

Simplify.
LIVE SMALL THINK BIG



S is for Simplicity

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L is for Lifestyle: Christian living that doesn't cost the earth



www.lisforlifestyle.com

S is for Simplicity

Do your toes curl when you hear the word ‘simplicity’? Do you think of woolly jumpers and mung-bean stew? I can’t say I blame you if you do, but I hope to show you that simplicity is actually about something far more exciting.

Henry Thoreau, one of the great writers on this issue, said that ‘a person is rich in proportion to the things they can leave alone’ and, in many ways, this sums up what simple living is all about. Partly, it’s about our choices. As we look at our lives, do we know how we’ve ended up living how we’re living, and why? What choices have we made that control our present lifestyle? When we wanted that new house or car, were we aware that the trade-off would mean working longer hours to pay for them and seeing less of the people we love? Too often we find ourselves on the treadmill of life, paying the consequences for choices we hardly knew we were making.

Simple living is about stopping that treadmill and giving us the space to choose how we want to live our lives. There are many voices around us that tell us happiness is to be found in good clothes and nice jewellery; in a job that commands respect; in crashing out in front of the TV in order to recover; in having a busy diary. Simplicity asks us to sit and listen to those other whispers inside us that we seldom have the time to hear. It helps us to discover the wealth that comes, not from having an abundance of money and things, but from having the space for intimacy in our friendships, the space for ourselves, the space to live in a way that respects God’s earth and, primarily, the space for God.

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It will come as no surprise then that one of the key areas for simplicity is our *time*. Time is God’s creation and his gift to us. He has given it to us to enjoy and use for his service. We each have it in equal amounts, and how we choose to steward that time is our responsibility. Simple living allows time to be the most rewarding and beautiful possession that we have, helping us reach a place of wholeness and awareness both of ourselves and of God.

And yet, ‘I haven’t got time’ is a frequently heard complaint. As a result, many of us are suffering, with stress, sleep problems and relationship pressures becoming increasingly common. What is also clear is that the situation is only going to get worse. As writer, thinker and life-lover Tom Sine says, ‘That means we shall have less time for family and friends, less time to pray and study Scripture and less time to volunteer to address the mounting needs of the poor in our societies.’

One of the greatest ironies of time is that it often seems to be directly disproportional to the amount of money we have. Time is one of the greatest dividers: between those who spend time to save money and those who spend money to save time. Time has now become a status symbol; we measure our worth by our busyness and believe ourselves to be indispensable to all that goes on around us.

Our use of time reflects the values of our lives, and 'now' is a good time to ask ourselves whether or not we are truly living out God's values. If not, what needs to change? Many of us need to make changes so that we have the time simply to be: to be with ourselves and to be with God. Time in this sense has been described by Michael Schut as 'opening space in our lives for a greater awareness of God'.

For many, a helpful way for this to happen is through the practices of silence, solitude and contemplation. Let us touch the surface by looking at three suggestions from Gerald May as to how we can begin to create space. First, he suggests looking for spaces that occur normally in our lives. Perhaps there are times that we automatically fill by turning on the TV or making ourselves a drink, but that we could make 'intentional': moments to stop and be still.

Secondly, we should try to find the more regular, set-aside spaces during the day that are 'simply and solely dedicated to just being'. However long they are, they are an opportunity to take some space and establish ourselves with Jesus at the centre.

Finally, May recommends building longer spaces into our lives for authentic retreat. These may involve actually going away for a retreat or just taking a day of quiet.

Our aim is to bring our use of time under control so that it serves our kingdom values rather than those of the world; living intentionally in each moment of time. Henri Nouwen's description of this is beautiful. He talks of a life

... in which time slowly loses its opaqueness and becomes transparent. This is often a very difficult and slow process, but full of re-creating power. To start seeing that the many events of our day, week or year are not in the way of our search for a full life, but the way to it, is a real experience of conversion. If we discover that writing letters ... visiting people and cooking food are not a series of random events which prevent us from realizing our deepest self, but contain in themselves the transforming power we are looking for, then we are beginning to move from time lived as chronos to time lived as kairos.

