

Spiritual Pathways: Loving God in Simplicity

Matthew 6: 24 - 34

Introduction:

Photographer Peter Menzel worked on a very interesting project around the turn of the millennium, which was compiled in a book called *Material World: A Global Family Portrait*. He and a team of other photographers took portraits of 30 statistically average families from different countries around the world. In each photo the family is photographed in front of their home with all of their worldly possessions displayed outside.

<http://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2010/08/10/129113632/picturingpossessions>

It makes you think about what we have and what we need. I wonder what it would be like to live in some of those other houses and cultures. It makes me reflect on our culture and its consumeristic focus and how easily we take on the values of our culture. It makes me think about all the clutter that can fill our lives.

Contemporary culture lacks simplicity. Its a cluttered world we live in.

I see 3 key areas of clutter:

The first key area is our money and possessions.

When Jesus says, 'You can't serve God and Money'. He is saying that money gives orders if you're not careful. It bosses you around. So get your priorities right and you'll be glad that you did.

We so easily form unhealthy attachments to good things, particularly in the area of our money and possessions. Greed, status, comparing, discontent, miserliness.

The second area that gets easily cluttered is our thought life. We are continually distracted in our day and age. There is endless information coming our way. And most of us are sponges for the next exciting piece of information. But do we give ourselves space to reflect, to sit without receiving something new.

How well do we cope with silence? Many of us find it hard to just be still. We think its unproductive and we are uncomfortable with it.

Do we slow down enough to even recognise when good things in themselves have become unhealthy attachments in the area of thought life - which can lead us into envy, lust, greed, pride.

The third area of clutter is our conscience - undealt with hurts and strong emotions can leave us carrying resentments and wounded spirits with ugly corners of unforgiveness and guilt left to grow.

Today we're looking at Simplicity as a spiritual pathway. It's a spring clean for the soul!

It says in Ecclesiastes 'This is all that I have learned: God made us plain and simple, but we have made ourselves very complicated.' (Ecc. 7:29)

Decluttering our lives - gives you more head space, more emotional energy, without this, we lose sight of God and our minds are preoccupied with other things. We can waste years of our lives with the wrong priorities.

Romans 12:2 - Don't copy the behaviour and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.

What the world calls wisdom and what the Bible calls wisdom are two very different things. A biblical pathway of simplicity aligns directly with its teachings about wisdom. To live simply is to be wise.

In the Old Testament 'wisdom' means 'the skill to live life according to God's ways'. A wise person was someone who patterned their life (choices, relationships, character, speech, parenting, finances) on God's Word and character.

Wisdom is synonymous with living well. From a Jewish perspective, wisdom was never theoretical or intellectual; it was always tangibly expressed action. James 3:13 encapsulates the Jewish understanding of wisdom when he writes: 'Who is wise and understanding among you? Show it by your good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.'

Wisdom is something vital that we should pursue and make a priority: 'Wisdom is the principle thing; therefore get wisdom.' Proverbs 4:7

Wisdom is not a set of rules: a Sign of our Relationship with God

God invites us into an intimate relationship with him, wisdom comes from there:

Matthew 6: Jesus teaching strikes us with his simplicity. 'Do not worry' he says!

Living totally without worry sounds to many people as impossible as living totally without breathing. Some of us are so hooked on worry that if we haven't got something to worry about we worry we've forgotten something!

There is some inner attitude here that we must learn...

Jesus had a strong, lively sense of the goodness of his father, the creator of the world. He had watched birds flying around, simply enjoying being alive. He had figured out that they never seemed to do the sort of work that humans did, and yet they mostly stayed alive and well. He watched a thousand different kinds of flowers growing in the fertile Galilean soil and had appreciated their fragile beauty. Where did its beauty come from? The flowers didn't spend hours in front of the mirror putting on make-up. It didn't go shopping for clothes. It was just itself: glorious, God-given, beautiful.

So when Jesus tells us not to worry about what to eat, or drink or wear, he doesn't mean that those things don't matter. Far from it! And nor is he saying we shouldn't work to get those things. The point is about priorities. Put these things first, and you'll find they get moth eaten in your hands. Put God first, and you'll get these things thrown in.

God's kingdom and the way of life that goes with it, with its life of de-cluttered simplicity that marks out God's people, this is what you should aim at. Then you'll find that food, drink and clothing look after themselves.

Ultimately choosing simplicity means choosing to trust in God's provision. Through careful and wise living. We recognise God's provision as a gift that is not ours to keep and can be freely shared with others.

An important Old Testament concept which goes hand in hand with what Jesus says here is the 'fear of the Lord.'

The fear of the Lord can be defined as an inward attitude and feeling of awe and affection toward God, because of who God is and what he's done. This inner attitude outworks itself in worship and right living.

The Bible states that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. (Prov 9:10)

Simplicity is the only thing which sufficiently shapes our lives so that possessions can be genuinely enjoyed.

While there is a danger of rules that restrict and withhold good and celebratory expressions of faith. Allow for different expressions:

10 guidelines for walking down this pathway:

1. **Buy things for their usefulness rather than their status.** Cars, houses, clothes, stereo systems(!) thought should be given to liveability and use rather than prestige and impressing others.
2. **Reject anything that is producing an addiction in you.** Learn to distinguish things that are adding to your life and things that are taking away from your life...If you have become addicted to television, by all means sell your set or give it away. Any of the media - radio, music, magazines, movies, newspapers, books - that you find you cannot do without, get rid of or have a break from. If money has a grip on your heart, give some away and feel the inner release.

Remember, an addiction, by its very nature, is something that is beyond your control. You cannot just decide to be free of it. But you can decide to open this corner of your life to the forgiving grace and healing power of God. You can decide to allow loving friends who know the ways of prayer to stand with you....

3. **Develop a habit of giving things away.** If you find that you are becoming attached to some possession, consider giving it to someone who needs it.
4. **Fourth, resist the pressure to purchase the latest gadgets on offer.**

Timesaving devices almost never save time.. .. Most gadgets are built to break down and wear out and so complicate our lives rather than enhance them.

We don't often think about the negative effects a device might have.

5. **Learn to enjoy things without owning them.** Owning things is an obsession in our culture. If we own it, we feel we can control it; and if we can control it, we feel it will give us more pleasure. The idea is an illusion. Many things in life can be enjoyed without possessing or controlling them. Share things. Enjoy the beach. Enjoy public parks and libraries.

6. **Develop a deeper appreciation for the creation.** Get close to the earth. Walk whenever you can. Listen to the birds. Enjoy the textures and smells. Marvel in the rich colours everywhere.
7. **Look with a healthy skepticism at all "buy now, pay later" schemes.** They encourage you to live beyond your means.
8. **Obey Jesus' instructions about plain, honest speech.** "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil" (Matt. 5:37). If you consent to do a task, do it. Avoid flattery and half-truths. Make honesty and integrity the distinguishing characteristics of your speech.
9. **Reject anything that breeds the oppression of others.** This is one of the most difficult and sensitive issues for us to face, but face it we must. Do we sip our coffee and eat our chocolate at the expense of exploiting the poor in less developed countries? In a world of limited resources, does our lust for wealth mean the poverty of others? Should we buy products that are made by forcing people into unsafe and exploitative assembly-line jobs?
10. Tenth, **shun anything that distracts you from seeking first the kingdom of God.** It is so easy to lose focus in the pursuit of legitimate, even good things. Job, position, status, family, friends, security these and many more can all too quickly become the centre of attention.

May God give you, and me, the courage, the wisdom, the strength always to hold the kingdom of God as the number one priority of our lives. To do so is to live in simplicity.