

## “Spiritual Habits for Ordinary People - simplicity”

Scripture: Matthew 6:25-33

Graphics: money, seeking, simplicity

Big Truth: The people of the Panama UMC are called to reorient our lives to embrace less, have less, and seek first the kingdom of God.

Focus Phrase: Simplicity ushers me into the place where Jesus is my all in all.

### 1. Introduction

- A. Growing up immersed in Christian camping in the 1970s and 1980s, there was one song that we sang so many times that when I learned to play guitar, it was the first song I ever learned.
- B. It has a simple chord progression and the words are super simple and right from scripture.
- C. Let me play it for you...sing with me if you know it. (Seek Ye First - words on screen)
- D. That song was written by Karen Lafferty in 1971 at Calvary Chapel, in Costa Mesa, California following a Bible study she attended on Matthew 6:33, which is our text for today.
- E. That song has been included in every major protestant hymnal since 1980, and is one of the most popular songs...especially around a campfire.
- F. The reason, I think, that song is so cherished for followers of Jesus is because **it speaks into our hearts a truth about the simplicity of the gospel.**
- G. The life of being a disciple of Jesus can be explained using lots of big fancy theological words that we learn from great thinkers. But, for me, the truth that we are to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness boils it all down to a simplicity that grabs my heart.
- H. I don't need to tell you that life can be complicated. Contemporary life is a seemingly endless string of events, appointments, social media streams, bills, games, newsfeeds, debates, and a whole host of other things that keep us awake at night. The anxiety is real. Really real, sometimes.
- I. Jesus knows that about us...about you. But, that never stops Jesus from finding you in the midst of the whirlwind we call life - especially when we pray with Him and when we study Him. He said, “Come, follow me.” Or in Matthew 11:28-30 He said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

- J. We're in Week 3 of our series we've called Spiritual Habits for Ordinary People. So far, we've learned that ordinary people can pray...and learned that ordinary people can study Jesus and the world God made.
- K. Today, we dive into the Spiritual Habit of Simplicity. It's very likely that you've never taken the time to think about simplicity as either a habit or a spiritual discipline.
- L. My prayer for this message has been and continues to be that you and I will hear my words inviting us to simplicity...and that you and I will begin to really hear Jesus' words this morning. Jesus talks about simplifying life A LOT!
- M. In fact, every time Jesus talks about money and finances and goods and wealth he ALWAYS is pointing toward simplicity.
- N. The people of the Panama UMC are called to reorient our lives to embrace less, have less, and seek first the kingdom of God.
- O. We'll talk about anxiety in life and what Jesus invites us to do about that, and then I have 10 things that ordinary people can do right now to build a habit of simplicity.
- P. Let's pray and DIVE IN!
- Q. PRAY!**
- R. Pick of a copy of the bible in whatever form you have it and turn to Matthew chapter 6, starting in verse 25. For those worshiping at home, make sure you have your bible with you. Let's begin...

## 2. Scripture

### A. READ Matthew 6:25-33

- B. This whole section of Matthew's gospel, from chapter 5 to chapter 7, is a collection of Jesus' sermons as recorded by Matthew. We don't know if Jesus sat down in one sitting and preached all these truths, but He did indeed speak these words...in your bible they may even be in red to indicate they were Jesus' words.
- C. Picture yourself sitting with Jesus and hearing these words for the first time. In fact, let me read some of this again and, this time, close your eyes and simply listen INTENTLY to Jesus' words.
- D. Listen to Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of verses 25-26: "If you decide for God, living a life of God-worship, it follows that you don't fuss about what's on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the birds, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, careless in the care of God. And you count far more to him than birds."

