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THE SPIRITUAL HABIT OF SIMPLICITY Michael B. Beough
Matthew 6:25-33 October 26, 2008
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Today and this week in our Growth Groups, we are going to talk about simplicity as a spiritual habit of the heart.

I must confess that, for me, it represents the most difficult spiritual habit to achieve. I almost wish it hadn't been included in our Growth Group study this semester. Simple living does not come naturally to me. And I have some spectacular failures in this regard.

Look, I could never be a Father Timothy. For many years, he has lived on his skete out in New Mexico just north of Santa Fe near Abiquiu. At first, he lived totally alone with only rudimentary necessities as the head and only member of his Greek Orthodox monastic order. You would always see him dressed the same way in a long black cassock, no matter when you dropped in. And you might find him in his little chapel leading worship with no one else in attendance. Talk about simple living! No thanks if that is what it means!

Well, I am happy to report that in my study on simplicity I learned that it is not about going off by yourself to live in the desert with a dog and a couple of chickens. Simplicity is a habit of the heart that enables us to live focused and responsible lives wherever we are.

I don't plan on being a Father Timothy, but he proves what Jesus says in Matthew 6. We really can live simpler lives and simpler lives really can make a difference for our own peace of mind and spirit and for the good of others. I do believe there is something truly humanizing in simple living. Richard Foster, who 30 years ago wrote one of the best books on the spiritual life, says simplicity is liberating.

So how do we get there?

Our model is Jesus. Jesus practiced simplicity. Jesus mastered the art of simplicity. In Matthew 6:25-33, he says **the opposites of simplicity are worry and anxiety.**

Jesus starts out in verse 25 by telling his disciples, "Do not worry about your life." Well, Jesus loses me right there. How about you? "I worry, therefore I am." I try not to worry, but then worry that I have forgotten something I should be worried about. You know what I mean? Who can't help but worry when the economy crashes or the doctor tells you something you don't want to hear or there is a new strange noise in the drier?

On the other hand, Jesus makes a good point in verse 27. You could worry yourself all day long about what you don't have and never add even a second to your time on this earth. In fact, you might shorten your time by worrying too much. I think Jesus is right.

So let's see what else he has to say. Don't worry about having enough to eat or drink. Don't worry about having something to wear. Look at the birds. They never have to apply for a job, and yet God feeds them. I think about that every time we see an egret at the edge of the pond behind our house catching a fish and swallowing it whole. He has no fishing pole or hook, not even any hands. And yet God made him with a deadly beak and expandable throat and pretty good juggling skills.

Look at the flowers in the fields. They never have to go shopping, and yet not even the top ten best dressed people in the world are as beautiful. Does everyone know what a Texas bluebonnet looks like? Teresa and I were driving up a highway in south Texas many years ago. We came over a rise around Three Rivers and spreading out before us as far as the eye could see were fields of bluebonnets. It was a stunning sight. People were stopping and taking pictures, but no picture could do that justice, though Jim Tuggey has come as close as anyone I have seen to capturing that kind of beauty. If God does that for birds and flowers, Jesus says, why do you think He won't do it for you? Do you think He loves you any less?

Jesus goes on to say in verse 32 that a lot of non-believers spend their whole lives worrying about what they don't have. Their whole existence centers on accumulating more stuff. Why? To build up their sense of security. To make themselves seem more important. To gain an advantage over others. That's what they live for. It defines their lives. "I consume, therefore I am." And Jesus says they act that way because they don't know that there is a Father in heaven who knows exactly what they need and will provide it.

I have news for Jesus. We aren't driven by what we need. We don't so much worry about food and clothes, whether we will have any. We worry about whether we can get the latest cell phone with the most features. We worry about sustaining the lifestyle we have grown used to and getting ahead. We worry about fitting in and being fashionable and making it to the end of the day with some sanity left. We are driven by what we want and by what our culture says we should have. And that is what makes simplicity so hard. How do we live simpler lives in a culture that does its best to clutter and crowd our lives with so much stuff? In some ways, I almost feel guilty for recommending simplicity when the government is telling us that the only way out of our current economic crisis is for us to spend more money, buy more things. It makes you wonder if they have noticed that we got into this mess because people were buying too many things they couldn't afford.

Jesus is right. We do worry about a lot of unimportant stuff and accumulate even more stuff to worry about. And it makes us sick.

Finally, we get to the last verse in this passage, verse 33. **Here is where we finally get to the pathway to simplicity of the sort Jesus lived and wants us to experience.**

Verse 33 shifts our life focus from worrying about what we don't have or what we want to have or what our culture says we should have to something more positive and more life-giving. Here is the key to simple living.

"Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these other things, like food and clothing, will be given to you as well."

Talk about a principle for simplifying your life! And yet it is not just a principle that we try to adhere to. It is the kind of thing the Holy Spirit impresses on our hearts and brings to bear in our lives for the larger purpose of making real God's kingdom on earth.

A life directed by the Holy Spirit, a life that yields itself to the Holy Spirit, proceeds from a much different place. And it leads to much different results. To new habits of the heart. To liberation. To joy and dancing. Did you know that the song the choir sang at the beginning is a dancing song?

Here is what happens. When the Kingdom of God and the righteousness of God's kingdom become the focus of our lives, our motivation and our lifestyles start changing. Life becomes simpler because now we make decisions, not based on what our culture throws at us, or what we are worried about, but based on what God wants to achieve in our world through us. If we become pursuers of God's kingdom of love, peace, and justice, of forgiveness and redemption, then a lot of things we might be spending our time, money, and worry on will go away. They won't be as important to us any more.

Let me suggest two new habits that seeking God's Kingdom first will change in us.

The habit of putting our faith in God and not in things. Things cease defining who we are. They lose their power over us because we know they cannot save us. They can actually complicate our lives and cause deeper problems that we worry about. Richard Foster says that putting God's kingdom first will lead us to de-accumulate. Only God can save us.

The habit of reexamining what we think we must have. Focusing on God's Kingdom first helps us gain clarity. I am thankful that my wife understands this better than I do. How many times has she said, "We don't need it." Not as many times as she has had to say, "You don't need it."

Waste not, want not. That can apply to so many things. Our waste of natural resources, for example. Our abuse of the environment.

This is the habit of making every day individual choices by asking such questions as:

Do I need it?

Does it reflect the lifestyle of Jesus?

Will it be a waste of time and resources?

Does it further God's purpose?

Does it put me further in debt?

Does it help me show concern for others?

Does it bring God's Kingdom closer to the earth?

I believe Jesus is right. If we seek God's Kingdom first, everyone will have enough. How much simpler can it be?

Let me tell you that the gospel is not for the fainthearted and the spiritual life that comes from the Holy Spirit is not for those who are looking for easy street. It takes huge faith to step out there and put God's Kingdom first in our lives. It takes courage to choose the simple life of Jesus. If you have not chosen this path yet, I encourage you to take the first step today. Begin a walk with the Lord of heaven and earth who sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty and yet promises to lead you by the hand to a simpler life, a focused life, a more responsible life. Ask him into your heart today and do not worry about what you shall eat or drink or wear. He will add all these things unto you.