

Simplicity

SCOTT HOEZEE

A few years ago, some billboard advertisements proclaimed, “Drink Pepsi, win stuff.” The ads never even said what the “stuff” was that you could win; but maybe that does not matter today, since there is the bumper sticker slogan that says, “The one who dies with the most stuff wins.” We assume that stuffing our lives with more stuff is the way to be happy, successful, content. Is that so? Is that anything remotely like the Christian vision for what life is all about? Today on Groundwork, we continue in our series on the spiritual disciplines to think most especially about the discipline of simplicity. What is this discipline? How does it lead us another way from so much of contemporary society, and how does it make us grow closer to the heart of God? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, continuing on in this series of programs on disciplines – spiritual disciplines – and as mentioned already, we are going to look at simplicity today, but we have looked at a number of other ones, and throughout the series we will be looking at meditation on scripture and prayer, fasting, giving, generosity, service, solitude; but today, simplicity. We will look at some scripture passages that help get at that subject.

DAVE BAST

Right; yes. The disciplines are all things that we do, not so much for their own sake, although they are probably good for us, but we do them in order to grow in our life with God. They all, in one way or another, will help to break the hold that the various idols of the world have on us, and draw us closer into the mind and heart of God. There is a wonderful, practical result that pursuing these things has.

Today we want to talk, as you said in the introduction, about the discipline of simplicity. Maybe you have never thought of that as a spiritual discipline, but it is; and here is a great passage from Paul’s letter to the Philippians that can get us grounded in scripture; Philippians 4, beginning at verse 10:

I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹²I know what it is to be in need and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³I can do all this through Him who gives me strength.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, there is Paul indicating to the Philippians – they have given him a gift and he was very grateful for the gift and he does not pretend that the gift is meaningless or not even useful for him, but he wants to make clear that is not the joy of his heart, getting stuff; and in that sense, Paul is living out what his Lord Jesus had said in the Gospel; well-known lines from Matthew 6 in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus – just quickly to remind ourselves – Jesus says, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,” and of course, he says, “Do not worry about food, drink, clothing. The pagans run after all those things; but seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and all these other things will be added to you, as well.”

So, that is what Paul is trying to live out there as an example in front of the Philippians. They gave him some things; much appreciated; but, even without them, there is a contentment in Paul's heart just from knowing who Jesus is and who owns his life.

DAVE BAST

Right. Neither Paul nor Jesus is saying in these passages that we have to learn to live on nothing; that you cannot ever have anything nice; you cannot ever enjoy anything. You do not have to worry about where your next meal is going to come from; you do not have to be prudent and saving and all of that; that is not the point they are trying to make. They are both trying to say we must not obsess over things – over the goods of the world – and God wants to feed us and clothe us; yes, He will use our efforts to do that, and the efforts of others; but, it is not a matter of stripping away everything.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But it is a matter of perhaps paring down life to simplicity; to the basics. Because there is, all through scripture – and we will see different scripture passages in this show, too – but there is that sense that the more cluttered your life is, the harder it is to make your way to God and the harder it is to see your way clearly as to what the kingdom is up to; and of course, that is the rub, as we could say, that is the issue or the conflict with modern society, as we said at the head of this program, Dave. People just want more stuff. We are always stuffing our lives with more stuff and we seem to think that that is the path to the kind of contentment – so Paul said: Look, I have had a lot, I have had a little, I have had nothing, and the one constant for me is contentment. I can be content with a lot, with a little, with nothing; but society says: Oh, no you cannot. You can only be content with a lot; more and more; ever better; keep collecting; keep stuffing your life.

