



spiritual formation

Wednesdays 6:30pm

The Discipline of Simplicity — Adapted from *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster

“May God give you—and me—the courage, wisdom, the strength to always hold the kingdom of God as the number-one priority of our lives. To do so is to live in simplicity.” -Richard Foster

What is the Discipline of Simplicity?

Richard Foster describes Simplicity as “an *inward* reality that results in an *outward* life-style.” It begins with the right perspective on wealth, possessions and priorities. From there, it takes on concrete shape as we incorporate those values into our daily lives.

The **goal** of simplicity is to avoid the extremes of all-out *materialism* on the one hand and a complete rejection of possessions on the other (i.e. *asceticism*). Richard Foster describes these dual goals in the following way:

“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-Christlike legalistic asceticism. Both lead to idolatry. Both are spiritually lethal.”

The Inward Attitude of Simplicity

The ***inward part*** of simplicity starts with embracing Jesus’ teachings on wealth, possessions, and our need to “seek first his Kingdom,” (**Matthew 6:19-34**). Taking Jesus seriously on these points frees us from society’s never-ending quest to find one more (materialistic) thing to satisfy our deepest longings and desires. To live with Jesus’ teachings

guiding our hearts and minds is to live out of something Thomas Kelly calls “***The Divine Center.***”

Adele Calhoun, the author of *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, says this about the inner reality of simplicity:

*“Keeping it simple has fallen on hard times. And though we like the idea, we also like our choices. Jesus teaches us that freedom is not found in having and doing but in keeping God and his will first in our heart... Jesus wants us to know that we don’t **need** all the things or experiences we think we do. What we really need is to keep first things first — Jesus and his kingdom. Life becomes much more simple when one thing matters most.”*

Three Ways to Shift Our Thinking

1. God’s Gifts Instead of our Efforts. Society teaches us that wealth and luxury are a reward for hard work and innovation. This perspective is a breeding ground for anxiety, because it places on us the heavy burden of feeling as though everything depends on how hard we work.

In contrast to this, ***the Bible affirms that our possessions are a gift from God*** to be received with gratitude and humility (e.g. James 1:17). When we embrace this Biblical reality, we are freed from the anxiety-producing pressure to constantly work hard enough to earn the things we need (or want).

“What we have is not the result of our labor, but of the gracious care of God.” -Richard Foster.



2. Trusting God Instead of Ourselves. We tend to obsess over the best way to protect our possessions and investments. Even if we acknowledge that God is the one who provides us with the things we need (point #1, above), we can still act as though we are the ones who have to watch over and protect the blessings he's given us. This replaces one anxiety (the burden of working hard enough to earn what we need) with another: the constant fear of losing what we've been given. **If we trust God enough to provide us what we need, we can trust him to protect what has been given.**

"To know that it is God's business, and not ours, to care for what have is the second inner attitude of simplicity. God is able to protect what we possess."
-Richard Foster.

3. Sharing Instead of Hoarding. Our society tends to honor those who work hard, save for the future, and achieve financial security. Although we do celebrate acts of generosity and benevolence, the overwhelming emphasis in our society is on the accumulation of personal wealth. The Bible offers a dramatically different attitude towards material possessions: **what we have is a gift to be shared, not hoarded.**

"The reason we find such an idea so difficult is our fear of the future. We cling to our possessions rather than sharing them because we are anxious about tomorrow." -Richard Foster.

2. The Outward Lifestyle of Simplicity

There is no *one* way to apply the inward attitude of simplicity to our everyday lives. Everyone will approach this differently, and the key is to do what God has placed on your heart without binding your approach on anyone else. With that in mind, Richard Foster offers ten *possible* ways to incorporate simplicity into our daily lives:

1. **Prioritize usefulness over status**— Buy what you need, not what you think will impress others.
2. **Reject anything that leads to addiction**— We are slaves to God alone (**1 Peter 2:16**).
3. **Regularly give things away**— "Freely you have received; freely give." (**Matthew 10:8**)
4. **Don't buy into retail propaganda** — Don't buy into the myth that your life is incomplete without the latest and greatest gadgets.
5. **Learn to enjoy things without owning them** — You don't need to own something in order to enjoy it—renting and borrowing are great, too!
6. **Develop a deeper appreciation for nature** — God has created a beautiful world. Learn to appreciate the simple beauty of God's creation.
7. **Think twice about "buy now, pay later."** — God warns Israel against charging interest to because he knows debt can enslave us. Be practical but responsible in taking on debt.
8. **Speak clearly and plainly** — "All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one." (**Matthew 5:37**)
9. **Reject anything that is predicated on the oppression of others** — Perhaps one way to "love our neighbor" is to refuse to support companies that exploit the vulnerable.
10. **Shun anything that distracts you from seeking God's Kingdom first** — Be mindful of what is becoming your main focus in life, and be willing to reject anything that becomes more important than God.