

The Simplification of Life

Matthew 6:19-34

INTRODUCTION

“So then, having been freed by the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, in obedience to his call, in heartfelt compassion for the poor, in concern for evangelism, development and justice, and in solemn anticipation of the Day of Judgment, we humbly commit ourselves to develop a just and simple lifestyle, to support one another in it and to encourage others to join us in this commitment.”

The Christians who published this resolution had gathered from around the world to talk about the need for a simple lifestyle. As a result of their meeting they were able to put into words what many others have been feeling. It is becoming increasingly clear that the affluence of Christians in the Western world is incompatible with the teaching of Jesus, especially at a time when millions of persons are suffering from poverty and starvation. The time has come for the followers of Jesus to “strip down” and get rid of excess baggage.

What is the biblical teaching about the simplification of life? How can we apply this teaching to our lives in a complicated technological world? How can we distinguish between “necessities and luxuries, creative hobbies and empty status symbols, modesty and vanity, occasional celebrations and normal routine, and between the service of God and slavery to

fashion"? These and other questions must be faced by those who are serious about living a Christian life in today's world.

COMMENTARY

One of the most helpful biblical passages on the simplification of life occurs in the central chapter (Matt. 6) of the Sermon on the Mount. Before turning to that passage, however, it is important to remind ourselves of the basic "presupposition" of the sermon. Jesus had come preaching the good news of God's rule. He made it very clear that living under the rule of God, living in union with God, is the "one thing needful" in human life. The incredible thing is that we do not need to earn this relationship with God as a reward. On the contrary, he offers it to us as a free gift of grace. All we need to do is accept it by faith. "By grace you have been saved, through faith." (Eph. 2:8) The good news of the Gospel is that the most important thing in life, union with God, is ours for the taking.

But how do we "take" or accept it? The teaching of Jesus, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, is so valuable because it answers that basic question. The sermon is a blueprint for those of us who want to know how to live in order to show God that we are "serious" about accepting his gift of life. We do not obey this teaching in order to earn a reward, but in order to show God how earnestly we want to accept his gift and how eagerly we want to experience the fullness of life which he offers us. Every word of this sermon was preceded by something else, the preaching of the rule of God, the offer of union with God as the key to life's fullness and meaning.

In the middle chapter of the sermon there is a section on the subject of possessions which begins with a basic principle of Christian discipleship: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will

your heart be also.” (Matt. 6:19-21) In the Middle East the peasants lived a hand-to-mouth existence which gave them little opportunity to lay aside “treasures.” When they did so they would hide them away with extreme care. The treasure might consist of fine clothes which would be saved for special occasions. But when the moths got at them the clothes would be ruined. The treasure might include grain which could be stored away in barns. But worms and insects could come and ruin the grain. The word for “rust” used here literally means “eating away.” Finally, the treasure might be in the form of money. But in the Palestinian houses where the walls were made of baked clay it would be all too easy for thieves to break in (literally “dig through”) and steal. How foolish it is, Jesus says, to put your trust in treasures which have no permanence rather than in the blessings which God gives. These alone have eternal value.

The main point of this teaching is summarized in a simple principle: “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Matt. 6:21) Where our treasure is, there is our essential being, our trust, our security, and our consolation. If our treasure is in earthly things, then that is where our lives will be rooted. But to have our essential being rooted in earthly treasures is disastrous because they are so transient and so easily lost. The only life with a future is the life with treasures in heaven, totally centered on God.

Jesus illustrates the point with the sayings about the “sound eye” and about the impossibility of serving God and mammon. (Matt. 6:22-24) The theme of the next section (Matt. 6:25-34), which lays the foundation for the simplification of life, is stated in the opening words: “Do not be anxious about your life.” The King James Version reads, “Take no thought for your life,” and later, “Take no thought for the morrow.” This can mislead the modern reader because Jesus is not advocating a reckless, improvident, thoughtless attitude toward life. He had worked as a carpenter and knew that human labor is needed to “make God’s gifts our own.” Someone has remarked that no one works harder than the birds of the air whom he uses as

examples here! He also knew the importance of planning ahead, often warning disciples to “count the cost” before following him.

