



## Lent Course 2025 A Deeper Walk

### Week 5 SIMPLICITY (Matthew 6:25-34)

8 APRIL 2025 - Revd Paul A. Carr

QUESTION: What do you think the Spiritual Discipline of Simplicity involves?

#### The (not so) Simple Life

When my children were born it was an extraordinary moment: to witness that fragile, naked, human beginning. They entered the world, as we all do, with nothing. Of course, what is true at birth is also true at our time of death. Whatever we accumulate materially in life is left behind. *'For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.'* (1 Timothy 6:7) However, in between these two pillars of our existence, things get complicated.

As we grow and age we are occupied with the world of ideas and also the material world of objects, possessions or what I will rather unscientifically call stuff! As individuals and communities our lives are shaped by these two worlds colliding. We use stuff to express so much about who we are both personally and corporately. Our values and preferences and beliefs are manifest consciously and subconsciously through the stuff of life.

*Stuff* is ornamental figurines, sofa beds, instruments, toiletries, recipe books, mugs, artwork, iPad, candles, crosses and curtains. *Stuff* is stereo systems, storage solutions, newspapers, stationery, fridge magnets, family portraits and coat racks. The stuff of life. Stuff!

Between our naked beginning and our inevitable passing it is easy to be, as Richard Foster puts it, '...trapped in a maze of competing attachments.' And what we attach ourselves to begins to dictate the shape of our lives as author Chuck Palahniuk puts it 'The things you own end up owning you.' Into the midst of all this stuff Foster offers us the spiritual discipline of Simplicity as a remedy to life's excesses.

#### Peak Stuff

Ikea's head of sustainability Steve Howard said recently that consumption of many familiar goods is at its limit, "If we look on a global basis, in the west we have probably hit peak stuff ... I'd say we've hit peak red meat, peak sugar, peak stuff ... peak home furnishings."

When the industry that is trying to sell you stuff, is saying there is too much of it, we might want to rethink our relationship to it. And with tens of thousands of tons of furniture heading for landfill on an annual basis, Howard makes a good point. This should come as no surprise, however, since we live in a society dominated by the narratives of consumer engineering and built-in-obsolence. It gets hard to make decisions in life with all the stuff that gets in the way. All the while new storage complexes spring up; to put the stuff we can no longer fit in our homes.

With desire *for* and accumulation *of* more and more and more and more stuff, it's not just our homes and landscapes that get cluttered. So do the corridors and closets of our minds and hearts. The journey from "peak stuff" to a life of simplicity is one that starts within us. In all kinds of ways, we configure the world around us to represent something of what is going on inside.

Foster offers (with some urgency) a means of equipping us to face this world of competing influences, market forces and hostile individualism. 'The Spiritual Discipline of simplicity is not a lost dream, but a recurrent vision throughout history. It can be recaptured today.' He says, 'It must be.' (p.101)

In groups of two or three read together Mark 10:17-22. Why do you suppose the rich man was shocked? What other questions do you have?

### **Henri Nouwen: The Case for Downward Mobility**

*'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, <sup>SEP</sup>who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.'* Philipians 2:6-8

There is something profoundly odd, even counter intuitive, about the life of Jesus Christ. The very one who breathed the universe into being (Gen 1, Ps 33:6, John 1) comes to dwell among us yet finds "no place to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). What's going on?

Commenting on the above passage of scripture from Philipians 2 Robert Ellsberg says, Even at the dawn of the church this voluntary self-emptying of power, status, and security offered a powerfully counter cultural statement. It set the way of Christ in bold contrast to the values of Empire, and thus set a challenge to all Christ's followers' (Nouwen, The Selfless Way of Christ p.7)

From the moment we are born our parents, teachers and culture impress upon us the need to *make it* in this world. We are swept into the currents of, what Henri Nouwen calls, Upward-mobility: climbing the ladder, making it to the top with the demands and desire for status, wealth and prosperity. None of which are intrinsically evil, but scripture certainly asks us to evaluate where they sit in our affections 'For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs' (1 Tim 6:10)

Nouwen does not wish to denigrate ambition, but he cautions us, true growth is something other than the uncontrolled drive for upward mobility in which making it to the top becomes its own goal' (p.26). He then observes of Jesus' life, 'He moved from power to powerlessness, from greatness to smallness, from success to failure, from strength to weakness, from glory to ignominy.'

And, he continues, 'The whole life of Jesus of Nazareth was a life in which all upward mobility was resisted' (p.31) This is striking of course not least because Jesus calls us to share in his life 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?' (Matthew 16:24-26)

### **Simple Minds**

'...deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.' (Mark 7:22-23). Foster says, 'The Christian discipline of simplicity is an inward reality that results in an outward lifestyle'.

