

Growing Spiritually

Advance in Faith 1, Unit 6



Week 4 – Simplicity and Submission



Introduction

The Need for Christian Spirituality

“Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deeper people” (Richard Foster).¹

For many years the church has used the expression “spiritual disciplines” to describe what are healthy relational practices of the Christian life. In other words, practices which help us to...

- Maintain and deepen – “HEALTHY”
- Our relationship with God – “RELATIONAL”
- On a regular basis – “PRACTICES”

Simplicity

Inward Reality and Outward Lifestyle

“Because we lack a divine Centre our need for security has led us into an insane attachment to things. We must clearly understand that the lust for affluence in contemporary society is psychotic. It is psychotic because it has completely lost touch with reality. We crave things we neither need nor enjoy”. (Richard Foster).²

“I am learning ... that a man can live profoundly without masses of things” (Richard E. Byrd).³

“For 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 ...” (Soren Kierkegaard).⁴

“Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.” (Phil. 4:11-12)

¹ R. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980), p. 1.

² R. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980), p. 70.

³ R. E. Byrd, *Alone* (G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1938), p. 19.

⁴ S. Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 27.

Attitudes of Simplicity

“Jesus speaks to the question of economics more than any other single social issue. If, in a comparatively simple society, our Lord lays such strong emphasis on the spiritual dangers of wealth, how much more should we who live in a highly affluent culture take seriously the economic question?”⁵

- (i) All that we have is a gift from God

- (ii) All that we have we can entrust to Him

- (iii) All that we have is available to others

Simplicity in Today’s Context

The inward reality of seeking first the Kingdom of God is key to the practice of Simplicity. When our trust is in His provision and our identity stems from being His royal priesthood, it affects the outworking of our lives.

“Experiencing the inward reality liberates us outwardly. Speech becomes truthful and honest. The lust for status and position is gone because we no longer need status and position. We cease from showy extravagance not on the grounds of being unable to afford it, but on the grounds of principle. Our goods become available to others.”⁶

How does technology play out within the concept of Simplicity? If Simplicity is about freedom from the need to consume, what might it look like to live simply within your own mind? Perhaps regulating the amount of information you consume is something to consider.

Applications of Simplicity⁷

In this complex world, it is often difficult to apply simplicity to our lives with God-honouring wisdom. Here are ten applications that Richard Foster developed for himself, and two more for good measure...

⁵ Richard Foster, *The Discipline of Simplicity* article, p. 2.

⁶ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, p. 100.

⁷ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, pp. 78-83.

(i) Buy things for their usefulness, not status

“As ... for apparel, I buy the most lasting and, in general, the plainest I can. I buy no furniture but what is necessary and cheap” (John Wesley).⁸

(ii) Reject anything that produces an addiction in you

(iii) Develop a habit of giving things away

(iv) Beware the propaganda of modern gadgetry

(v) Learn to enjoy things without owning them

(vi) Develop a deeper appreciation of creation

(vii) Have a healthy skepticism of “buy now, pay later” schemes

(viii) Embrace plain and honest speech

(ix) Reject anything that will breed the oppression of others

(x) Shun whatever will distract from seeking first God’s Kingdom and His righteousness

(xi) Schedule smart phone-free time

(xii) Focus on core relationships with actual, real-life people

At the core of the discipline of Simplicity is the notion that we live simply so that others may simply live. Yes, this impacts how we spend our money but it also impacts what consumes our time and thought life.

⁸ J. Wesley, *The Journal of the Reverend John Wesley* (London: The Epworth Press, 1938) – notation for November 1767.

“When we are truly in this interior simplicity our whole appearance is franker, more natural. This true simplicity...makes us conscious of a certain openness, gentleness, innocence, gaiety, and serenity, which is charming when we see it near to and continually, pure eyes. O, how amiable this simplicity is! Who will give it to me? I leave all for this. It is the Pearl of the Gospel.”⁹

Submission

“A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” - Martin Luther.

The biblical teaching on submission focuses primarily on the spirit with which we view other people. At the heart of biblical submission is the spirit of consideration and respect we have for each other. It distinguishes between the external actions of obedience and the internal heart-response of submission.

