Spiritual Disciplines 4. Simplicity. Matthew 6:19-33

Based on Richard Foster’s Celebration of Discipline, chapter 6.

Let me tell you about Shaun and Linda. Shaun and Linda and their three kids once lived in Pennant Hills. Shaun was an executive in a large company, and Linda was a computer consultant. They had two late model cars and a Harley motorbike on lease, they had a big house with a pool, numerous flat-screen TVs, gym memberships, two mortgages, and lots of credit card debt. The children had music lessons, did Karate, played soccer, and needed tutoring. A baby sitter ferried them to their various activities, because Mum and Dad didn’t get home till after 7pm. They felt empty and stressed out. Then they read a book called “Your Money or Your Life” -a secular book by Joe Dominguez, which spoke about simplifying your lifestyle. It made a deep impression on them.

As a result they sold their Pennant Hills home, and moved further out to Kenthurst. They paid off one mortgage, all their credit cards and traded in both cars and the bike for a modest station wagon. Shaun cut his work hours, and Linda quit working altogether. It made an enormous difference to their lives and they never looked back!

Though this isn’t a story about Christians, it illustrates a deeply spiritual principle – the value of SIMPLICITY.

In the Jerusalem Bible translation, Ecclesiates 7:29 says, “God made man simple; man’s complex problems are of his own devising.”

Richard Foster believes that the majority of Christians have never wrestled with the discipline of simplicity, conveniently ignoring Jesus’ many words on the subject because this discipline directly challenges our vested interests in an affluent lifestyle.

One of the pervading opinions in our culture is that the Bible is ambiguous about economic issues, and that what we do with our wealth is an individual matter. Nothing could be further from the truth! The Bible challenges nearly every economic value we hold. For starters, in the Old Testament, private ownership of the land was discouraged, as the earth was seen as the Lord’s. (Lev 25:23) The year of the Jubilee was implemented to make sure that the rich didn’t keep getting richer, and the poor poorer. How sad that Israel wasn’t able to stick to it!

The Psalmist counsels detachment from our possessions. He says, “If riches increase, do not set your heart on them;” and in Proverbs, we read, “He who trusts in riches will wither.” (Prov 11:28)

Jesus’ words in Matthew 6:33 teach something quite countercultural for those of us living in the ‘west’. He says, “Seek first God’s Kingdom & his righteousness, and all these things will be added also”. In other words, material possessions should not ever be our focus. God should always be first, and when he is, we can trust him to provide for us. In this, he echoes the teaching of the rest of Scripture.

Foster describes the Christian Discipline of Simplicity as an inward reality that results in an outward lifestyle. This inward reality is simply a single minded devotion to God. It is not something that comes to us ready formed however. It is something we need to seek in prayer and strengthen through obedience. As we determine to spend time in God’s presence, and be ‘transformed by the renewal of our minds,’ as Paul counsels in Romans 12:2, this inner attitude of complete devotion to God can take root in us, and grow to maturity.

This inner devotion to God is marked by being able to see that everything we have as a gift from God, and therefore we can hold onto our possessions lightly. We have no problem making them available to others. We trust God to care for us, and for our possessions, and so are able to live without anxiety, as Jesus counselled in our Gospel reading this morning.

However, simplicity is not just an inner attitude. If it is truly part of our spirituality, it will be evidenced by the way we live.

Foster identifies a number of lifestyle choices which mark an attitude of inner simplicity. When you read Foster’s chapter on Simplicity in Celebration of Discipline, they read a little like the Ten Commandments of the Simple Lifestyle! However, he counsels that these choices should not become laws in themselves, though they are certainly evidence an inner devotion to and trust in God.

Let me run them by you, and as I do – perhaps use them as a spiritual checklist for yourself.

1. We should buy things for no other reason than their usefulness. Status, prestige and fashion should not be considerations. When we buy things it should be because we need them rather than simply want them. (that’s a hard one, isn’t it?) This should apply to housing, transport, clothing. Foster reckons we all have too many clothes – and that we should only buy new ones when the old ones wear out…
2. We should reject anything that produces an addiction in us. How do we identify whether something is an addiction? An addiction, by definition, is something that controls *us -* we don’t control it. If we suspect something might be an addiction, we could ask ourselves if we could do without it without coming unstuck. It could be something as simple as a particular drink, or treat, or magazine we’re hooked on, or even the daily paper!

