

The "Real" Simple Life

Discover emotional and financial freedom through an often-neglected spiritual discipline.

By Matt Bell | posted 08/25/05

Not long ago, a good friend went through his closet and gave away literally half of his clothes. Rather than missing the items, he feels a new sense of freedom.

In a recent *Town & Country* magazine article, Jane Hammerslough describes a similar experience. A roof repair gone wrong forced her family to frantically pack what they could and move to a small, sparsely furnished rental house for six months. She writes of their surprise that they didn't miss much of what they had left behind. Rather than feeling depressed or deprived due to their "hideous living room" and "mismatched plates," they felt liberated. And when they returned home, she felt "overwhelmed by the utter excess of stuff." A purging of things soon followed. She concluded that "when 'enough' is always just a little more than you already have, you don't have a lot of room left for the truly great pleasures of life: family, friends, and the time to enjoy them."

Of course, too much stuff can also leave too little room for God. With the time required to shop for, move, insure, use, store, clean, maintain, organize, and worry about our stuff, time in God's Word, time to minister, time for church, and time to reach out to others can easily get edged out--hence, the call for simplicity.

While the concept of simplicity has been around for a long time, the growth of the self-storage and closet organizer businesses would seem to cast doubt on its popularity.

In *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster argues that "the majority of Christians have never seriously wrestled with the problem of simplicity, conveniently ignoring Jesus' many words on the subject. The reason is simple: this Discipline directly challenges our vested interests in an affluent lifestyle."

Foster makes an important distinction when he describes the Christian discipline of simplicity as "an inward reality that results in an outward lifestyle." In other words, focus too quickly on the externals--the doing without--and it's the good intention that is likely to be cast aside instead of the extra blender.

But simplicity is more than just uncluttered closets. "It is possible for a person to be developing an outward lifestyle of simplicity and to be filled with anxiety," according to Foster.

He describes simplicity as "a life of joyful unconcern for possessions" and suggests that it "is the one thing that sufficiently reorients our lives so that possessions can be genuinely enjoyed without destroying us."

It is that tendency of possessions to destroy or, at least, worry us that Solomon refers to when he says, "The abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep" (Ecclesiastes 5:12).

On the other hand, Foster believes there are three inner attitudes related to possessions that lead to peace. "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."

Once we have begun to cultivate the inner reality of simplicity, what might our outer reality look like? Foster offers 10 principles.

1. Buy things for their usefulness rather than their status.
2. Reject anything that is producing an addiction in you.
3. Develop a habit of giving things away.
4. Refuse to be propagandized by the custodians of modern gadgetry.
5. Learn to enjoy things without owning them.
6. Develop a deeper appreciation for the creation.
7. Look with a healthy skepticism at all "buy now, pay later" schemes.
8. Obey Jesus' instructions about plain, honest speech.
9. Reject anything that breeds the oppression of others.
10. Shun anything that distracts you from seeking first the kingdom of God.

In our materialistic, marketing-saturated world, simplicity isn't, well, so simple. But as Richard Foster points out, it begins on the inside with the attitudes of our hearts and minds. And those attitudes are cultivated through prayer and meditation on the truth of God's Word.

Matt Bell is founder and president of Financially Speaking, Inc., and writes and speaks on topics related to the biblical approach to money management.

For a biblical perspective on simplicity, see the following:

[Luke 12:15-21](#)

[Luke 12:33-34](#)

[Luke 6:30](#)

[Philippians 4:12-13](#)



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