In submission, we are free to value other people. We give up our own rights for the good of others and can subsequently love people unconditionally. We have given up the right to demand that they return our love. No longer do we feel that we have to be treated in a certain way. We rejoice in their successes and feel genuine sorrow in their failures. It is of little consequence that our plans are frustrated if their plans succeed. We discover that it is far better to serve our neighbour than to have our own way.

Submission and Self-Denial

The touchstone for embracing a biblical understanding of submission is self-denial.

"Self-denial is a posture fitting for all those who follow the crucified Lord"¹⁰ – Richard Foster

John Calvin’s vision on Christian life was guided by an insight called “blind self-love”. The premise being what distorts our lives more than anything else is our blind self-love. This is the primary reason our lives do not express the image and likeness of God.

In a culture fixated on self and the elevation of individualism celebrated apart from community, the practice of ‘self-denial’ is vital to spiritual health.

⁹Francois Fenelon, in Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, p. 99.

¹⁰ R. Foster, *Celebration of Disciplines*, p. 145.

What Self Denial is not:

- (a) Self Destruction/Loss of Identity

- (b) Self Deprivation/Asceticism

- (c) Self Contempt/Neglect

The essence of the biblical concept of self-denial is found in

Mark 8:34-35 (NIV)

“Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.’”

It means to submit one’s self primarily to God. This frees us to realise that we do not have to have our own way – in other words, our happiness is not dependent upon getting what we want. The paradox of this self-denial is that we are then able truly to find and value ourselves.

Following this, self-denial is often applied through the subordination of our rights/interests to the rights/interests of others. Self-denial is more about putting others first than it is about putting yourself last and even though the one automatically implies the other, it’s about where the focus is.

Mark 9:33-37 (NIV)

They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the road?’ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.’ He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.’”

Colossians 3:18-25 (NIV)

“Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged. Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving”.

How might submission play itself out in your world today?

Conclusion

“We must not think of the Spiritual Disciplines as some dull drudgery aimed at exterminating laughter from the face of the earth. Joy is the keynote of all the Disciplines. The purpose of the Disciplines is liberation from from the stifling slavery to self-interest and fear. When the inner spirit is liberated from all that weighs it down, it can hardly be described as dull drudgery.”¹¹

¹¹ R. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980), p. 2.

Memory Work:**Mark 8:34-38 (NIV)**

“Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.’”

Group Questions:

- Read and discuss 1 Timothy 6:6-10
- How does 2 Corinthians 9:6-8 impact on your discussion of the above text?
- On a scale of 1-10, how busy do you feel? What can you do to reduce the sense of busyness you experience?
- In a culture that promotes and espouses individualism, how might you practice the discipline of Submission?
- Where does the balance lie between practicing Submission and being a doormat that people walk over?

Take Home Exercise:

The recommended reading for this unit is *Richard Foster’s Celebration of Discipline*.

Appendix A

5 Surprising Spiritual Benefits of Owning Less Stuff

Minimalism was meant to help our finances. Here's how it helped our faith.

Eight years ago, my family sold, donated, or discarded over 60 percent of our possessions. My wife, children, and I removed clothes, furniture, decorations, cookware, tools, books, toys, and anything in our home that was not immediately useful or beautiful. At the time, long before tiny houses and magical “tidying,” the idea of such drastic downsizing was completely foreign.

Like so many of us, I worked long hours for paychecks spent on technology, clothing, toys, furniture, decorations, cars, and hopefully someday, a bigger house in a nicer neighborhood. I didn't really believe the purpose of life was to chase possessions, but my calendar and checkbook sure seemed to tell a different story.

One Saturday afternoon, I was cleaning out my garage while my 5-year old son played whiffle ball in the backyard. I suddenly realized that everything I owned wasn't making me happy. It was actually distracting me from the very thing that did bring me happiness.

At first, our minimalism came as a practical move. We had grown weary of living paycheck to paycheck to cover our mounting possessions and of trading time with our kids to clean clutter in the house. But soon, the process of intentionally owning less began to influence our spiritual journey in ways we never expected.