DAVE BAST

Well, but there are a lot of people, including people in society, that recognize the futility of that, and the burden that accumulating and having lots and lots can lay on us. You know, there is a term in real estate when you want to sell your house you have to de-clutter it. You have to make it clean and simple and neat; and there are people in society that recognize the wisdom of that with respect to their lives. This is, to me, an important point. I actually have gotten into a couple of a reality shows where people are living out in the wilderness and they are radically simplifying. One of the interesting things to me – it is interesting just to see what kind of a life that is – but there is never a whiff of God in any of those programs. Maybe they will talk about native religion or they will talk about the creation and living simply. It becomes an end in itself. The spiritual discipline of simplicity is not an end in itself. It is a means to the end that we may seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and then all these things will be added. That is the point Jesus is making.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; if you do not have that up front, then paring down just gets you down to something else, but it does not get you to focus on God. Again, right; some of those reality shows that try to put people in extremis – they put them into extreme situations – but of course, that too stands in such contrast to the rest of society because probably a lot of the advertisements that come on during those shows are aiming for what – and some observers of the advertising industry have noted that there is this thing called designer dissatisfaction; that advertisers make us dissatisfied by design. Your life is worth nothing if you just have PlayStation 1. You have to have PlayStation 2. And that 38-inch wide-screen TV is great, but the 52-inch one you cannot live without. We are made dissatisfied constantly by advertisers who want us to believe the lie that more is better and more stuff leads to happiness.

DAVE BAST

Or built in planned obsolescence, as they say. Your new gadget wears out and it is no longer supported by the software in a few years, so that you have to buy an updated one. Well, we want to focus in on what simplicity really looks like and what it really can do for us in terms of seeking God and His kingdom, and we want to be a little bit practical about this, so we are going to have a guest join us in just a few moments who is going to share a little bit about how she has tried to achieve a simpler life for the sake of the kingdom.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork. As part of our spiritual discipline series, we are thinking today about the discipline of simplicity; and Dave, we have a guest with us to help us talk about that.

DAVE BAST

We are welcoming today Rena Dam; welcome, Rena, to the program.

RENA DAM

Thank you, thank you.

DAVE BAST

Let me give a little bit of background. In the interest of full disclosure, I should start by saying Rena is a colleague on staff with us at Words of Hope, and she works in our English ministry, and is a program producer for the international English program that we do; but, Rena has a wonderfully interesting and varied background. She grew up as an MK – that is missionary kid – in Bangladesh and Taiwan. She, as an adult, has served as a missionary in Africa; especially working with an organization that is today known as World Renew - it was formerly the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee – in various kinds of projects aimed at helping people with development and physical needs and that sort of thing in Africa; and I wonder, Rena, if that background has not had a big impact on the way you try to live now, here in a rather affluent city in the United States?

RENA DAM

Right. Yes, it definitely does; if I think about my attitude toward simplicity, it is extremely impacted by my upbringing; not only growing up in places where there was so much poverty and so many people doing without, and being aware of those inequalities in material resources, but it also has made me realize some things that people in other places we call less developed – what they have that we sort of lose or have lost with...

DAVE BAST

It is not only what they lack, it is what they have that we lack.

RENA DAM

Right; exactly; something that we have not necessarily traded in, but almost lost as we collect more and more things around us, we lose our relationships and our closeness with other people and with God in a way that I find, and other people find, easier when their lives are not so full of stuff.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is easy when we think, Rena, too, about other cultures. You have been in Africa – Bangladesh – and we think: Well, yes; those people live simpler lives because they do not have any choice. They do not have an IKEA to go to; so, of course, they are simple; but then again, they have no choice; but what you are saying is that your observation is that, to a degree, it is true, they just do not have the opportunity, but they have other things. Talk about a few things you observed that we sometimes lose because we do have IKEA and Sam's Club and everything else, but what are some of the virtues you saw in those cultures and what they have because they have less stuff.

RENA DAM

Well, most of them are relational; either between relationships with our fellow human beings, and also our relationship with God. In a sense of with each other, there is usually a much more cohesive sense of community in places than there is... for example, I live in a place where I hardly ever see my neighbors. I rarely even talk to them. I drive my car into my driveway; I go into my house; I do my things in my... and

we sort of have to fight against that in our culture because we have built up so many things around us. We have all these lovely houses, but how many people come and visit them?

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. That is a good point.

Rena Dam: And the other thing that I really see is that there is a sense of, I think, vulnerability in our relationship with God that people have; also a sense of gratefulness and thankfulness in our church that we would go to in rural Uganda. People would almost always start their prayers with: Thank You for waking me up this morning, Lord. You know, not thank you for my Mercedes or thank you that I have all of these clothes to choose from or all of this stuff; thank you that I am just here and that You sustain me; and I think there is a closeness with God that, when we fill our lives with other things, we often lose that depth of relationship, unfortunately.

