

Simplicity- Spiritual Discipline

Desire: To uncomplicate and untangle my life so I can focus on what really matters

Definition: Simplicity cultivates the great art of letting go. Simplicity aims at loosening inordinate attachment to owning and having. Simplicity brings freedom and with-it generosity.

An old Shaker song goes “’Tis a gift to be simple. ’Tis a gift to be free.” We may agree with the sentiment, but there has never been a more complicated, cluttered, bureaucratic society than the one we live in today. In fact, the “good life” is often defined by how full, busy and complicated our lives are. Modern life is not simple. It is always about adding one more thing. But the more we add, the more can go wrong: one car, one set of problems; two cars, two sets. Adding the latest, the biggest and the best to our lives wreaks havoc in our souls as well as our environment.

Keeping it simple has fallen on hard times. And though we like the idea, we also like our choices. Jesus teaches us that freedom is not found in having and doing but in keeping God and his will first in our hearts. “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. . . . For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19-21). Jesus wants us to know that we don’t need all the things or experiences we think we do. What we really need is to keep first things first—Jesus and his kingdom. Life becomes much more simple when one thing matters most.

Throughout church history followers of Jesus have intentionally vowed to live simply. Following the example of the Lord, they have given up comfort and possessions and the clutter of life to leave larger spaces for loving God and neighbor.

Simplicity creates margins and spaces and openness in our lives. It honors the resources of our small planet. It offers us the leisure of tasting the present moment. Simplicity asks us to let go of the tangle of wants so we can receive the simple gifts of life that cannot be taken away. Sleeping, eating, walking, giving and receiving love, the benefits we take for granted, are amazing gifts. Simplicity invites us into these daily pleasures that can open us to God, who is present in them all.

Aging has always been about simplifying and letting go. Sooner or later we realize that we can't manage all the stuff and activity anymore. We have to let go. The practice of letting go and embracing simplicity is one way we prepare ourselves for what is to come. One day we all will have to let go of everything—even our own breath. It will be a day of utter simplicity—a day when the importance of stuff fades. Learning to live simply prepares us for our last breath while cultivating in us the freedom to truly live here and now.

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways are you susceptible to the entitlement mentality of our age?
2. How has the “more is better” mentality shaped you?
3. Do you envy those who have more things or more opportunities than you? Explain.
4. How much of your identity is wrapped up in what you own and where you go?

Who are you without all these acquisitions and opportunities?

5. What is it like for you to give away things you still want and like?
6. When have you downsized? What was it like for you?

Spiritual Exercises

1. Ask God to help you speak the simple truth.
 - Practice speaking simply—no double meanings or half-truths that put you in the best light.
 - Let this practice help you become aware of when you rationalize, deny, blame and spin.
2. Uncomplicate your life by choosing a few areas in which you wish to practice “letting go.” Clean out the garage, basement, closet or attic. Go on a simple vacation. Eat more simply.
 - What is this like for you?

3. Intentionally limit your choices. Do you need six different kinds of breakfast cereal, hundreds of TV channels or four tennis rackets? What is it like to limit your choices?
 - Does it feel free, or do you want and envy surface?
 - Talk to God about this.
4. If someone admires something of yours, give it away. Find out just how attached you are to your things.
 - What is that like for you?
5. If you can get where you need to go by walking rather than driving, try walking.
6. Make a catalog of all the gadgets you have in your home, from the dishwasher to the lawnmower.
 - Which gadgets have made you freer?
 - Which could you share?Which could you get rid of and not really miss?
7. Where have you complicated your life with God?
 - Consider what actually brings you into the presence of Christ. Spend time there. Practice giving no excuses, no apologies, no spontaneous yeses.
 - When you are tempted to say yes, stop yourself and say, "Let me think about this for a moment. I'll call you back in ten minutes." Even ten minutes can afford you the time to consider whether you really want to say yes.
 - When you are tempted to apologize for something like a messy house, don't. An apology can give the impression that your house is always neat and clean. Perhaps people need to see that you do live with a certain amount of clutter and that it's OK.
 - When you want to make an excuse for something like being late or eating on the run, let the excuse go. Accept yourself and the reality of your life.
 - No excuses, no apologies and no spontaneous yeses can actually be a step in discerning what you truly need to apologize for.

Resources on Simplicity

Freedom of Simplicity by Richard Foster

Less Is More by Cecile Andrews and Wanda Urbanska

Simplicity by Mindy Caliguire

The Way of Simplicity: The Cistercian Tradition by Esther de Waal

Reference

Calhoun, Adele Ahlberg *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (IVP Books, Illinois 2005) page 84-86