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Simplicity – The joy of an uncluttered life – 10.4.9

Consider the egg. Masterful in its simple design. No buttons. No latches. No hinges. No seams. Only three parts – shell, white, yolk. Totally biodegradable. And yet it's useful for everything. Every good recipe includes eggs (almost). And if you get a rooster involved, this simple machine can actually make a chicken. Simplicity.

I think maybe that the egg inspired the early iPods. My first one was a 4th generation 2004 model. White, smooth lines like an egg, simple controls and very few of them, and it did one thing well – play music (or my sermons, 2,000 of which would fit on a 20 GB model!)

The egg and the iPod illustrate simplicity and help define what I'm getting at in this lesson. I'm preaching a series on some of my favorite things right now, and I bet that if I checked back over my preaching for the last 20 years, in any six month span there would be some lesson on simplicity (or at least an extended reference to it). It's one of my favorite things, even if I'm not very good at it. Simplicity is next to godliness.

So what is simplicity? Simplicity is to be devoted to very few things, and really, to have only one ultimate priority. Christian simplicity is a state of heart where God is at the center and everything else gets shaken into its proper place or maybe even shaken out of your life altogether.

Another way to put it is that simplicity is to serve one God and one God only. In that sense, the first of the Ten Commandments is a call to a simple life: **"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:2-3)**. The other nations had to worry about appeasing the river god, the god of the sun and weather, the god in charge of the harvest, gods who dealt in animal fertility...and these gods (so they thought) didn't necessarily get along with each other, so who knew when you were ever right with the gods? But that was a lie, and the Lord God simplified their life with this message: I AM the Lord your God, and you shall have no other!" Likewise with the declaration known as The Shema: **"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)**, which not only states that He is One, but tells us that he is supposed to be our first and highest love in everything we do. That simplifies life, and it is this very simple focus on One God out of which Christian simplicity grows.

We sometimes get confused about simplicity because we turn away from this simple focus on God and look instead at the external ways that we think simplicity ought to express itself. We think about money and possessions, for example, and we assume that a simple life must be one where we get rid of seven-eighths of our stuff. Well there might be something to be said for that, but only if you come to that conclusion as a result of putting God first. The Amish probably have a lot to teach us about putting God first, but they sometimes stumble into legalism just like we do. Some of the Amish have decided, for example, that a simple life means that you wear very plain clothing so as to not attract attention to yourself, which is admirable, but then they fall into debates and even splits over whether it is permissible to have buttons on your shirt or a zipper on your pants, or to wear any bright color (and by the way, how bright is bright, really?). Such concerns are far from

the Kingdom of God, I think (but let me say again that we have our own foibles). Richard Foster says: *“To attempt to arrange an outward life-style of simplicity without the inward reality leads to deadly legalism”* (*The Celebration of Discipline*).

Or we focus on technology and we begin to think that a simple life means that we return to Mayberry (as if we ever lived there in the first place!) and get rid of cell phones and the internet and the dishwasher and we return to the simple ways of yesteryear! That may have a place too, but only if it comes as a result of putting God first. And remember, primitive does not equal simple. If I cut off my electricity and indoor plumbing, I might be returning to a more primitive lifestyle, but it would probably create more problems than it solved, complicating rather than simplifying my life.

When David and Sharran Pryor went to Papua New Guinea, they had the task before them of translating the New Testament into a new language and establishing Christian leaders in the villages around them. I heard Sharran say that they partly wanted to leave modern conveniences behind and live more like the people there (in order to better identify with them) but to do so would have meant they would have spent all their time growing and gathering food, cooking and storing it, fetching water and washing clothes, and that would have left no time for translating the Bible, the very task that brought them there in the first place. So they used what time-saving technology they could and stayed focused on the translation and finished it! Now which choice would have been more simple? From the outside it would have been tempting to say that less technology and fewer modern conveniences equals simplicity. But the Pryors put God first and then did what was needed to complete the work God had for them to do.

Again, the simple life is the one where God is at the center and everything else gets shaken into its proper place or maybe even shaken out of your life altogether.

To keep it simple this morning, we'll turn to one main Scripture only (though I probably can't resist bringing in a few others!). It's from Jesus, from the Sermon on the Mount. It's NOT the part where he says "Don't store up treasures on earth". It's not the part where he says that "You can't serve both God and Money". It's actually the part where he says "Do not worry", because the paragraphs that surround that teaching lay out a fine description of the difference between simplicity and duplicity.

Matthew 6:25-34 - ²⁵"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

Now the person who does a lot of worrying and fretting hasn't yet found that inner simplicity of the heart that Jesus teaches. Remember when Jesus chided Martha for being worried and upset over many things? He then told her that only one thing is really needed, and he meant devotion to God. (From **Luke 10:38-42**) (If that's you, take heart and know that none of us have arrived, but take it seriously and press on).

²⁸"And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

I almost feel guilty preaching against worry (or I did in the past) because what do I really have to worry about? Sure, troubles come and go for me, but I have a house and food and money to pay my heating bill and reasonably good health. How can I say "Don't worry!" to people who have real problems? But then I realized with a start that many of the people Jesus spoke to on the

Mountain had next to nothing. Survival was day-to-day, or pretty close to it, and there wasn't much of a safety net. If Jesus can tell THEM to not worry and to trust God, that's a message for all of us.