DAVE BAST

You mentioned Uganda, and on a program fairly recently on Groundwork, we welcomed Archbishop Henry Luke Orombi from Uganda, and I just asked him, kind of open-ended, “You are an outsider; you are a preacher; what would you critique about our society as you look at it?” And the first thing he said was, “You are too busy, and you do not have enough room for God in your life. You have not allowed space for that.” It takes time, and again, we need to de-clutter our lives, not simply as an end in itself, but for the sake of other people, of relationships with them and with God.

RENA DAM

I think that is a really good point; and that actually is what I struggle with. I have a much easier time making my material surroundings simpler. What I find much harder to do is to work against those pressures of all of the things we feel we should do, and all the things that keep us busy, like you were saying. We run around sometimes not even knowing why we are doing what we are doing anymore. It is this kind of lack of focus that makes it very difficult to really be able to live a life concerned with what really matters.

DAVE BAST

Now we are thinking about the next discipline, which is solitude and silence...

RENA DAM

Right; sure.

DAVE BAST

That can help us with the busyness. But, getting back to de-cluttering and simplicity: What are some of the practical things you have done to simplify your material life, your physical?

RENA DAM

In a very practical sense, I do not have a lot of stuff, myself and my kids; we do not buy a lot of things; we do not – I think probably the biggest thing for my children is that we do not own a TV, so we do not have a lot of that sort of techie stuff either. Of course, that is also, in terms of simplicity, a huge thing in terms of our time. One of the other things that is very important to me is really focusing on those relationships, and one of the ways that that is connected to how I do that very practically in my life is, for example, I do not have a microwave, I do not have a dishwasher; I grow or work with local farms to get all of our vegetables – I mean, not all of our food...

DAVE BAST

You spend a lot of time on food preparation and clean up with your kids.

RENA DAM

I do! Exactly; which, in fact, the result of that – what is so great about that is not: Oh, what a sacrifice, I do not have a microwave. That is not really what matters. What matters is that every single day I am preparing,

eating, cleaning up, spending time with my kids doing that, and I think that that, in a way, is the outcome of simplicity.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, it is interesting – this started in the 1950s when appliances were coming into their own – dishwashers, microwaves – we call them all “time saving appliances,” but unfortunately, the time we saved never got plowed into relationships, it just got plowed into watching TV.

RENA DAM

Right; exactly – put it into a different appliance, right?

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, the time we save with those things, unfortunately – and I confess this is probably true in my own life, too – we save time with a dishwasher instead of doing them by hand, but we do not spend time with each other in the time we save; we go our separate ways. It is a matter of some intentionality; but the other intentionality is that then the relationships have to be nurtured simultaneously. They will not happen automatically, even so; so, you are very intentional about both.

RENA DAM

Right; if we just kind of float along with the mainstream way our society goes, it is very difficult to have a sense of focus because we just get pulled apart in all different kinds of directions and distracted by things and by all of this stuff that we feel we need to be doing.

DAVE BAST

I think is certainly an area where we cannot make rules or lay down even principles. Everybody has to find their own way: What do you give up and how much do you give up?

I remember reading a line years ago of Calvin, who said, “There is always another step you can take,” in effect; “there is always something more you can give up until you live on bread and water; but even then, you could have moldy bread and dirty water.” I think his point was: Try it, and take some steps, and do not worry about how rigorous you have to be; but, it is a matter of reclaiming our lives for the sake of relationship.

RENA DAM

Right; I really like that as a focus on the positive rather than the negative; rather than simplicity being equated with sacrifice, it is equated with actually enriching our lives. You may, in a sense, feel like you have to give something up, but you gain so much more in return.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is interesting, we said in the first segment of this show, too, Rena, we have to fight against society for so much of this, so that we are constantly being pulled in the other direction. I know I read a quote from somebody a while back who said, “Americans are willing to share almost anything with each other at dinner parties or cocktail parties. You can share about your depression...”

DAVE BAST

Verbally sharing...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, yes; you can share about your depression; you can talk about your bipolar; you can talk about a bad relationship, and people just nod and say, “Oh, yeah, yeah,” but tell somebody you do not own a TV and they think you are weird! It is like: What is wrong with you?! But again, that is just that pressure of society that we have defined a good life with stuff and not with people.

