

Complicated Simplicity: An Unfinished Sermon
Presented by Jack Heppner
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Introduction

I am here today to speak about the Discipline of Simplicity. That is a very complicated task and I know that I will only be scratching the surface of what could be said about simplicity. There is no way I can complete this task in half an hour. So this will be an unfinished sermon. I promise to leave you hanging in the end – without all your questions answered. I have no other choice. I will be asking you to finish the sermon in your own hearts and live out the ending as you sense God calling you to do it and to wrestle with your own defenses.

I will try to keep my comments as simple as possible, but I am aware that they may appear to you to be a hodge-podge of disconnected thoughts. And I know that no matter how mildly and carefully I say what I think needs to be said, some of us will take offense to what I say. And if you notice that I am stumbling my way through this incomplete sermon it will likely be because I am stepping on my own toes in the process.

Like most of us, I have hardly begun implementing a biblical vision of simplicity in my life, and I am afraid - afraid to take the next steps to which God is calling me. I hope my fumbling words will help to move you in some way. I would rather see us disturbed, angry, or even feeling guilty when I am done speaking than to see us unmoved. In our culture it has become a taboo to lay a “guilt trip” on anyone, and in many ways I agree with that notion. But I suspect that Jesus is not boxed in by our modern phobia of guilt. My goal is at least to get us thinking seriously about the call to simplicity and perhaps committing to taking one or two baby steps in that direction. But this sermon is not a “how to” manual on simplicity. We will spend our time taking care of preliminary matters first.

One complicating factor on the road to simplicity is confusion. According to the studies and polls that George Gallup Jr. has done, Americans (and by inference Canadians) are among the loneliest people in the world. It is ironic that many people who have attained the “American Dream” – a comfortable life in the suburbs with money to spare to buy all kinds of entertainment – now find themselves isolated and alone. Ramping up lifestyle has more often than not undermined the very things the human heart longs for. Repeated studies have shown that once basic needs are met, additional income does almost nothing to one’s happiness quotient. Millions of North Americans sit in their comfortable, insulated cubicles and long for the connections that many poorer folk come by naturally. The dream has gone flat and people wonder why. We are confused. Maybe we even feel betrayed.

Now I understand that each of our life stories and situations are unique. That is another reason why this is a complicated topic to address. There is no singular formula of faithfulness here. Some of us are barely making ends meet. Sometimes this is so because

we have chosen to live beyond our means – like the proverbial Joneses – and often in an attempt to assuage the tyranny of family expectations. (Have you ever noticed how family gatherings can become a place to compare and contrast our successes?) And for some the means simply are not there. Others are sitting on a pile of cash or equity, unsure about how to invest it – either so that we can assure ourselves of every creature comfort available until the day we die, or so that our kids have something to fight about once we're gone. The rest of us are somewhere in between. Individually we represent many levels of faithfulness and unfaithfulness with regard to lifestyle. So please forgive me if you feel unfairly painted with some of the broad brush strokes I will make today.

Another complicating factor arises from the fact that we carry some guilt as members of a corporate culture that preys on the weak of this world, and so it is easy to say that we are not personally responsible. We can readily hide behind the notion that my individual action will have almost no effect on the big picture, so why even bother. To that idea we can only reply that we should not choose a lifestyle according to how effective it will be in changing the world, but rather according to how faithful it is to the call of God.

For most of the 500 year history of the Mennonite Church the call to a simple lifestyle was clearly enunciated in our statements of faith. That is not to say that all Mennonites lived out this vision. Far from it. But at least it was noted as something to strive for. It has been during my lifetime – during the past half century – that such references to a call to simple living have been erased almost completely from our statements of faith. I have personally heard it said that we should take out such statements because we don't believe in them anymore anyway. The simple life just doesn't wash in the context of an affluent culture. This loss of vision is something we should grieve.

In 1974, Billy Graham convened a Consultation on World Evangelism in Lausanne, Switzerland to which he invited evangelical leaders from around the world. At the end of that consultation, the Lausanne Covenant was signed by thousands of evangelical leaders. Paragraph nine of the Covenant reads as follows:

All of us are shocked by the poverty of millions and disturbed by the injustices which cause it. Those of us who live in affluent circumstances accept our duty to develop a simple lifestyle in order to contribute generously to both relief and evangelism.

It is ironic, in a sense, that even while Mennonites were erasing their vision of a simple life from their understanding of faithfulness, other Christians around the world were pointing toward that goal as a mark of faithfulness to God and his mission in the world. This simply points to the fact that in God's Kingdom truth can never be totally eliminated. When put down in one place it springs up elsewhere. (By the way, that is a fascinating way to read church history.)