While I used to read Jesus's teaching on money and possessions as a burdensome call to sacrificial (even boring) living, owning less actually resulted in a better life, full of freedom and joy and peace. I began to recognize that Jesus wasn't calling me to a boring life; he was calling me to a more abundant life. Here are a few of the surprising spiritual benefits my family and I have experienced since deciding to own less stuff:

1. Owning less offers more opportunity to pursue your passions.

When we measure the time, money, and energy spent caring for our possessions—researching, shopping, organizing, picking up, cleaning, repairing, replacing, and even working for the money to buy them in the first place—we discover that our possessions can keep us from the passions God has given us.

In his sermon on the mount Jesus warned, “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money” (Matt 6:24). Unwittingly, perhaps, a lot of us have wiggled out of Jesus' clear teaching in a host of creative ways: “Just because I like money doesn't mean I hate God,” “I'm not someone who *serves* money,” “I'm pretty sure Jesus means someone a lot richer than I am.”

What if Jesus' teaching wasn't meant to scold, but to set us free? As we released what we didn't need, we found more time, energy and money to pursue the greater passions God had put in our hearts.

2. Owning less is the quickest path to buying less.

If you haven't yet experimented in living with less, you might think it's as horrible as dieting: a feeling of constant deprivation and craving what you've said *no* to. But in reality, the opposite is true. I was initially nervous about adopting a "capsule wardrobe" of just 33 items of clothing or less, but quickly grew to enjoy the simplicity and the fact that I loved every item in my closet. Today, I have little desire to add to it. When you've gotten rid of what you don't need and set out to only keep what's necessary, that insistent voice inside badgering you to buy more is quietly silenced.

When Jesus taught his disciples, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Luke 12:33-34), he was inviting us to a freedom of heart that can be only experienced when our hearts are no longer tethered to all we own.

3. Owning less nurtures our spirits.

When John the Baptist was preparing people's hearts for the coming Messiah, the crowd asked him what they should do. He instructed, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same" (Luke 3:11).

That's odd, right? John's charge sounds a lot like the way folks responded *after* they met Jesus, but seems a bit odd as a prescription for the best way to *welcome* Him.

But John knew that owning less often fuels spiritual growth in our lives. It forces us to evaluate our hearts and motives in ways we wouldn't otherwise experience. Like his cousin Jesus, John understood that physical reality is never divorced from spiritual reality.

4. Owning less fosters gratitude and contentment.

We live in a culture that daily bullies us to own more. Our radios and televisions and iPhones and online searches barrage us with ads insisting that we'll finally be happy when we own this outfit or drive that car or drink that soda. But we're not happy. Our discontent is evidenced in our excess. Our longings to own the latest and greatest, as well as our tendencies to compare our lives with those around us, have left us feeling like we're always missing something.

Intentionally owning less not only sows a spirit of gratitude and contentment into our hearts, it waters and nourishes the fruits Paul promises to those who walk by the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23).

5. Owning less reframes reality for the rich and the poor.

One of the criticisms of the minimalism movement is that it's trendy among people who are privileged, but irrelevant to those who are poor. I disagree. In fact, I believe that Jesus' teaching on possessions liberates both.

Jesus taught his followers to pray, "Give us today our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11). That wasn't just a prayer for poor folks without enough to eat. Jesus is also teaching those who have more-than-enough that God delights in providing for our needs—both physical and spiritual

The tendency to search for security and happiness in possessions is common for both the rich and the poor—it is a temptation that you cannot out-earn. Those with more-than-enough should be quick to realize the joy found in using their excess as provision for those with less. And those with less should be quick to recognize that accumulating more is not the key to security. For both the rich and the poor, faith in God's provision is the only path to lasting security.

Over the years, I've come to define minimalism as the intentional promotion of the things we most value and the removal of everything that distracts us from it. I've found it to be a lifestyle that offers not just a tidier home, but a more intentional spirituality.

Owning less may be one of the most significant steps you'll ever take to the abundant life Jesus promised.

**** Joshua Becker is the author of "The More of Less: Finding the Life You Want Under Everything You Own," a book that inspires others to find more life by owning less stuff. He is also the Founder and Editor of "Becoming Minimalist."*