

Practice Makes Perfect (Almost): Simplicity

Mike Hagan

Definition

Simplicity is not the easiest spiritual practice to define or explain because it is so central to the Christian life but it does not tie directly to a biblical word like prayer, study, giving, or fasting. In addition, it gets muddled up with poverty and wealth. Simplicity makes great complexity bearable (Willard).

If one word captures simplicity, it is perhaps the word “shalom,” which may be defined as living in Kingdom-of-God-well-being.

In church history it meant selling everything and living an ascetic life. We think of that definition as too limiting.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it was freedom from desire. So when the Lausanne Congress for World Evangelization met in 1974 (the largest gathering of evangelical Christian leaders at the time), they wrote in their covenant, paragraph 9, a commitment to “a simple lifestyle” so that Christians would generously contribute relief and evangelization. Then in 1979 and on into the early 80s guidelines were drawn up on simple living, some of it very good.

However, simplicity is not a simple lifestyle, although it may result as a by-product, but it is a commitment to Jesus and his Kingdom and to faithful participation in the mission of our servant King in a lost and broken world.

- **Matthew 6:25-33; 28:18-20**
- Soren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*

Anything that sidetracks your commitment distances you from simplicity. Often material things are the most obvious obstacles. The Bible says a lot about economics in both FT and NT. Wealth and poverty both can become idolatrous. Poverty is not simplicity. To the poor life is simple like a man strapped to a tree with a strait jacket – he has few choices. The blessings of God that come to those who are obedient may prove the worst obstacle (thus all that Jesus said about it: Luke 16:13 and *mammon* [Aramaic] et al).

Dallas Willard said, “The idealization of poverty is *one of the most dangerous illusions of Christians in the contemporary world*. Stewardship – which requires possessions and includes giving – is the true spiritual discipline in relation to wealth” (194). Cf. 1 Tim 6:6-7, cp. with Mark 10:23. We need to think about the manner of Jesus’ teaching, for example Luke 14 where the Jewish leaders made their own set of rules (like sitting

nearest the head table) and Jesus presents another way, one that is directed by principles or guidelines governed by one commitment – to him.

What the Bible says is that both rich and poor are equal before God (so Matthew 5-7). This is the Kingdom view of well-being.

First Testament

Illustration: *The New Yorker* cartoon – man and wife looking through picture window at a lovely vista of fields and trees. The man says, “God’s country? Well, I suppose it is. But I own it.” Evangelicals sometimes confuse the biblical perspective that God owns it all and our stewardship of it.

- KJV translates *mishpat* by “judgment” 294X and “justice” once. If it had used justice more, perhaps we would not be so confused.
- Gen 1:28; 2:15 stewards of creation.
- Ex 20:1-3 and idolatry
- 4th and 10th commandments address covetousness, too → Eph 5:5; Col 3:5
- Lev 25 Year of Jubilee and what it does to land ownership
- Law of tithe, Lev 27:30-33; Num 18:21-32; Deut 12:5-18; Deut 14:22-28.
- Gleaning in fields, Lev 19:9-10; Deut 24:19-21
- Deut 6:4-5 *shma*
- FT neither poverty nor wealth condemned. Blessings to obedient, cf. Ps 37:3-4; 73, esp. v. 25.
- No commands, but principles, Deut 8:17-18
- In fact, it became a problem. Cf. Jer 22:13-17; Hab 2:9-11

New Testament

Jesus often spoke to economics.

- Mark 10:17-31 [Matt 19:16-30; Luke 18:18-30] – 23, 25, life and attitude committed.
- Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-5:11 – (1) single-minded commitment to God demonstrated by frequent prayers and gatherings; (2) experience of Holy Spirit; (3) deep concern for one another (sharing of goods and meals).
- Paul – 1 Cor 10:31-11:1; Eph 4:28 – (1) Christian way of life in radical discontinuity with the world; (2) Christian way of life one of suffering for others in specific situations; (3) suspicious of wealth unless it was being used in good works. → 2 Cor 8-9 – voluntary; from commitment to Jesus; impulse of Holy Spirit.
- Matt 22:37-39, cp. Luke 6:30; James 1:17

Practice of Simplicity

Even simplicity becomes idolatry if the inward or outward practice takes precedence.

Inward Expressions (Foster)

- To receive what we have as a gift from God;
- To know that it is God's business and not ours to care for what we have;
- To have our goods available to others.

Outward Expressions (Foster 78-83)

- Buy things for their usefulness rather than their status.
- Reject anything that is producing an addiction in you.
- Develop a habit of giving things away.
- Refuse to be propagandized by the custodians of modern gadgetry.
- Learn to enjoy things without owning them.
- Develop a deeper appreciation for the creation.
- Look with a healthy skepticism at all "buy now, pay later" schemes.
- Obey Jesus' instructions about plain, honest speech.
- Reject anything that will breed the oppression of others.
- Shun whatever would distract you from your main goal!

Simplicity Handout

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Ponder these verses in terms of “one” thing in your life:

- **Matthew 6:25-33; 28:18-20**

Look through these passages in light of simplicity:

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- Ex 20:1-3 and idolatry
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Can you add to these lists of inward and outward expressions of simplicity?

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