

## 6. The Discipline of Simplicity

When we are truly in this interior simplicity our whole appearance is franker, more natural. This true simplicity . . . makes us conscious of a certain openness, gentleness, innocence, gaiety, and serenity, which is charming when we see it near to and continually, with pure eyes, O, how amiable this simplicity is! Who will give it to me? I leave all for this. It is the Pearl of the Gospel.

—FRANCOIS FENELON

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, JB). 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.

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. 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 life-style of simplicity without the inward reality leads to deadly legalism.

Simplicity begins in inward focus and unity. It means to live out of what Thomas Kelly calls "The Divine Center." Kierkegaard captured the nucleus of Christian simplicity well in the profound title of his book, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*.

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."<sup>1</sup>

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."<sup>2</sup> 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 the poor boy who purposefully becomes rich rather than the rich boy who voluntarily becomes poor. (We still find it hard to imagine that a girl could do either!) Covetousness we call ambition. Hoarding we call prudence. Greed we call industry.

Further, it is important to understand that the modern counterculture is hardly an improvement. It is a superficial change in life-style without dealing seriously with the root problems of a consumer society. Because the counterculture has always lacked a positive center it has inevitably degenerated into trivia. Arthur Gish states, "Much of the counter culture is a mirror of the worst features of the old sick society. The revolution is not free dope, free sex, and abortions on demand.... The pseudo-libertarian eroticism, elements of sadomasochism, and sexist advertisements in much of the underground press is part of the perversion of the old order and an expression of death."<sup>3</sup>

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. The wise sage understood that "He who trusts in his riches will wither" (Prov. 11:28).

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 graphically depicts the difficulty of the wealthy

entering the kingdom of God to be like a camel walking through the eye of a needle. With God, of course, all things are possible, but Jesus clearly understood the difficulty. 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 fall . . ." (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 every one 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 bishop is not to be a "lover of money" (1 Tim. 3:3). 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 forsake you'" (Heb. 13:5). James blames killings and wars on the lust for possessions: "You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war" (James 4:1, 2). Paul calls covetousness idolatry and commands stern discipline against anyone guilty of greed (Eph. 5:5; 1 Cor. 5:11). He lists greed alongside adultery and thievery and declares that those who live in such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. Paul 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.

### A Place to Stand

Archimedes once declared, "Give me a place to stand and I will move the earth." Such a focal point is important in every Discipline but is acutely so with simplicity. Of all the Disciplines simplicity is the most visible and therefore the most open to corruption. The majority of Christians have never seriously wrestled with the problem of simplicity, conveniently ignoring Jesus' many words on the subject. The reason is simple; this Discipline directly challenges our vested interests in an affluent life-style. But those who take the biblical teaching on simplicity seriously are faced with severe temptations toward legalism. In the earnest attempt to give concrete expression to Jesus' economic teaching, it is easy to mistake our particular expression of the teaching for the teaching itself. We wear this attire or buy that kind of house and canonize our choices as the simple life. This danger gives special importance to finding and clearly articulating an Archimedean focal point for simplicity.

We have such a focal point in the words of Jesus: "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 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? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. *But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well*" (Matt. 6:25-33, [italics added]).

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. Everything hinges upon maintaining the "first" thing as first. Nothing must come before the kingdom of God, including the desire for a simple life-style.

Simplicity itself becomes idolatry when it takes precedence over seeking the kingdom. In a particularly penetrating comment on this passage of Scripture, Soren Kierkegaard considers what sort of effort could be made to pursue the kingdom of God. Should a person get a suitable job in order to exert a virtuous influence? His answer: no, we must *first* seek God's kingdom. Then should we give away all our money to feed the poor? Again the answer: no, we must *first* seek God's kingdom.

Well, then perhaps we are to go out and preach this truth to the world that people are to seek first God's kingdom? Once again the answer is a resounding: no, we are *first* to seek the kingdom of God. Kierkegaard concludes, "Then in a certain sense it is nothing I shall do. Yes, certainly, in a certain sense it is nothing, become nothing before God, learn to keep silent; in this silence is the beginning, which is, *first* to seek God's Kingdom."<sup>4</sup>

Focus upon the kingdom produces the inward reality, and without the inward reality we will degenerate into legalistic trivia. Nothing else can be central. The desire to get out of the rat race cannot be central, the redistribution of the world's wealth cannot be central, the concern for ecology cannot be central. Seeking *first* God's kingdom and the righteousness, both personal and social, of that kingdom is the only thing that can be central in the Spiritual Discipline of simplicity.

The person who does not seek the kingdom first does not seek it at all. Worthy as all other concerns may be, the moment *they* become the focus of our efforts they become idolatry. To center on them will inevitably draw us into declaring that

our particular activity is Christian simplicity. And, in fact, when the kingdom of God is genuinely placed first, ecological concerns, the poor, the equitable distribution of wealth, and many other things will be given their proper attention.

As Jesus made clear in our central passage, freedom from anxiety is one of the inward evidences of seeking first the kingdom of God. The inward reality of simplicity involves a life of joyful unconcern for possessions. Neither the greedy nor the miserly know this liberty. It has nothing to do with abundance of possessions or their lack. It is an inward spirit of trust. The sheer fact that a person is living without things is no guarantee that he or she is living in simplicity. Paul taught us that the love of money is the root of all evil, and I have discovered that often those who have it the least love it the most. It is possible for a person to be developing an outward life-style of simplicity and to be filled with anxiety. Conversely, wealth does not bring freedom from anxiety. Kierkegaard writes, ". . . riches and abundance come hypocritically clad in sheep's clothing pretending to be security against anxieties and they become then the object of anxiety . . . they secure a man against anxieties just about as well as the wolf which is put to tending the sheep secures them . . . against the wolf."<sup>5</sup>

Freedom from anxiety is characterized by three inner attitudes. If what we have we receive as a gift, and if what we have is to be cared for by God, and if what we have is available to others, then we will possess freedom from anxiety. *This is the inward reality of simplicity.* However, if what we have we believe we have gotten, and if what we have we believe we must hold onto, and if what we have is not available to others, then we will live in anxiety. Such persons will never know simplicity regardless of the outward contortions they may put themselves through in order to live "the simple life."