Well, thank you so much, Rena, for joining us and for sharing that. We are going to, in just a moment, wrap up this program with some more thoughts about the simple life, but your testimony and your words and your

experience from living abroad has helped us a lot; so, thank you very much.

RENA DAM

Yes; thank you for having me.

BREAK:

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are wrapping up a program on the discipline of simplicity; and by virtue of the fact that this is a discipline, Dave, that means there are some things we can do, or try to do intentionally. We just heard from our guest in the last segment, Rena, who mentioned some things she does intentionally; but maybe we can wrap this up with a few other things so that we, like Paul in Philippians 4, the passage we read in the first segment, can truly say, and mean it: Look, sometimes we have a little, sometimes we have a lot, in some seasons we have almost nothing, but in all seasons we can be content.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely...

SCOTT HOEZEE

How can we do that?

DAVE BAST

And I am glad you brought us back to that Philippians 4 passage, because listen carefully to what Paul says: I have learned the secret of how to be content. There is a process to it; there is a learning curve, as we like to say; it is a secret in the sense that not everybody stumbles on to this. There are some things you have to do, and it takes practice; that is what learning is. So, Paul is saying to us, I think: Life can teach you this lesson if you go about it the right way; if you approach it in the right way; and then if you take the right steps. I think one simple step to take just for starters is stop envying what other people have. If you want to be content with what you have, stop complaining about what you lack.

Just this morning, I was doing my e-mail; I tend, like many people today, to buy things online; you go get a book at Amazon or – you can get anything at Amazon now – or these other places; that is very convenient, but what you get back are the ads that come right to your computer. So, I had an e-mail this morning from a supplier saying: Make your garage the envy of your neighborhood. I mean, you can even make your garage the envy of others. What is in it? All this stuff; all the accumulated...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Nothing is safe from designer dissatisfaction. So, what can we do? We are indebted on a number of these programs, Dave, to Richard Foster and his classic book in the last 30 years, *The Celebration of Discipline*, and he has a few ideas that we will just share quickly in closing here: What does *simplifying* mean? Again, the learning to be content, Dave, as you pointed out from Paul; but one thing we can do is get in the habit of giving stuff away on a regular basis; and not just the stuff that is broken, outdated, or the clothing that is torn for the rummage sale. Give away something you still need. Now, maybe you will replace it eventually; but, give away something you need to somebody who needs it more, and who does not have a chance to get it on his or her own.

DAVE BAST

Right; and here is another great idea of Foster's: Before you buy anything – especially something big – ask yourself: Am I buying this for its utility or for the sake of my own status? That is such a powerful one because – you know, the clothes we wear, the car that we drive, the kind of phone, maybe, that is in our pocket – a lot of these things, we go for the expensive and the flashy because we really want to tell people, or

show people, how important we are, or how successful.

SCOTT HOEZEE

When status and being eye-catching means more than just having a car to get around town or a coat to put on your back, that is an indication that we are buying way too much into the idea that more stuff is the way to contentment. Another idea – and I get this from my friend, Neal Plantinga, who said years ago: TV advertisements – if you have a TV – advertisers are often making ridiculous claims about what this product will do for you - or even what you said earlier: Make your garage the envy – sometimes we need to get into the habit of laughing out loud, and letting our children, if we have children at home yet, let our children hear their parents laugh at what a silly claim this is! This is not where happiness or where our hearts should be! So, just laugh out loud – laugh them into derision – the advertisers.

DAVE BAST

How ridiculous it is to think that the kind of car you drive will help you attract attractive people to you, or further your career, or...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or make you a better person at all.

DAVE BAST

Here is one last idea, straight from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Remember what He said in that passage at the beginning of the program: Consider the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. Look at the creation around you. Look at the beauty that God has built into the world and recognize that that beauty is greater than any of the stuff you might accumulate.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Creation properly puts us in our place and lets us realize what is really important and what really is not. What is really important is being after the heart of God.

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and Rena Dam was a special guest on our program today, too, and we thank her. We would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So, visit our website, groundworkonline.com, and tell us topics and passages you would like to hear next on Groundwork.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/simplicity>

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