I wish I could report that the evangelical world as a whole has moved forward aggressively on the covenant they agreed upon in 1974. To be fair, there are individuals and small groups here and there who have followed through on this commitment. But from my observations of the past thirty years, this statement has gone largely unheeded

by the evangelical, affluent mainstream in developed countries. If anything, the gap between its lifestyle and that of the world's poor has increased significantly since 1974.

So, far from simply resurrecting an historic vision of faithfulness, the call to a simplified lifestyle is both contemporary and urgent.

I want to touch briefly on the vast body of biblical literature concerning simplicity which we have all but erased from our Bibles. If not erased, then at least we have stopped underlining those verses in our Bibles, in our hearts and in our experience.

Therefore, do not be anxious, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be yours as well. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's trouble be sufficient for the day. (Matthew 6:31-34) Most of us have dyslexia and find it convenient to read such passages backwards – "Make sure you have taken care of all your needs and then go seek the Kingdom with your spare time and spare resources." *And a ruler asked him, Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments" 'Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.'* *And he said, "All these I have observed from my youth." And when Jesus heard it he said to him, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come follow me (Just kidding old buddy! I was just checking your attitude. And since you seem to be sincere, just keep your riches and don't bother following me. And by the way here is a bumper sticker to put on your car. In my Kingdom you can have your cake and eat it too!)"* Luke 18: 18-24 (The Modern Deadly Right Translation)

But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they came together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets. (Matthew 22:34-40)

On another occasion there was a similar dialogue with a little twist.

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you read?" And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have answered right; but guess what, I have created a shortcut! All you really have to do is read a little booklet about four spiritual laws, give mental assent to them, pray a little prayer and sign on the dotted line." And

the lawyer answered, “How creative! I like the new twist you put on things!” And everyone went away happy. (Luke 10:25-28, also from the Modern Deadly Right Translation)

We could read much more about what Jesus said about lifestyle, but there would be little point since we don't believe what he said anyway? He would say, for example...

You cannot serve both God and money. And we reply with the famous phrase coined by Pierre Elliot Trudeau, “Just watch me!”

Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God. And we reply, “You ain't seen nothin' yet!”

Woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation. And we say, “What consolation? My neighbor has even more than I do.”

Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. And we reply, “But we really do believe in miracles! Good thing we have that caveat in the contract. And if all else fails we can always use the *not withstanding clause*.”

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. (Has there ever been a moment in your life – even a split second – in which you would have been willing to give up all you have for a heavenly treasure you had discovered? What in the world do you think that would feel like? Many of us will never know. However, I do hold out the hope that some of our young people will, and perhaps a few older ones too.)

Again and again in Scripture, God comes through as a champion of the poor. But that is not to say that God favors deprivation and poverty and despises abundance. What he does despise is a disparity that allows a few to live in opulence while the many are forced to live in dire need. And that is where another complication sets in. While we can be aware of some dire needs in our community and respond to them in a faithful way, if our hearts, minds and bodies stay in Hanover, we will remain blind to the overwhelming disparity that exists in the world. If we do not lift our eyes to our horizons, it is quite possible to remain complacent and smug when we should be weeping and doing our part to bring about greater equity and opportunity for the downtrodden of this world.

If we step back into the Old Testament we find the mind of God on this matter all over the place, if we don't close our eyes to it. From the creation account, we note that our dignity does not come from wealth or position, but from the fact that we are created in God's image. That means we must live in such a way that our lives don't diminish or degrade the humanity of our fellow image-bearers anywhere in the world. In the Decalogue we are warned not to make idols out of any material things that would set our hearts against God. In the teachings on Jubilee we are reminded that the land belongs to God and should from time to time be redistributed to the disenfranchised. The teaching

on tithing underscores the fact that everything belongs to God. And the law of gleaning provided a way for the poor to participate in the joy of the harvest.

Perhaps the single most potent passage in the prophets relating to lifestyle is found in Amos 5:24: *Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream.* It is clear from such passages that “justice” and “righteousness” are sister concepts. Both refer to making things right in the way that God intended them to be. That is why they are used in conjunction with each other in a couplet, so common in Hebrew literature. I learned something recently that explains why I have often come across resistance to a focus on the concept of “justice” from well-intentioned believers. I have heard them say that that is not an important concept in the scriptures. I learned that this misreading of the text is rooted, at least to some extent, in a mistranslation in the Authorized King James Version of the Bible.

