On Simplicity

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation … (Phil. 4:12a)

I'm drawn to "keep it simple" solutions. Avoid complication; break down problems to straightforward solutions; don't wander into the "what if" category and try to solve potential issues; don't try to control things or people; do the next thing and focus on that. These are behaviors I can understand and follow.

The religious idea of simplicity is a variation on this theme. It involves the arrangement of life around a few consistent purposes, excluding whatever is not necessary for our well-being. It is largely an expression of frugality, an abstinence from using money or other resources to satisfy our desire for control, status, notoriety, glamour, or luxury. Frivolous consumption corrupts the soul from trusting God, and it hurts others as well. It is a provocation to the poor and morally degrading to those who lose themselves in endless acquisition.

Simplicity is an inward attitude that results in an outward lifestyle. It concentrates on seeking first the Kingdom of God, in a contented, centered way without a plethora of things cluttering our lives. Until we begin to see how unbalanced our materialistic culture is, how hurried our lives have become, we cannot begin to deal with the mammon spirit within ourselves and cultivate a lifestyle of simplicity.

The Bible does not condemn wealth, but does warn us of issues related to its acquisition:

- It enjoins the exploitation of the poor and abandoning ourselves to the pursuit of wealth. The leveling effect of the Year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:8ff) was a very practical Old Testament implementation of this concern.
- It speaks to the inner spirit of slavery that the idolatrous attachment to wealth and possessions brings. Psalm 62:10b exhorts us that though our riches increase, we are not to set our hearts on them. Solomon provides somber counsel when he tells us that a faithful man will be richly blessed, but one eager to get rich will not go unpunished (Prov. 28:20).
- Jesus was severely critical of the materialism of his day. In the Sermon on the Mount, he states: "Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort" (Lk. 6:24). He demanded that we lay up treasure in heaven not on earth (Mt. 6:19-24). The Lord is saying that earthly treasure can occupy our concerns and notes that what we treasure in our hearts controls our direction and values. He tells us bluntly that we cannot serve both God and money (Lk. 16:13). He left his own disciples nonplused with his remedy (sell everything) for the rich young man's idolatrous connection to his wealth (Mt. 19:16-22).
- Paul counseled contentment with what we have (1 Tim. 6:6-8) and warned that the desire for wealth to be a snare to senseless and hurtful desires that plunge people into ruin (1 Tim. 6:9). Indeed, the love of money is a source of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:10). Elders and deacons in the church of the Lord Jesus are not to be people who love money (1 Tim. 3:3) or are greedy for gain (1 Tim. 3:8).
- The author of Hebrews counseled contentment with what we have (Heb. 13:5) and James warns against greediness and the evil caused by the pursuit of gain (Jas. 4:1-2; 5:1ff).

Simplicity is not asceticism. It is not a declaration that wealth is wrong, and that we should not enjoy

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the Lord's gracious bounty. Simplicity puts possessions in proper perspective. It can and does rejoice with them and seeks the Lord's purpose for providing them. It knows contentment with or without them (Phil. 4:12).

How then to simplify our lives?

- Don't buy things for their status or to make an impression on others. Be discerning in distinguishing between what you need and what you want.
- De-accumulate. This is not a declutter and update suggestion, trading the old things you are tired of for the new things you want.
- Find ways to insulate yourself from the consumerism of the age. Regularly undertake a media fast.
- Learn to enjoy things without owning them. A wonderful application of this suggestion is to enjoy the Lord's good creation. Emerson expresses this sentiment in his poem *Good-bye*:

  > Oh, when I am safe in my sylvan home,
  > I tread on the pride of Greece and Rome;
  > And when I am stretched beneath the pines,
  > Where the evening star so holy shines,
  > I laugh at the lore and the pride of man,
  > At the sophist schools, and the learned clan;
  > For what are they all, in their high conceit,
  > When man in bush with God may meet?

- Shun anything that breeds (to your knowledge) the oppression of others.
- Shun anything that distracts you from God's kingdom concerns.

There is a serenity to a life hid with Christ in God. A recognition of our own spiritual poverty that leads us to the moral frontier where the Lord Jesus works in the power of His Spirit. Simplicity strips away those things which would interfere with that concentration and helps us pursue the high call of God in Christ Jesus.

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