury as a sign of the old life and admonished his disciples to "lend, expecting nothing in return" (Luke 6:35).

These words of Scripture should not be elevated into some kind of universal law obligatory upon all cultures at all times. But neither should they be thought of as totally irrelevant to modern society Certainly prudence, as well as simplicity, demands that we use extreme caution before incurring debt.

Eighth, obey Jesus' instructions about plain, honest speech. "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil" (Matt. 5:37). If you consent to do a task, do it. Avoid flattery and half-truths. Make honesty and integrity the distinguishing characteristics of your speech. Reject jargon and abstract speculation whose purpose is to obscure and impress rather than to illuminate and inform.

Plain speech is difficult because we so seldom live out of the divine Center But if our speech comes out of obedience to the divine Center, we will find no reason to turn our "yes" into "no" and our "no" into "yes." We will be living in simplicity of speech because our words will have only one Source. Soren Kierkegaard writes: "If thou art absolutely obedient to God, then there is no ambiguity in thee and ... thou art mere simplicity before God ... One thing there is which all Satan's cunning and all the snares of temptation cannot take by surprise, and that is simplicity."

Ninth, reject anything that breeds the oppression of others. Perhaps no person has more fully embodied this principle than the eighteenth-century Quaker tailor John Woolman. His famous *Journal* is replete with tender references to his desire to live so as not to oppress others. "Here I was led into a close and laborious inquiry whether I... kept clear from all things which tended to stir up or were connected with wars; ... my heart was deeply



concerned that in [the] future I might in all things keep steadily to the pure truth, and live and walk in the plainness and simplicity of a sincere follower of Christ.... And here luxury and covetousness, with the numerous oppressions and other evils attending them, appeared very afflicting to me " This is one of the most difficult and sensitive issues for us to face, but face it we must. Do we sip our coffee and eat our bananas at the expense of exploiting Latin American peasants? In a world of limited resources, does our lust for wealth mean the poverty of others? Should we buy products that are made by forcing people into dull assembly-line jobs? Do we enjoy hierarchical relationships in the company or factory that keep others under us? Do we oppress our children or spouse because we feel certain tasks are beneath us?

Often our oppression is tinged with racism, sexism, and nationalism. The color of the skin still affects one's position in the company. The sex of a job applicant still affects the salary. The national origin of a person still affects the way he or she is perceived. May God give us prophets today who, like John Woolman, will call us "from the desire of wealth" so that we may be able to "break the yoke of oppression."

Tenth, shun anything that distracts you from seeking first the kingdom of God. It is so easy to lose focus in the pursuit of legitimate, even good things. Job, position, status, family, friends, security-these and many more can all too quickly be come the center of attention. George Fox warns, " ... there is the danger and the temptation to you, of drawing your minds into your business, and clogging them with it; so that ye can hardly do anything to the service of God ... and your minds will go into the things, and not over the things And then, if the Lord God cross you, and stop you by sea and land, and take (your) goods and customs from you, that your minds should not be cumbered, then that mind that is cumbered, will fret, being out of the power of God."

May God give you-and me-the courage, the wisdom, the strength always to hold the kingdom of God as the number one priority of our lives. To do so is to live in simplicity.

Richard J. Foster is the author of many bestselling books, including *A Year with God*, *Streams of Living Water*, and *Prayer*. This article is adapted from his book *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*.