To receive what we have as a gift from God is the first inner attitude of simplicity. We work but we know that it is not our work that gives us what we have. We live by grace even when it comes to "daily bread." We are dependent upon God for the simplest elements of life: air, water, sun. What we have is not the result of our labor, but of the gracious care of God. When we are tempted to think that what we own is the result of our personal efforts, it takes only a little drought or a small accident to show us once again how utterly dependent we are for everything.

To know that it is God's business, and not ours, to care for what we have is the second inner attitude of simplicity. God is able to protect what we possess. We can trust him. Does that mean that we should never take the keys out of the car or lock the door? Of course not. But we know that the lock on the door is not what protects the house. It is only common sense to take normal precautions, but if we believe that precaution itself protects us and our goods, we will be riddled with anxiety. There simply is no such thing as "burglar proof" precaution. Obviously, these matters are not restricted to possessions but include such things as our reputation and our employment. Simplicity means the freedom to trust God for these (and all) things.

To have our goods available to others marks the third inner attitude of simplicity. If our goods are not available to the community when it is clearly right and good, then they are stolen goods. The reason we find such an idea so difficult is our fear of the future. We cling to our possessions rather than sharing them because we are anxious about tomorrow. But if we truly believe that God is who Jesus says he is, then we do not need to be afraid. When we come to see God as the almighty Creator *and* our loving Father, we can share because we know that he will care for us. If someone is in need, we are free to help them. Again, ordinary common sense will define the parameters of our sharing and save us from foolishness.

When we are seeking first the kingdom of God, these three attitudes will characterize our lives. Taken together they define what Jesus means by "do not be anxious." They comprise the inner reality of Christian simplicity. And we can be certain that when we live this way the "all these things" that are necessary to carry on human life adequately will be ours as well.

### 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. After all, the writers of Scripture constantly took that risk.\* And so I follow their lead and 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. Don't have more living space than is reasonable. After all, who needs seven rooms for two people?

Consider your clothes. Most people have no need for more clothes. They buy more not because they need clothes, but because they want to keep up with the fashions. Hang the fashions! Buy what you need. Wear your clothes until they are worn out. Stop trying to impress people with your clothes and impress them with your life. If it is practical in your situation, learn the joy of making clothes. And for God's sake (and I mean that quite literally) have clothes that are practical rather than ornamental. 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."<sup>16</sup>

*Second*, reject anything that is producing an addiction in you. Learn to distinguish between a real psychological need, like cheerful surroundings, and an addiction. Eliminate or cut down on the use of addictive, nonnutritional drinks: alcohol, coffee, tea, Coca-Cola, and so on. Chocolate has become a serious addiction for many people, 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:

\*It is sad to realize that often the attempt of Scripture to apply the principle of simplicity to a given culture has been universalized by succeeding generations and turned into soul-killing laws. Witness, for example, the laws against Christians braiding their hair or wearing rings because Peter had said to the people of his day. "Let not yours be the outward adorning with braiding of hair, decoration of gold, and wearing of robes" (1 Pet 3:3).

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. You can decide to live simply one day at a time in quiet dependence upon God's intervention.

How do you discern an addiction? Very simply, you watch for undisciplined compulsions. A student friend told me about one morning when he went out to get his newspaper and *p.* found it missing. He panicked, wondering how he could possibly start the day without the newspaper. Then he noticed a morning paper in his neighbor's yard, and he began to plot how he could sneak over and steal it. Immediately he realized that he was dealing with a genuine addiction. He rushed inside and called the newspaper office to cancel his subscription. The receptionist, obviously filling out a form, asked courteously, "Why are you canceling your subscription to the newspaper?" My friend blurted out, "Because I'm addicted!" Undaunted, the receptionist replied, "Would you like to cancel your entire subscription or would you like to keep the Sunday edition?" to which he exclaimed, "No, I'm going cold turkey!" Now, obviously not everyone should cancel their subscription to the newspaper, but for this young man it was an important act.

*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!

De-accumulate! Masses of things that are not needed complicate life. They must be sorted and stored and dusted and re-sorted and re-stored *ad nauseam*. Most of us could get rid of half our possessions without any serious sacrifice. We would do well to follow the counsel of Thoreau: "Simplify, simplify."

*Fourth*, refuse to be propagandized by the custodians of modern gadgetry. Timesaving devices almost never save time. Beware of the promise, "It will pay for itself in six months." 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. Children do not need to be entertained by dolls that cry, eat, wet, sweat, and spit. An old rag doll can be more enjoyable and more lasting. 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. Air conditioners in the United States alone use the same amount of energy as does the entire country of China.<sup>7</sup> Environmental responsibility alone should keep us from buying the majority of the gadgets produced today.

Propagandists try to convince us that because the newest model of this or that has a new feature (trinket?), we must sell the old one and buy the new one. Sewing machines have new stitches, stereos have new buttons, cars have new designs. Such media dogma needs to be carefully scrutinized. Often "new" features seduce us into buying what we do not need.

Probably that refrigerator will serve us quite well for the rest of our lives even without the automatic ice maker and the fancy exterior.

*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.