

SIMPLICITY

to will one thing

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ONE OF THE VIRTUES MOST SOUGHT AFTER by the early Desert Fathers and Mothers (and by generations of monastics, saints and mystics who came after them) was the virtue of "purity of heart." *"Blessed are the pure in heart,"* Jesus said, *"for they will see God"* (Matt. 5:8). To obtain this promise, these holy men and women of God rid themselves of all that was superfluous in their lives – money and possessions, luxurious clothing and rich foods, the desire for popularity, success and social status – and devoted themselves wholeheartedly to prayer, study, and good works. They examined their hearts continually to weed out envy, hatred, greed and lust, and focused all their prayer and effort on obeying Jesus' command to *"strive first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness"* (Matt. 6:33). They trusted that if they did this, God would provide them with all that was needed to sustain their lives.

Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher and theologian, captured the essence of "purity of heart" and of Christian simplicity in the title of his book, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*. This "one thing," he said, is God and God's Kingdom. We are to seek and love God "with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and with all our strength" (Mark 5:30).

This call – to "purity of heart," simplicity of life, and single-minded focus on God and God's Kingdom – is much needed today. We are overwhelmed and inundated with too much of everything: too many possessions, too much food, too much stimulation, too many activities, too much work, too much information, too many choices. As a consequence, most of us live scattered, hectic lives, racing from one task to another, juggling too many commitments, always living on the surface and never really knowing ourselves, or others. Nor have we the time and space to truly know God.

The simplicity we need has both an inward dimension and an outward expression. Inwardly it seeks an integration of the self that is rooted in our identity as beloved children of God. When we know ourselves to be children

of God above all else, we find the freedom to let go of the need to compete for status, success and popularity. We can let go of jealousy, envy and pride. Our hearts are fixed on one thing – knowing and loving and serving God. Everything else then assumes its rightful place and order in our lives. As our hearts become pure, others will notice changes in the way we speak, the way we dress, the way we work, the way we conduct ourselves. We will grow in appreciation for ordinary things, and will be content with less. Our hearts will fill with gratitude for the beauty and wonder of creation, for the gift of life, and for the loving kindness of God. We will grow in concern for the world and its peoples, and for our environment. We will be increasingly skeptical of our consumerist culture, and will grow in compassion for the poor. Our lives will become simpler, more generous, more authentic.

Why not begin (again) today? Rid yourself of whatever is getting in the way. Identify what is essential and let go of what is “too much.” Resolve to seek God and God’s Kingdom above all else, and examine every commitment, every relationship, every possession, every task, in the light of this one focus. Discover the gift and freedom of simplicity.

QUOTES *to ponder*

“It is better to have fewer wants than to have larger resources.” – *St Augustine, 354-430*

“In everything, love simplicity.” – *St Francis de Sales, 1567-1622*

“If you are wise, you will dread a prosperity which only loads you with more.” – *Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1803-1882*

“Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” – *Jesus (Matt. 6:26)*

“Simple Gifts” was written by Elder Joseph Brackett, Jr. while he was at the Shaker community in Alfred, Maine. These are the lyrics to his one-verse song:

‘Tis the gift to be simple, ‘tis the gift to be free
‘Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
‘Twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gained,
To bow and to bend we shan’t be ashamed,
To turn, turn will be our delight,
Till by turning, turning we come ‘round right.

PRACTICES *to try*

Consider Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6:25-34. How might the images of "the birds of the air" and "the lilies of the field" inspire you to live more simply? What would your life look like if you were to make Matthew 6:33 ("*Strive first for the Kingdom of God...*") your guiding principle?

Go through your clothes closet, your bookshelves, your storage spaces, your attic or basement, and identify the things you *need*. Give away the rest.

Practice gratitude. Look for beauty in ordinary things, in nature and in people – every day!

QUESTIONS *to consider*

How is simplicity reflected in your speech? Ask yourself, "Is what I am about to say truthful? sincere? necessary? helpful? kind?"

Review your calendar. Ask yourself, "Does my calendar reflect my values and priorities?"

How pure is your heart? How pure is your life? What is getting in the way? What doesn't belong? What is missing?

RESOURCES *to explore*

Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth, by Richard J. Foster (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1978). [Chapter 6, "Simplicity"].

Freedom of Simplicity, by Richard J. Foster (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

Simplicity: The Freedom of Letting Go, by Richard Rohr (New York, Crossroad Publishing Co., 1991, revised in 2003).

A PRAYER *for simplicity*

Knowing myself to be a child of God above all else, I pray for the freedom to let go of the need to compete for status, success, and popularity. Lord, help me fix my heart on one thing – knowing and loving and serving you.

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Preparing for the Sacrament

Resurrection

Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

Time

Redeeming the Gift

Transfiguration

To Bear the Beams of Love

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