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Much of the material on this website relates to our attitude and use of money, which is vital when we consider the concept of simplicity, but the foundational principle behind the desire to live simply is summed up in Gandhi's famous words: 'live simply so that others may simply live'. For many of us, simplicity is a heart-felt response to the problems that are facing God's world and its inhabitants. Climate change, deforestation, the loss of species, intensive farming, pollution, water scarcity and the erosion of soil and biodiversity are all caused by our patterns of living, particularly in the wealthier countries, and they impact both human and non-human alike.

We have to start by looking at our inner attitudes before moving to our outer actions. How do we view the world? Do we see it simply as the environment in which we live – something that serves no purpose other than our own benefit with no intrinsic worth of its own? Or, do we see it as St. Francis saw it when he talked of “brother earth” and “sister moon”? The more we become aware of the inherent value of the rest of creation, of its place in God’s plans for salvation and of its role in leading us to worship our Creator the more we will want to ensure that our lives are having as little negative impact on the earth as possible.

Simplifying our consumption habits will have a great effect on our world. Primarily, we will want to live in a way that consumes as little fossil fuel as possible since the burning of fossil fuels is the main cause of climate change and hence the biggest threat to our world today. We are now all-too aware that we contribute to climate change every time we turn on the ignition in our cars and so as part of exploring simplicity we will want to reduce our car dependency and walk, cycle or use public transport wherever possible. This has benefits beyond the reduction of fossil fuel usage. For one, it will improve our fitness, helping us take care of our bodies. How many people do you know who drive to the leisure centre in order to sit on a mechanised bike or run on a treadmill for twenty minutes?! It will also enhance our contact with what and who is around us. We will often go past the same people each day and, with a bit of initiative, it won’t take long for smiles and then friendly greetings to be exchanged. Similarly, I love watching the seasons go past: the same trees, parks and gardens can look so different depending on the time of year, yet each stage has its own beauty and its own reasons to elicit praise.

Every time we eat food that has been produced intensively and transported thousands of miles to reach our plates we are also using fossil fuels. Simplicity involves rediscovering the connection between our food and the land; eating local, organic food wherever possible and taking the time to grow our own. This, again, has benefits beyond that of reducing environmental damage. Eating organic, locally produced food helps us remember that our food does not originate in plastic bags in the bright lights of a supermarket, but that it comes from the ground and that labour has gone into growing or rearing it. In the case of animals, if we decide not to be vegetarian, it establishes a closer connection with them: a connection that brings responsibility for the quality of their lives. In a culture where we have everything whenever we want it, the restriction of the seasons brings its own freedoms: not least the joy of actually eating food that tastes wonderful! The idea of seasons is a thoroughly biblical concept and helps us appreciate the rhythms that are in life and the patience that that engenders.

Fundamentally, food has a profoundly spiritual dimension to it. It is one of the main ways by which we nourish ourselves and our relationships with each other and it is no coincidence that the Bible so often links food/eating with central biblical concepts (communion, water of life, fasting, “taste and see that the Lord is good”, the eschatological banquet and so on). Indeed, Michael Schut sees food as a sacrament and talks of “the spirituality embodied in our personal and cultural relationship to food”. Speaking personally, I see the food I eat as one of the ways in which I worship God: eating in ways that respect what he has created, both human and non-human.

There are many other things that we can do to live lightly on this earth (for more ideas see www.lisforlifestyle.com and www.arocha.org.uk/livinglightly). The complexities of our society bear heavily on our world and the call of simplicity is for us to respond.

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Micah asked (Mic. 6:8): ‘What does the Lord require of me?’ In our world today, what does it mean to ‘act justly and to love mercy’? How do I ‘walk humbly’ with my God? A Christian approach to simplicity provides a helpful answer, touching every area of our lives, from our approach towards money, the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the way we use our time and so on. What is important to remember is that it all begins with our heart attitude and only then moves on to our outward practice.

I hope you are inspired to ‘act justly and to love mercy’. Simplicity has these things at its heart and is desperately needed today. As Richard Foster says, ‘Our task is urgent and relevant. Our century thirsts for the authenticity of simplicity; the spirit of prayer, and the life of obedience. May we be the embodiment of that kind of authentic living.’