- E. Verse 33 says, “Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don’t worry about missing out. You’ll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.” **OK, you and open your eyes...**
- F. **Simplicity is not having nothing!** Simplicity is relying on God’s provision to provide everything you need, some things you want, and a whole lot of extra time and brain-power to pray, study, and give thanks.
- G. Picking up from last week’s challenge to build a habit of study, Jesus said to examine the birds and flowers to see that they don’t have to worry about being taken care of.
- H. The big question is, “Doesn’t God put more value on YOU than on the birds or the flowers?” The answer is, “Of course He does! You and I are the pinnacle of Creation...what God called VERY GOOD!” in Genesis 1.
- I. So, if the grass and birds are adorned so beautifully, God will indeed provide for every one a disciples’ needs.
- J. Jesus then mentions Solomon. Solomon was one the richest men to ever have lived. He was King. He had goods and cattle and houses and tents and servants. Some estimate that in today’s dollars, his net worth would be \$2 TRILLION! Bill Gates is worth a paltry \$150 million or something.
- K. But, here’s Jesus saying that King Solomon was rich, but even HE wasn’t clothed like the lilies of the fields.
- L. Therefore, verse 31, Jesus gives this command to his disciples (imperative - “Do this!” statement): “Do not worry - about what you will eat or drink...what you will wear.”
- M. How many of the disciples struggled with this? How many of US struggle with this? Worry and stress and anxiety are killing us.
  - i. This past 6 months has seen an incredible spike in the level of anxiety-related health problem. Alcohol abuse and drug abuse have skyrocketed. Suicide and overdoses have spiked exponentially.
  - ii. And the underlying un-addressed cause is hopelessness - fear that the future can not be any better than the worst of today. Combine that with a lack of coping skills or support from community and people are desperate.
  - iii. And this isn’t just those strung out of drugs, but you and me and our families and our neighbors.
- N. And we read Jesus’ VERY simple words to NOT WORRY and we think, “That’s easy for you to say, Jesus. You’re not here and you’re God.”
- O. But Jesus brings it home in verse 34 when he said, “...and indeed, your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things (clothes, food, hope,

provision of ALL things). There isn't one thing that you need (or want for that matter) that Jesus doesn't know. Believe that, church!

- P. So, said Jesus, if the Father knows all that, then what can we do to receive it?
- Q. Simple, Jesus said, (in the NRSV), "Strive first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things (all your needs...including hope and contentment and joy) WILL be given to you as well as the kingdom itself.
- R. The incredible truth here is that the thing that is MOST IMPORTANT and MOST VALUABLE, the KINGDOM OF GOD, will be given to you...AND, all the other stuff you need will be given to you as well. Breathe!

### 3. Application

- A. Why then do you and I strive so hard after the things of this world first...and the kingdom ONLY when we have time?
- B. I think it's because the things we can create with our own hands - the paycheck we can earn, the clothes we wear, the cars and houses and land we buy, ALL those things can be controlled if we are the ones to earn and buy them.
- C. The problem is that we spend so much time and money striving after the things of this world that we allow it all to be a **jumble of striving**.
- D. And, honestly, our anxiety for what we don't have, and what we think we need, becomes the driving force to keep all the balls in the air and plates spinning.
- E. But Jesus said, "Do not worry." (pause) Embrace simplicity.
- F. Richard Foster wrote, "Simplicity is the only thing that sufficiently reorients our lives so that possessions can be genuinely enjoyed without destroying us. Without simplicity we will either capitulate to the 'mammon' spirit of this present evil age, or we will fall into an un-Christian legalistic asceticism. Both lead to idolatry. Both are spiritually lethal."
- G. The spiritual habit of simplicity keeps you and I from driving ourselves crazy to have more, do more, and show off more. But, it also keeps us from thinking that we have to shun everything that might bring some genuine joy and contentment into our lives.
- H. Those who have absolutely nothing are guilty of idolizing money and wealth as much as those who have way more than they need.
- I. The spiritual habit of simplicity keeps us in a place where we have enough of the things we need, genuinely enjoy what we have, but that we don't continuously and anxiously desire to have more, bigger, or other.
- J. For all the young people who are here today: listen, remember that as you start out on earning and spending, don't be fooled by the desire to show off everything you have to your friends. I will tell you honestly that someone else

