

# Living Simply: Imperative Now

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These reflections were prepared as a resource for Earth Day 2001 on behalf of the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Working Group.

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 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? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6.25-33)

In his famous speech aboard the *Arabella*, Puritan leader John Winthrop urged the colonists to guard against the seduction of material success, and to ensure that “the good of the public overweighs all private interests.” Pious hard work in a land of seemingly unlimited resources earned many colonists handsome incomes. Soon silks and imported furniture were the rage in New England cities, and powdered wigs the fashion. The communitarian ethic of austerity and religious piety gradually fell by the wayside, and America became the world's greatest merchant state.

Even as we are proud of our great material progress, there is a restless sense beginning to stir that something is amiss. A recent study, commissioned by the Merck Family Fund, found that most Americans think we consume too much, produce too much waste, and have lost sight of the spiritual values that once guided us as a society. People are ready, the study concluded, to begin a serious dialogue about our national habits as consumers and, in many cases, see a deep need to begin to take action on this issue.

A critical factor for our time is that the environment is becoming ever less capable of sustaining the growing impact of our escalating consumption patterns. Everywhere our forests are overlogged, our agricultural lands are overcropped, our grasslands overgrazed, our wetlands overdrained, our groundwaters overtapped, our seas overfished, and nearly all our terrestrial and marine environment is overpolluted with chemical and radioactive poisons. Worse still, our atmospheric environment is becoming ever less capable of absorbing either the ozone-depleting gases or the greenhouse gases generated by these activities without creating new climatic conditions to which human beings cannot indefinitely adapt.

Today we must reconsider our consumption patterns not only because there is strong moral basis for doing so. We must reconsider our consumption radically and fundamentally, because as a planet we have no other choice. Simple life is a compelling necessity now.

Christian simplicity frees us from the modern mania to possess, accumulate, and the attitude that “more is better.” It brings sanity to our compulsive extravagance, and peace to our frantic spirit. Simplicity enables us to live lives of integrity in the face of the stark realities of our world. It is not a faddish attempt to respond to the ecological crisis that is threatening us now. Christian simplicity is more than a reaction to the modern crisis. It gives us the basis for developing a strategy for action to address many of our social inequities. The answer to the problem of the survival of the planet lies in spirituality as much as it does in politics, science, or economics.

It is a call given to every Christian. The witness to simplicity is profoundly rooted in the biblical tradition, and most perfectly exemplified in the life of Jesus Christ. The majority of Christians have never seriously wrestled with the problem of simplicity, conveniently ignoring Jesus’ many words on the subject. The reason is simple: the discipline of simplicity challenges our vested interests in an affluent lifestyle. But we get help and a focal point from the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:25-33.

The central point of the discipline of simplicity is to seek the kingdom of God and the righteousness of God’s kingdom first, and then everything necessary will come in its proper order. Simplicity becomes idolatry when it takes precedence over seeking the kingdom. Focus upon the kingdom produces an inward reality that results in an outward lifestyle. Both the inward and outward aspects of simplicity are essential. We deceive ourselves if we believe we can possess the inward reality without its having a profound effect on how we live. To attempt to arrange an outward lifestyle of simplicity without the inward reality degenerates into legalistic trivia.

Jesus makes clear in the Matthew passage that freedom from anxiety is one of the inward evidences of seeking the kingdom of God first. The inward reality of simplicity involves a life of joyful unconcern for possessions. Three inner attitudes characterize freedom from anxiety: receiving what we have as a gift from God; knowing that what we have is to be cared for by God; and to have our goods available to others. When we are seeking first the kingdom of God, these three attitudes will characterize our lives. Taken together they define what Jesus meant by “do not be anxious.”

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