According to Hebrew scholars, the Hebrew word *mishpat* can be translated either “judgment” or “justice,” depending on the context, just like the meaning of an English word like “lean”, for example, must be discerned from the context in which it is used. It could mean “skinny” or “tilting at an angle.” In our traditional version *mishpat* is almost always translated “judgment” even though it is clear from the context that in at least 90 occasions the concept of “justice” is implied. All newer translations have made this correction. But generations of Christians have mostly heard of God’s “judgment” and not his “justice.” This is particularly disturbing when it is noted that judgment is usually thought of as what will happen to the other people because of their unfaithfulness. In the process we have failed to pick up that God actually desires “justice” with a tenacity we will perhaps never fully comprehend. He never desires judgment or takes delight in it like he does with justice. And we are called to be imitators of God as we live out our lives.

It is interesting and somewhat scandalous to me how some Christians on the far right today can come up with the central message of the Bible as being our right to private property, freedom from taxes, freedom to exploit the earth’s resources, and the right to bear arms. This is a far cry from the notion of justice, righteousness and mercy which I read throughout its pages – all concepts that call us to lifestyles focused on seeking first the Kingdom of God, which includes loving our global neighbors as ourselves.

So it is my conclusion that our vision for a simplified lifestyle must be rooted in the concept of God’s justice – that is the vision that all his creatures should have a chance to share in his bounty. If it is rooted in thrift it can make misers out of us as we hoard what we don’t use. If it is rooted in legalism it will degenerate into judgmentalism and self-righteousness. A simple lifestyle, as Richard Foster says, must emerge from an inward reality, an awareness that to live simply is simply to desire one thing – a desire to seek first the Kingdom of God. How to live out that desire may be a complicated matter, but in its purest form it is really quite simple – desiring one thing, and one thing only. Could it be that the pathway to joy and fulfillment is not in desiring many things, but only one thing?

I could at this point quote a lot of statistics that show, for example, that the infant mortality rate is ten times as high in underdeveloped countries than in ours. That life expectancy in some parts of God's world is only a third of what it is in Steinbach. Or that half a billion children do not have sufficient nourishment in their first two years of life to develop a healthy brain, which doesn't really matter for half the children in poor countries because they die before the age of five anyway from the effects of malnourishment. Or I could describe how much energy we use per capita compared to the masses who languish on the brink around the edges of the world. But such statistics bore us. We are immune to them. We mostly take them in one ear and spew them out the other.

Maybe a few personalized stories and parables would serve us better. Perhaps they can speak for the voices of millions of others drowned out by the noise of a world gone mad.

I would like to introduce you to **Esteban Gonzalez**. I was only twenty-six, give or take a year, and had been in Bolivia only a few weeks when Esteban came to meet me. "Tell me what it means to be a Christian and how to become one," he said. Only God knows what happened that morning, but something changed for Esteban. He developed a new interest in the things of God and his Word. He could not read – probably one of those statistics about brain damage as an infant. But every night he asked his little, eight-year-old daughter who was attending school, to read something from the Bible and then he would explain to the rest of the family what he thought it meant before he offered up his evening prayer.

One night I was out on my little Honda motor cycle and happened to stop at his thatched roof home after dark. Esteban came out and greeted me warmly. I casually asked him if he had had his supper yet. No, he said, he hadn't – nor had his children, although they already had gone to bed. I asked him to explain. It's simple, he said. He had contracted to clear a certain parcel of land with axe and machette, about a three week job. Meanwhile he took some advance on his pay from a small store the owner operated. That afternoon, when he had finished the job and went to collect his pay he was told that he had already taken it all in groceries. That was impossible, he said to me, because he had only take a little rice and cooking oil to keep his family alive. But he couldn't read, write or do arithmetic to defend himself. So the boss's word was the final one.

Then the heart wrenching words came from his lips. "I can handle going without food for a few days myself," he noted calmly as his eyes moistened, "but it is hard to send your children to bed hungry." I was angry and sad at the same time. I had in mind to go meet the boss the next day and extract the money by whatever means necessary. Today I might have the courage to at least attempt that, I don't know. But I was a young, inexperienced foreigner still learning about the realities of injustice. But I knew instinctively that I was now staring at its ugly face.

Even though I knew it wouldn't resolve the injustice, I gave him a few pesos and told him to get some food for the next day to feed his children. To make a long story short, I met with Esteban many times after that to help him learn to read, write and do basic math to

give him some basic tools to defend himself against such injustice. But I discovered that his brain was damaged and that what I taught him just wouldn't stick.

Nearly twenty years later, when we had returned to Bolivia for a one-year stint in the early 1990s, I met Esteban's wife who told me that he had taken up drinking and was gone, who knows where. He just couldn't take it anymore. Estaban. My brother. I see him as clearly this moment as I see you. And I hear him saying quietly, as his eyes mist over, "Its hard to send your kids to bed hungry." And I weep in my heart. And so does God.