The main point of this section is clearly preserved in the Revised Standard Version: “Do not be anxious about your life.” The Greek verb used in this sentence means literally “to worry anxiously.” To put it affirmatively, the followers of Jesus are to live in such absolute trust that they are given freedom from anxiety. Their trusting lifestyle makes it possible for them to accept each day as a gift from God, leaving the unknown future in his hands. Those who are anxious about their lives—possessions, property values, investments, jobs, or anything else—are clearly lacking in the kind of trust which Jesus called for throughout his ministry. This main point about the importance of trust is supported in the following material with three types of evidence.

(1) *Proverbial wisdom.* First Jesus points out that the God who gave us life can be trusted to give us food to sustain that life and the God who gave us bodies can be trusted to provide ways to clothe these bodies. (vs. 25) Second, he asks, “Which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life?” (vs. 27) The word in Greek for “span of life” can also mean “stature,” as in the older translations, but span of life makes more sense. No one by worrying can add the smallest amount of length to his life. Today we have even discovered that worry can shorten our lives! Third, in a statement which appears only in Matthew, Jesus says that we should not be anxious about tomorrow. (vs. 34) In other words, why cripple ourselves for today’s living by worrying about tomorrow?

(2) *Argument by analogy.* This type of argument, from less to greater, is familiar in rabbinic teaching. First, Jesus speaks about the birds. (vs. 26) The point he makes is not that the birds are idle but that they are free from worry. They live from day to day with unconscious trust in their Creator, accepting the necessities of life as they are given by the God who provides for their needs. If God provides for the birds, how much more for us! Second, he speaks about the lilies of the field. (vs. 28-

30) These are probably the scarlet anemones which bloom on the hillsides of Palestine, rivaling the proverbial splendor of the great King Solomon. These flowers last a very short time. They wither and die under the early summer sun, serving only to heat the simple ovens of the common people. But if God provides for transient flowers, how much more will he provide for his people!

(3) *Prophetic sayings.* First, Jesus points out that worry is characteristic of the pagans who do not know God. (vs. 32) Because they do not know about God's power and love, the pagans worry about food and clothes and the other necessities of life. For God's people, who know about his concern for them, worry is unjustified. Second, Jesus says that the basic necessity is always to put God first. (vs. 33) "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness." The tense for the verb "seek" implies unceasing quest, and the goal we are to seek in this way is repeated for emphasis: God's kingdom (rule) and God's righteousness (saving power and presence). The other necessities of life will be provided those who continuously seek God first above all things.

All of this is closely related to the simplification of life in the modern world. The more we trust God the more we will experience his life-giving presence. Anxious worry about food and clothing and other "things" clearly reveals our lack of trust. Furthermore, responsibility for an abundance of things (excess baggage) not only causes anxiety, it even lures us away from God altogether! One of the best ways to avoid this danger is to demonstrate our trust in God through the simplification of life. How can we tell the difference between the necessities of a simplified life and excess accumulation? Dietrich Bonhoeffer has an interesting suggestion: "Let us reverse the word of Jesus and our question is answered: 'Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also.' Our treasure may of course be small and inconspicuous, but its size is immaterial; it all depends on the heart, on ourselves. And if we ask how we are to know where our hearts are, the answer is just as simple—everything which hinders us from loving God above all things

and acts as a barrier between ourselves and our obedience to Jesus is our treasure, and the place where our heart is.”

In addition to strengthening our relationship with God by demonstrating our trust in him, a simplified lifestyle has two other advantages. First, it makes it possible for us to *share* with others. A simple lifestyle can free up resources that can be put to work to alleviate suffering. The fact that thousands of persons die of starvation every day cannot be ignored by the followers of Jesus, the friend of the poor. Our financial resources can purchase food for the starving and can help people who are struggling to become self-sufficient. One couple decided not to build a larger house although they “needed” it, because the financial obligation would make it impossible for them to continue their practice of giving generously to the poor. This kind of sharing is a vital part of the Christian life.

Second, a simplified lifestyle makes it possible for us to *witness* to others. Jesus said, “You shall be my witnesses . . . to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:8) As Christians we are concerned about environmental destruction, wastefulness, and hoarding. We are concerned about political and economic injustice which causes poverty. We are aware of the seduction of riches. We are alarmed at the power of militarism and the expansion of the arms industry. What can we do about all this? We can “talk” about Christ as the ultimate solution to the world’s problems, but in most situations the way we act, the way we live, is a much more effective form of witness. Simplified living is therefore a powerful way of revealing the power and presence of Jesus Christ to the world.