

The Radical Disciple week 5 – Simplicity

I'm sure you're familiar with how decluttering has become a trend. Type declutter into a search engine and there are 49,000,000 webpages. Marie Kondo suggests, for instance, only keeping 30 books! All this is nothing new – at the end of the 19th Century designer William Morris once said 'Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful'. But how might this relate to us as Christians?

Since the 1980's Christian writers have been focusing on a simple lifestyle, last week I mentioned the book *living simply*, so that others can simply live – there's a connection between caring for creation, and how we tread lightly on earth.

In other words, is there a radical biblical Christian lifestyle, and if so, what does it look like?

We have received new life from Jesus – is there a new lifestyle which goes along with our new redeemed life – does this reflect the challenges of the contemporary world, some of which we've looked at in previous weeks – particularly its alienation both from God and from the earth's resources which he created for the enjoyment of all?

In 1974 the Lausanne congress on world evangelism includes this in their covenant – '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 more generously to both relief and evangelism.

So, there is a direct link between the poor, injustice, evangelism and my lifestyle and so simple living. It's well worth reading chapter 5 of *radical lifestyle* where John Stott details how he and other Christian leaders of the time deliberated, prayed, studied scripture in order to come to some conclusions. All of this means having our eyes open, both to the world and to the bible, listening to the Spirit at work in the world through us as Christians.

Stott and others came to a commitment, a summary of which I'd like to share with you.

- 1) *Creation* – we worship God as creator of all things, and we celebrate the goodness of his creation. In his generosity he has given us everything to enjoy, and we receive it from his hands with humble thanksgiving (1 Tim 4:4, 6:17). We therefore denounce environmental destruction, wastefulness and hoarding. We deplore the misery of the poor who suffer as a result of these evils. We also disagree with the drabness of the ascetic. We recognise our own involvement in them and we repent.
- 2) *Stewardship* - when God made male and female in his own image, he gave them dominion over the earth (Gen 1:26-28) He made them stewards of its resources, and so to develop a right relationship to God, neighbour and the earth's resources. People's humanity is diminished if they do not have a just share in those resources. Unfaithful stewardship means disobeying God and alienating people from his purposes for them. Therefore we pursue justice with and for the poor who are exploited and powerless to defend themselves. We look forward to the restoration of all things at Christ's return (Acts 3:21). At that time our full humanness will be restored, yet we still promote human dignity today.
- 3) *Poverty and wealth* – We affirm that involuntary poverty is an offence against the goodness of God. Biblically the poor who are powerless cannot defend themselves and so must be protected. God's call to rulers and the powerful is to defend the poor, not to exploit them. The church is therefore called to stand with God and the poor against injustice and to suffer with them. The uncomfortable words of Jesus (Luke 12:15) 'be on your guard against all kinds of greed – life does not consist in the

abundance of possessions' are a challenge and an opportunity. We are called to listen to his warnings about the dangers of riches – wealth brings worries, vanity and false security, the oppression of the weak and indifference to the sufferings of the needy. So, it is hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt 19:23) and the greedy will be excluded from it. The kingdom is a free gift offered to all, but is especially good news for the poor because they benefit most from the changes it brings.

We believe that Jesus still calls some (?even us?) to a lifestyle of total, voluntary, poverty. He calls all his followers to an inner freedom from the seduction of riches (for it is impossible to serve God and money) and to sacrificial generosity (1 Tim 6:18). The example in all this is Jesus himself, who had nowhere to lay his head, and whose self-sacrifice in washing his disciples feet calls us to do the same. We resolve to get to know poor and oppressed people, to learn lessons of injustice from them, to seek to relieve their suffering, and to include them regularly in our prayers.

- 4) *The new community* – We rejoice that the church is the community of the new age, whose members enjoy a new life and a new lifestyle. The earliest Christian church was characterised by a commitment to each other in that they sold and shared their possessions (Acts 4:32). This principle of generous and sacrificial sharing is an indispensable characteristic of every Spirit-filled Christian. So those of us who are affluent are determined to do more to relieve the needs of less-privileged believers. We also must seek ways as church to show this same lifestyle. Christ calls us to be salt and light, in order to hinder its social decay and illuminate its darkness. When we are distinct from the world, in values, standards, and lifestyles, we present the world with a radically attractive alternative.
- 5) *Personal lifestyle* – Jesus our Lord summons us to holiness, humility, simplicity and contentment. He also promises us his rest. We confess, however, that we have allowed unholy desires to disturb our inner tranquillity, so without the constant renewal of Christ's peace in our hearts, our emphasis on simple living will be one sided. Our Christian obedience demands a simple lifestyle, irrespective of the needs of others. However, there are 800 million destitute people, and 10,000 die each day of starvation – this makes any other lifestyle indefensible. While some are called to live and serve among the poor, and others to open our homes to the needy, all of us are called to develop a simpler lifestyle. This means re-examining our income and expenditure, in order to manage on less and give more away. This does not mean legalistic rules, but renouncing waste and opposing extravagance. We need to re-examine the distinction between necessities and luxuries (waitrose essentials range includes avocados, artichoke hearts, kale, olives and cappuccino mousse!), creative hobbies and empty status symbols, modesty and vanity, occasional celebrations and normal routine (how many cake days!), between service to God and slavery to fashion. How all this works out will differ from person to person – (nsumbi) those of us in the west need the help of our majority world brothers and sisters in evaluating our standards of spending. We are also too exposed to the deadly sin of covetousness - -maybe not our neighbours ass, but whatever the modern equivalent (kitchen) is? So we need to be accountable to each other, and each other's understanding, encouragement and prayers.
- 6) *International development* – John Donne's poem 'no man is an island' has been challenged in the UK, and the tendency of an island mentality all too prevalent over the last few years is profoundly unchristian. We are called to be shocked by the poverty of millions and disturbed by the injustice which cause it. There is gross disparity – a new international economic order is needed to change to the balance between the affluent west and the majority world, where many are our Christian brothers and sisters. What we need to do some work and prayer on, is to understand the link between consumption, resources, income – and so to support and use the resources of Christian organisations such as Tearfund to find out more and to get involved, we can't leave it to others. Tearfund and other such organisations also lobby government (of all colours) – many others also lobby government with their own vested interests of multinationals and oppose any fundamental