³¹So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' **³²For the pagans run after all these things,** (remember that pagans serve many gods and trust none of them) **and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.** **³³But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.** **³⁴Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.**

And there, along with the 1st Commandment and The Shema, is another perfect description of simplicity: **But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.**

Even though simplicity is a heart matter, it wouldn't be real if it didn't produce some fruit in us, some outward expressions that bless us and others. I'm going to list five such outward expressions (which are adapted from Richard Foster in Celebration of Discipline), but don't take these as any kind of law and certainly don't use them to judge others!

Outward expressions of simplicity to look for in your life:

1. You can enjoy things without owning them. You can go to the beach without having to buy a piece of the beach. You can ride in a friend's hot car without having to get one just like it. You can eat a steak off a neighbor's stainless steel grill without going out and buying one just like it. You can enjoy going out on someone's boat without having to buy your own boat. I owned a boat for awhile and I did enjoy it, but I found that there is something better than owning a boat (for me) and that is to have friends that own boats and pay for repairs and store them and do the maintenance on them!

Most of us (and this may not be true of the person sitting next to you) get joy out of being able to loan something to someone who will use it responsibly. We meet someone here at church and we find out they need a table saw for a few days, and even though we hardly know them, we say: "Use mine!" And it really makes us glad when they do, assuming they don't abuse it or steal it, and even if they accidentally damage it, it seems to give most of us a lot of joy to be able to say, "Don't worry, I'll buy a new blade for it. That just sometimes happens!" So, since that gives us joy, why do we feel compelled to own things and not bother someone else? Part of the blessing of living as a community is that we don't have everything we need and we do sometimes need to help each other out. So one outward expression of simplicity is enjoying things without owning them, because when God is at the center, you're no longer casting about looking to buy something that will fill up the empty places.

2. You find yourself in the habit of giving things away (because it is more blessed, more enjoyable to give than to receive). And by giving things away, I don't mean just giving away your old junk. Whenever we have a church rummage sale for the mission trip, I always value the opportunity "donate" a bunch of stuff that I've been tripping over in my garage, which usually involves me dropping the stuff off and then squealing my tires getting out of the parking lot before they demand that I take it back! I'm talking about giving away perfectly useful things, things you care about, because someone else needs them more. When God takes over the center, you don't need things for identity or security, and so when you see a genuine need they can fill, you find yourselves giving them away.

3. You acquire things for their usefulness for achieving God's purposes in your life, rather than for their status, or because you're a victim of marketing. I have an Aerospostale shirt that my wife bought for me on eBay. The only problem is that the only tag on it is way down at the bottom

of the buttons, and since people my age were taught to tuck in their shirts, that means that no one can see how cool I am to wear Aero.

Actually, I've mostly quit caring about labels on clothes, though I don't think I've slipped as far as my Dad, who lost all sense of fashion by age 30! But when it comes to Apple vs. Dell, DeWalt vs. Black and Decker, or Shimano vs. FLW, I have to admit that my choices may be more due to marketing or the desire in the back of my mind to impress someone. I think that's called being a poser! But if God is at the center of my identity, and pleasing him is becoming the most important thing, than the things I acquire, along with the activities I commit to) will be in the service of achieving his purposes.

4. You will learn to speak plainly and keep your word. This one may not seem to fit, being that the rest of the list is about possessions. But when Jesus told us to let your 'yes' be 'yes' (**Matthew 5:37**), he was getting at a powerful truth about simplicity: When the heart is centered on God, the mouth doesn't need to justify or color everything.

By speaking plainly, I do not mean abandoning kindness or tact and being brutal. I mean saying what needs to be said without having to spin your image so people think well of you. If you're often saying something like: "I just say what's on my mind", you probably say too much and you feel the need to explain why, which just adds to the problem. If you often say: "I don't watch much TV, but the other night I saw this show..." you probably watch too much TV, or else you care too much what other people might think about how much TV you watch.

Or maybe you're like the politician who said: "Friends, I have people in my district who are on one side of this issue, and people who are on the other side, and so I say to you today that I choose to stand wholeheartedly with the people of my district!" But when God is at the center of your life, you'll be able to speak plainly about the things that really matter, and stick to it.

Here's part of [a letter](#) that was written in 1971 by a well-known politician, but which I ran across only about a month ago: *While the deep concern of a woman bearing an unwanted child merits consideration and sympathy, it is my personal feeling that the legalization of abortion on demand is not in accordance with the value which our civilization places on human life. Wanted or unwanted, I believe that human life, even at its earliest stages, has certain rights which must be recognized — the right to be born, the right to love, the right to grow old.* That's plain talk, and very principled too, and it was written by Senator Edward Kennedy. But things changed, and national sentiment changed, and so did his convictions, along with many, many other elected officials in all parties. Now I don't think that we should go through this life seeing EVERYTHING in black and white, but when God is at the center of our life, we're willing to take our stand on the few things that matter most, and speak plainly about them.

5. You'll begin weeding out that which distracts from the Kingdom in you. Legalism can creep in here when you START here. People start saying: "TV is no good, so no good Christian should have one." But if first you seek God and his Kingdom, he might show you that TV is distracting you from what matters most, and you'll weed it out. Maybe you'll weed out a hobby that has taken over your life, or maybe one that you used to enjoy but you haven't been ready to admit that you don't enjoy it nearly as much as you did, and now it's taking away from your pursuit of the Kingdom of God. You might even break up with someone for the same reason. And none of this is because someone makes you feel guilty about it, but because you yourself love God more than anything and you start to realize that this other thing is calling out for more loyalty than it deserves.

Simplicity. My subtitle is “The joy of the uncluttered life” because to live simply is to be exactly who God makes you to be, and no one else. Your life can be busy and simple. It can be difficult and simple. It can be prosperous and simple. But only with God at the very center.

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Prayer and Invitation