



## Simplify: Theology

What can it possibly mean to live simply in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? Tesco Value rather than Tesco Finest? Not owning the latest mobile phone or laptop? One holiday a year instead of two? If we're honest, none of us living in the West are immune from the lure of iPods, holidays, fashion and so on. And of course our definition of living simply will depend on how we think our lifestyle compares to our colleagues, friends and family. All of this probably means that most people are quite honestly a bit confused about what it means to live simply as a Christian and to find true fulfilment in Christ in today's world.

Sometimes I suspect as Christians we often don't like to hear the harder messages Jesus spoke. We like to focus on the Jesus who is our friend, who carries our burdens, who comforts, who protects. All of this is right and good. But what about the Jesus who called us to deny ourselves to follow him (Luke 9:23)? The Jesus who loved the rich young ruler, but wasn't going to make his message more palatable by telling the man that he didn't actually have to sell everything and give it to the poor (Mark 9:21)? The Jesus who tells us to seek first God's kingdom and that stuff like food and clothing will follow (Matthew 6:33)? Why did he say all this though - was it just to make life difficult and miserable for his followers?

It doesn't take much scientific research to realise that there are a lot of people today with a huge number of possessions who just aren't happy. Even though we live in a world today where many people in the West own more than they ever have before, I suspect the idea that possessions don't equal happiness was just as true in the first century as it is today. Jesus knew full well the hold that possessions can have on people's lives.

Take for example, the rich young ruler mentioned earlier: his identity was so tied up in his belongings that he could not give them up, despite the promise of treasure in heaven - something far better in the long run. How true is this for people today? We allow ourselves to be defined by the status symbols that are our cars, the size of our houses, the exotic locations of our holidays. We may declare otherwise but, these things can quickly become more important to us than putting God first. We fail to take seriously Jesus' words, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven... for where your treasure is, there your heart also will be." (Matthew 6:19-21).

Jesus didn't say that money and possessions are inherently wrong. Rather, our use of them needs to be directed towards putting God first, making him our treasure rather than our belongings. So for example, in Luke 8:3 we see that Jesus relied on the wealth of women to support his ministry. Paul relied on Lydia's hospitality to give him somewhere to stay (Acts 16:15). Neither did Jesus say enjoying life is bad; he certainly knew how to enjoy a celebratory feast for a special occasion with friends – I doubt the wedding at Cana served up Tesco Value!

Perhaps though, our culture has become so tied to its possessions that we no longer realise the hold they have over us. Perhaps, too, we are so used to having things whenever we want them, we have lost the value of a feast – of saving some things for special occasions. Taking a month to scale down our lifestyles, to re-evaluate how we use our money and belongings might turn out to be releasing. We may just realise quite how much we can do without and how we can more effectively use what we do have for God's purposes – and that there's huge satisfaction in that. We might just find out that this isn't about dogmatic asceticism, a desire to take all the fun out of life, but that actually in simplifying our lifestyles, we discover a bit more just what Jesus meant when he said he had come to give us life in all its fullness... life that finds its identity first and foremost in him, and not in what we own. Surely it's worth trying for a month at least.

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