controls – we pray that groups such as tearfund will hold them to account and bring challenge to those with power.

- 7) *Justice and politics* – Linked with this is a conviction that the present situation of social injustice is so abhorrent to God that a large measure of change is necessary. Not that we believe in an earthly utopia, but neither are we pessimists. Change can come, although not through commitments to simple lifestyle changes alone. What is needed is a shift among the powerful through structural change. The Christian church should not be linked with party politics, but challenging political structures is our calling. The word ‘politics’ simply means ‘the art of living in community’. Servants of Jesus are called to express his lordship in our political, social, and economic commitments and our love for neighbour by taking part in the political process. But how? First we pray for peace and justice, as God commands. Second, we will seek to challenge in love each other to clarify our vision and raise expectations. All Christians must participate in the active struggle to create a just and responsible society. In some situations obedience to Christ demands resistance to unjust laws. This might mean persecution and suffering – as Jesus warned. While personal commitment to change our lifestyles without political action to change systems of injustice lacks effectiveness, political action without personal commitment lacks integrity.
- 8) *Evangelism* – As Christians we remain deeply concerned for the millions of unevangelised people in the world, and the 95% of people even in our village! Nothing in lifestyle change or justice diminishes this. We are called (Acts 1:8) to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. Lifestyle change and evangelism together is a powerful thing – people seeing the difference in the way we live makes Christianity attractive. It is impossible with integrity to proclaim Christ’s salvation if he’s not saved us from greed, good stewardship or have closed hearts towards the needy. When Christians care for each other and for the deprived, Jesus Christ becomes more visibly attractive. In contrast, the affluent lifestyle of some Western evangelists preaching in majority world countries is offensive. By simple living as Christians we release resources for evangelism as well as for development.
- 9) *Finally the Lord’s return*. Next Sunday is Advent Sunday – as well as preparing for Christmas, we also focus on Jesus return. The old testament prophets denounced injustice and warned of his coming judgement. The lord is coming back to judge, save, and redeem. He, as we celebrate today, is Christ the King -as Jesus shared in his story of sheep and goats he will sit on his throne and separate the saved from the lost. Those who minister to him by ministering to one of the least will be saved, but those who are persistently indifferent to the plight of the needy, seeing others as less than human, not seeing Christ in them, often making excuses for not helping, will be irretrievably lost (Matt 25:31-46). All of us need to hear this solemn warning of Jesus, and resolve afresh to serve him in the deprived.

Our resolve. Stott concludes this chapter by saying ‘so then, having been freed by the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, in obedience to his call, in heartfelt compassion for the poor, in concern for evangelism, development and justice, and in solemn anticipation of the day of judgement, we humbly commit ourselves to develop a just and simple lifestyle, to support one another in it, and to encourage others to join us in this commitment. This will not be easy. May Almighty God give us grace to be faithful. Amen.

(A brief summary and an act of commitment)

1. **The new community:** we rejoice that the church is intended to be God’s new community, which exhibits new values, new standards, and a new lifestyle.
2. **Personal lifestyle:** we lay down no rules or regulations, but in view of the fact that about 10,000 people die of starvation every day, we determine to simplify our lifestyle.

- 3. International development:** we are shocked by the poverty of millions and resolve to contribute more generously to human development projects. But government action is essential.
- 4. Justice and politics:** we believe that the present situation of social injustice is abhorrent to God and that change can and must come.
- 5. Evangelism:** we are deeply concerned for the vast millions of unevangelised people. The call to a simple lifestyle must not be divorced from the call to responsible witness.
- 6. The Lord's return:** we believe that when Jesus returns, those who have ministered to him by ministering to the least will be saved, for the reality of saving faith is exhibited in serving love.

I invite you to pray this commitment through and to make it your own. Rev John Musson Nov 2023