Let me quote a story from Foster’s book:

“A student friend told me about one morning when he went out to get his newspaper and found it missing. He panicked, wondering how he could possibly start the day without the newspaper. Then he noticed a morning paper in his neighbour’s yard, and he began to plot how he could sneak over and steal it. Immediately he realised he was dealing with a genuine addiction. He rushed inside to call the newspaper office and cancel his subscription. The receptionist, obviously filling out a form, asked courteously, “Why are you cancelling your subscription?”

My friend blurted out, “Because I’m addicted!”

Undaunted, the receptionist replied, “Would you like to keep the Sunday edition?” to which he exclaimed, “No – I’m going cold turkey!”

As Foster points out, this doesn’t mean that everyone should cancel their subscription to their newspapers, but for this young man, it was a spiritual issue.

Simplicity is *freedom,* not slavery, and if we identify an addiction in ourselves – even what we might feel is an insignificant one – we should seek help in becoming free.

1. We should develop the habit of giving things away. Foster suggests that if we find we are becoming too attached to a particular possession, we should consider giving it away to someone who needs it. ‘De-accumulate’ – he says! Masses of things that are not needed just complicate our lives. He says that most of us could get rid of half our possessions without any real sacrifice.
2. We shouldn’t get hooked on unnecessary gadgetry. Most things that say they’ll save us time actually don’t, and more often than not, they consume energy. Environmental concerns alone should discourage us from buying gadgets we don’t really need.
3. Find things to enjoy that we don’t need to *own* –like the garden, or the beach, or the park or the library. Why buy a book when we can borrow it from the library, and save the trees?
4. Develop a deeper appreciation of creation. Get out and enjoy this beautiful place in which we live! Sit and listen to the Bell birds, smell the rain or salt in the air, marvel at the rich and verdant colours. Watch the surf pounding on the beach. Simplicity means to be in touch with the fact that “The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it.”
5. Avoid going into debt. If we don’t have the money for something, should we be considering buying it? I suppose purchasing a home is not in this category, as we would have to save for a very long time in order to be able to do this. But then we could always consider just renting a place. There are many young people in the cities now, who deliberately choose to rent their whole lives instead of buying, and many retirees do this as well.
6. Develop the habit of plain speech. We need to avoid deception, flattery and half-truths. We need to make sure we do not say one thing when we mean another. Often, we are not open and honest in the things we say for complicated reasons such as fear of what people may think of us, or the desire for approval, or the need to get our own way. Jesus said simply let your yes be yes, and your no be no. If we are living from an attitude of inner simplicity, we will not be duplicitous in our speech.
7. Reject anything which leads to the oppression of others. To live this way, we need to be aware of things in our consumer-generated culture which exploit others. We can choose to buy fair-trade products, for instance, rather than brands imported from 3rd world countries where workers are exploited for profit. Most large supermarkets now stock Fair Trade Coffee, Tea and chocolate.
8. Reject anything that hinders us from seeking first God’s kingdom. It’s so

easy to get caught up in legitimate and even good things, but we need to be careful that even the good stuff isn’t keeping us from putting God first.

Our schedules could probably bear looking at on a regular basis. Most retirees tell me that they are busier now than they ever were when they were working. Why is that, I wonder? Perhaps it’s because we get to choose what we do when we retire, and there are so many good things to choose from! There are trips to be with family, having visitors, club memberships, travel, gardening – even church commitments! We can fall into the trap of filling our lives too full, and then the basics of living for God – putting him and our neighbour first – can get crowded out.

There you have the ‘Ten Commandments’ of the discipline of simplicity. Without making them a law to bind us, I hope that they have provided some grist for our spiritual mills this morning.

May God give us the courage, wisdom and strength to make the Kingdom of God the number one priority in our lives.

Let’s pray…