- will ALWAYS have something that's newer, faster, and better. Hear me when I say that faster, shinier toys just get crunched and dented and rusty faster, too.
- K. Before we dive into the 10 things Foster suggests to build a spiritual habit of simplicity, let's talk about how to deal with our anxiety about our stuff. And this is an INTERNAL or INWARD condition.
- L. When Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom..." he wasn't kidding. Foster said, "...freedom from anxiety is one of the inward evidences of seeking the kingdom of God."
- M. If you can wrap your mind and heart around these three simple life-principles, then you will find that your anxiety about stuff and life is gone:
- i. First, **view EVERYTHING you have as a gift from God**. All of your possessions and money. Your spouse, if you have one, family, your job. EVERYTHING. Remind yourself every day that God has given you all you have and nothing that you have or will ever have is NOT a gift from God. That radically changes the value and grip we put on our stuff.
  - ii. Second, **EVERYTHING you have is cared for by God**, not you. We are to be stewards of the gifts we have received from God. It's not your responsibility to ENSURE that everything is always perfectly cared for by you. That's not a license to be careless and reckless. But it changes your view of who God is and who YOU are in this process of seeking.
  - iii. Thirdly, **make EVERYTHING you have available to others**. Woah! Shut up! Seriously! Money? Make it available. Don't go out into the street with a dump truck load of cash (unless God clearly says to come to 35 East Main.) Possessions? Make them available. Give some away, church. You probably don't need that tool you haven't used in 20 years. Time? (oh boy) Make it available. Everything.
  - iv. Foster wrote this, "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." (p88)
- N. With those three things in mind, here is a list things you, as an ordinary follower of Jesus, seeking first the kingdom, can do, practically, to build a spiritual habit of simplicity.
- O. Remember, though, this is all about seeking the kingdom before ALL things. Foster reminds us that if we are NOT seeking the kingdom FIRST, then we're not seeking it at all.
- P. Strap on your seatbelt, because I don't have time to unpack all these today, but I've given you a cheat sheet on your seat. These come directly from Foster's book, with a few modification by me:

- i. 1 - buy things for their usefulness, not the status they elicit. John Wesley said, "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." That might be a little much, but you get the idea.
- ii. 2 - reject anything that is producing an addiction in you. You know what that is in your life. Chocolate, beer, coffee, Diet Coke. Enjoy. Don't be a slave to anything. Seek first the Kingdom.
- iii. 3 - develop a habit of giving things away. It's SO liberating! You don't need it all and it's just cluttering your life and house.
- iv. 4 - refuse to buy into the latest gadget that promises to make life easier. So much technology, so little time. I often roll my eyes at the people who answer their flip-phones until mine won't STOP ringing and buzzing!
- v. 5 - learn to enjoy things without owning them. Go to the beach...don't buy a beach house. Rent stuff when you need it.
- vi. 6 - develop a deeper appreciation for creation. Get outside! Free entertainment! And healthy!
- vii. 7 - be cautious of buy now, pay later offers. Most of the time it's not a good thing to not pay for what you have.
- viii. 8 - obey Jesus' instructions about plain, honest speech. Mean what you say and say what you mean.
- ix. 9 - (I like this one) reject anything that breeds the oppression of others. Do some research into that clothing or food before you buy.
- x. 10 - shun anything that distracts you from seeking first the kingdom of God. Having and doing is great! But don't let those things be the center of your attention. That's the place that only Jesus gets in your life.

#### **4. Conclusion**

- A. Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you, Alleluia! Alleluia!
- B. Ordinary people - ordinary disciples - can do extraordinary things when we allow our extraordinary God to transform us to seek FIRST his kingdom.
- C. This week, take stock of EVERYTHING in your life. ALL of it! Spend time listing it out, looking around you at home, at work, at church. ALL of it is God's...a gift to you. To us.
- D. Make it available to others. ALL of it. Money, things, time, life itself.
- E. Don't let anything get in way of building spiritual habits of prayer, study, and simplicity.

- F. Let's give Richard Foster the last word, "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." Amen!