When thinking about the way we shape our lives and the stuff we interact with it is important to hold Foster's words in mind chiefly because, 'We deceive ourselves if we believe we can possess the inward reality without its having a profound effect on how we live'. However, it is also worth bearing in mind, to attempt to arrange an outward lifestyle of simplicity without the inward reality leads to deadly legalism.' (p.100) Just as there are many hermits in the wilderness who have never experienced the riches of solitude, so too a life that dispossesses us of all worldly goods does not ensure simplicity. Many who have pursued downward mobility have just ended up poorer in every respect.

Simplicity does not only relate to what we do or do not possess. Simplicity also relates to our integrity of mind and character. Many who have trodden an ascetic downward trajectory have done so with an inverted pride that leads to conceitedness. While upward-mobility bloats us with a sense of our own importance this danger also lurks for the downwardly mobile.

Simplicity resists the urge we feel to puff ourselves up whatever our material circumstances might be. Simplicity is a discipline of refinement. Simplicity is a state of mind that avoids pretense and fights the temptation to "name drop", exaggerate, boast or enhance our own reputation. Walking the downward way of simplicity is not a masochistic yielding to punishment but rather to see that the greatest things in life might be somewhere other than where our upwardly mobile culture would have us believe.

In groups of two or three read together Matthew 6:25-34. What are your thoughts about this passage?

### **The Goal of Simplicity**

Simplicity is a matter of *teleology*. Teleology is concerned with "telos" from the Greek meaning goal, aim or purpose. Simplicity is not asking us what we should possess as much as "where are you going?" Foster says, 'Simplicity sets possessions in proper perspective.' (Foster p.104) If we consider the question of where we are going, might we learn to pack accordingly? The stuff of life is important only insofar as it serves our 'telos'.

Downward mobility is not the irresponsible renunciation of all earthly possessions. It is more of a controlled descent than that. We walk the downward way not for the purpose of becoming impoverished but because, like the merchant in search of fine pearls (Matthew 13:45,46) we would be willing to sell everything we have to obtain God's Kingdom.

Simplicity asks us 'where are you going?' If we have answered this by seeking first God's Kingdom, we might begin to remove any obstacles that get in our way. The Spiritual Discipline of Simplicity tries to de-clutter life, so that there are fewer barriers between us, God and those whom God has chosen for us to love.

Simplicity does not outlaw riches but it prudently heeds the Psalmists counsel, 'If riches increase, set not your heart on them' (Ps 62:10) A timely warning lest we are beguiled by wealth, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (Matthew 19:24) Counter to the wisdom of the age we are warned, 'Be on your guard... for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.' (Luke 12:15).

In regard to this Nouwen talks about poverty as the "good host" because, he observes, those with nothing have nothing to lose and are thus less defensive, 'who will be our robber when everything he wants to steal from us becomes our gift to him?' (Nouwen, Reaching Out)

Neither scripture nor Nouwen advocate or admire destitution, but they do offer warnings against the complications of prosperity. This might give us a clue as to why Jesus would say something as seemingly absurd as 'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God' (Luke 6:20) The rich on the other hand will find it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for them to enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 19:24)

The Spiritual Discipline of Simplicity attempts to shift the conversation away from what you do or do not have, to consider what it is we are seeking. Neither riches or poverty but the Kingdom of God. If there is a question to be answered about the quantity of stuff in our lives it is dictated only by this guiding principle 'No servant can serve two masters ...you cannot serve God and wealth' (Luke 16:13).

Simplicity would have us discard anything that obscures or inhibits us from our goal of Kingdom seeking. Simplicity is not to accept nor reject riches. Neither is simplicity to accept or reject poverty. Simplicity sets us free from these categories and asks us to find contentment in all circumstances un beholden to our economic status as we draw our 'telos' from elsewhere (Phil 4:12).

### **Three Inner Attitudes**

Foster offers three inner attitudes by which simplicity may be characterized in our lives.

1. To receive what we have as a gift from God
2. To know that what we have is to be cared for by God
3. To have our goods available to others

### **The Outward Expression Of Simplicity**

These inner attitudes will not become our reality until they find their outward expression. Unfortunately, this is not without complications as Foster says, every attempt to give specific application to simplicity runs the risk of 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.' (p.110) He therefore offers us ten controlling principles for the outworking of simplicity in our lives.

1. Buy things for their usefulness rather than their status
2. Reject anything that is producing an addiction in you
3. Develop a habit of giving things away
4. Refuse to be propagandized by the custodians of modern gadgetry
5. Learn to enjoy things without owning them
6. Develop a deeper appreciation for creation
7. Look with a healthy skepticism at all 'buy now, pay later' schemes
8. Obey Jesus' instructions about plain, honest speech. Let what you say be "yes" or "no"
9. Reject anything that breeds the oppression of others
10. Shun anything that distracts you from seeking first the Kingdom of God

**Which of the ten controlling principles for outward simplicity is the most helpful to you? Are there any you feel are unrealistic and why?**



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