On another front, I grew up with the iron curtain strung across Europe, keeping people in oppressed regions from escaping to freedom. Thank God that curtain has come down. A few feet of it sits at our local museum. But today walls are coming up again with a completely reversed role. Now literal and invisible walls are coming up all around the privileged people of the world, not to keep people in, but to keep disadvantaged people out – people who are literally dying to get at the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table. We know of the wall coming up between Israel and Palestine – rooting up centuries-old orchards and separating people from their lands. Fewer know about the 75-mile wall on the border between Arizona and Mexico designed to move would-be trespassers into desert areas where the harsh summer sun kills them like flies.

Let me tell you a story about a certain man we will call **Pedro Martinez**. As his ancestors had done for centuries, he farmed a small plot of land by hand. It was a hard life, but every fall he took his sacks of beans to the market, which brought him most of his annual income. It was barely enough to live, but he managed to keep his children in school and a thatched roof over his family's heads. One fall, a number of years ago, he took his beans to market only to find that he could not sell them. The new free trade agreement, NAFTA, now allowed beans from the US and Canada to flood the local market, driving down the price of his product, making it worth almost nothing.

Pedro stumbled home in disbelief. They could eat beans but what about school fees, and clothes. The family suffered. He had to withdraw his children from school. His youngest child died that winter from a disease that could easily have been treated, but there was no money for medicine. He often thought about what he had read in a local newspaper - that since NAFTA had arrived the average wage in Mexico had dropped 34 percent while the cost of living had gone up 247 percent. How would he and his family survive?

After a few years of barely hanging on to life he heard that some new American factories were employing workers just a few miles from the border. Although quite far from home, he found work in one of these factories. But the wages were low and barely covered his bus fair and some basic life necessities for his family. One day Pedro fell ill and was unable to go to work because of a high fever. He told a friend to tell his employer that he would be back as soon as he could.

A few days later he returned to work, only to be told that he had been replaced with another desperate family man. "Miss one day of work and you are out!" the agent told him coldly. Back to square one. Meanwhile, his oldest daughter, Yolanda, had been

watching her parent's desperate struggle for survival and could stand it no longer. She determined to find her way into the land of milk and honey, earn some money and send it back to feed her starving family. She found some other young people from similar families to go with her.

Upon arriving at the border they found a twelve-foot fence made of solid metal. For days they trudged along the fence, hungry and thirsty. Finally they came to the end of the fence and crossed into the US only to enter a vast wasteland. By now Yolanda was somewhat delirious. She had begun vomiting and noticed blood in her stool – both symptoms of life-threatening dehydration. Yet for two more days she hung on. Her friends half carried and half dragged her on - hoping against hope to find some help. Finally their strength gave way and they laid under a mesquite bush in great anguish and moved on. Maybe the rest could still find help. Shortly after that Yolanda lost consciousness.

That is where Dorothy Chao found her. Dorothy, a volunteer with Christian Peacemaker Teams, does the illegal work of providing food and water for migrants in desperate need in the desert. She knows she may face fines or imprisonment, but she carries on with her ministry anyway in Jesus name. When she found Yolanda it was too late. She died there. In Dorothy's arms. Under the mesquite bush. With the temperature hovering at a hundred and ten degrees Fahrenheit. Number 135 on the death count this summer in that desert alone. Probably as many again never found before the vultures did. Vultures are fat in this part of the desert.

In her grief that night Dorothy lay on her mat in the open desert and composed a poem entitled, *Desconocida* (Unidentified)

Now –
 In the dark
 I lie on my mat in the desert –
 Blowing wind, rustling mesquite
 Beautiful, savage desert.

Desconocida –
 Found in the desert today
 Were you a daughter, sister, mother, wife?
 Did you think of your family when you died?

Did you think of your home in Mexico, Guatemala, Columbia, Peru?
 Did you see the flowers, the stars
 That I did?
 Or did the burning thirst,
 The heat of the day
 The chill of the night
 Call forth the savage side of the desert only?

Did the Border Patrol come with the helicopter
bouncing and buzzing above you like an angry bee,
And scatter your group on the rocky ground below
Like leaves before a desert wind?

Were you pulled along through the cactus by another
Till you could go no further
Then sacrificed –
Left behind for the survival of the group?

Did you grieve the separation from the others
Regret words spoken, unspoken,
Did you wish for the physical closeness of another human
As you died?

Did you see the town lights from your hiding place
Here in the desert wash?
did your terror keep you still
Even as dehydration and exposure did their work?

Restless spirit,
Victim of global forces beyond your control,
Forgive my complicity!
Come sit with me thru the dark of this night.

Baptize me with your spirit,
Help me to carry your voice forward,
Speak through me
So that neither of our lives will be in vain.

This morning I have more questions than answers about a complicated simplicity, about a purity of singular focus. So I will simply leave you with a question coined by the late Francis Schaffer, “How should we then live?”

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