

SESSION 3

Excerpt from *Celebration of Discipline*

We have such a focal point in the words of Jesus: “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well” (Matt. 6:25-33).

The central point for the Discipline of Simplicity is to seek the kingdom of God and the righteousness of His kingdom first and then everything necessary will come in its proper order. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of Jesus’ insight at this point. Everything hinges upon maintaining the “first” thing as first. Nothing must come before the kingdom of God, including the desire for a simple life-style. Simplicity itself becomes idolatry when it takes precedence over seeking the kingdom. In a particularly penetrating comment on this passage of Scripture, Soren Kierkegaard considers what sort of effort could be made to pursue the kingdom of God. Should a person get a suitable job in order to exert a virtuous influence? His answer: no, we must first seek God’s kingdom. Then should we give away all our money to feed the poor? Again the answer: no, we must first seek God’s kingdom.

Well, then perhaps we are to go out and preach this truth to the world that people are to seek first God’s kingdom? Once again the answer is a resounding: no, we are first to seek the kingdom of God. Kierkegaard concludes, “Then in a certain sense it is nothing I shall do. Yes, certainly, in a certain sense it is nothing, become nothing before God, learn to keep silent; in

this silence is the beginning, which is, first to seek God's kingdom."

Focus upon the kingdom produces the inward reality, and without the inward reality we will degenerate into legalistic trivia. Nothing else can be central. The desire to get out of the rat race cannot be central, the redistribution of the world's wealth cannot be central, the concern for ecology cannot be central. Seeking first God's kingdom and the righteousness, both personal and social, of that kingdom is the only thing that can be central in the Spiritual Discipline of simplicity.

The person who does not seek the kingdom first does not seek it at all. Worthy as all other concerns may be, the moment they become the focus of our efforts they become idolatry. To center on them will inevitably draw us into declaring that our particular activity is Christian simplicity. And, in fact, when the kingdom of God is genuinely placed first, ecological concerns, the poor, the equitable distribution of wealth, and many other things will be given their proper attention.

As Jesus made clear in our central passage, freedom from anxiety is one of the inward evidences of seeking first the kingdom of God. The inward reality of simplicity involves a life of joyful unconcern for possessions. Neither the greedy nor the miserly know this liberty. It has nothing to do with abundance of possessions or their lack. It is an inward spirit of trust. The sheer fact that a person is living without things is no guarantee that he or she is living in simplicity. Paul taught us that the love of money is the root of all evil, and I have discovered that often those who have it the least love it the most. It is possible for a person to be developing an outward life-style of simplicity and to be filled with anxiety. Conversely, wealth does not bring freedom from anxiety. Kierkegaard writes, "... riches and abundance come hypocritically clad in sheep's clothing pretending to be security against anxieties and they become then the object of anxiety... they secure a man against anxieties just about as well as the wolf which is put to tending the sheep secures them... against the wolf."

Freedom from anxiety is characterized by three inner attitudes. If what we have we receive as a gift, and if what we have is to be cared for by God, and if what we have is available to others, then we will possess freedom from anxiety. This is the inward reality of simplicity. However, if what we have we believe we have gotten, and if what we have we believe we must hold onto, and if what we have is not available to others, then we will live in anxiety. Such persons will never know simplicity regardless of the outward contortions they may put themselves through in order to live "the simple life."

To receive what we have as a gift from God is the first inner attitude of simplicity. We work but we know that it is not our work that gives us what we have. We live by grace even when it comes to “daily bread.” We are dependent upon God for the simplest elements of life: air, water, sun. What we have is not the result of our labor, but of the gracious care of God. When we are tempted to think that what we own is the result of our personal efforts, it takes only a little drought or a small accident to show us once again how utterly dependent we are for everything.

To know that it is God’s business, and not ours, to care for what we have is the second inner attitude of simplicity. God is able to protect what we possess. We can trust Him. Does that mean that we should never take the keys out of the car or lock the door? Of course not. But we know that the lock on the door is not what protects the house. It is only common sense to take normal precautions, but if we believe that precaution itself protects us and our goods, we will be riddled with anxiety. There simply is no such thing as “burglar proof” precaution. Obviously, these matters are not restricted to possessions but include such things as our reputation and our employment. Simplicity means the freedom to trust God for these (and all) things.

To have our goods available to others marks the third inner attitude of simplicity. If our goods are not available to the community when it is clearly right and good, then they are stolen goods. The reason we find such an idea so difficult is our fear of the future. We cling to our possessions rather than sharing them because we are anxious about tomorrow. But if we truly believe that God is who Jesus says He is, then we do not need to be afraid. When we come to see God as the almighty Creator and our loving Father, we can share because we know that He will care for us. If someone is in need, we are free to help them. Again, ordinary common sense will define the parameters of our sharing and save us from foolishness.

When we are seeking first the kingdom of God, these three attitudes will characterize our lives. Taken together they define what Jesus means by “do not be anxious.” They comprise the inner reality of Christian simplicity. And we can be certain that when we live this way “all these things” that are necessary to carry on human life adequately will be ours as well.

RICHARD J. FOSTER. “THE DISCIPLINE OF SIMPLICITY.” IN CELEBRATION OF DISCIPLINE: THE PATH TO SPIRITUAL GROWTH, 86-89. HARPERCOLLINS, 1998.