

Packing for the Trip

4th Weekend of Easter – April 16/17, 2005

Sermon Background Study

“But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness . . .” (Matthew 6:33)

Exodus 16:9-15 (NRSV)

⁹Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.’” ¹⁰And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. ¹¹The LORD spoke to Moses and said, ¹²“I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.’”

¹³In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.

Luke 10:1-9 (NRSV)

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. ²He said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. ³Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. ⁴Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. ⁵Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ ⁶And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. ⁷Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. ⁸Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; ⁹cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’

We don't need steamer trunks or car carriers for this trip to the Good Life. Instead, we travel light depending upon the goodness of God and the hospitality of others. The world wants us to believe that we must have lots of stuff for the trip and a great big SUV to carry it all. But rather than helping us toward our destination, all that stuff simply weighs us down, demanding our constant attention.

Packing light – for a long trip and a short one

There hadn't been much time to pack. When Moses said go, everyone had simply dashed for the Red Sea. They somehow found the time to plunder the Egyptians, grabbing jewelry and clothing, but they had not prepared any food provisions other than some loaves of unleavened bread.¹ When the Israelites reached the safety of the Sinai wilderness, they realized that choosing gold over food had perhaps not been the best decision and they began to complain, “you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger” (Exodus 16:3). But of course, they were completely wrong. They were God's people and God would provide for them. Soon, God began raining upon them “bread from heaven,” a flakey, nutritious substance that could be gathered off the ground each morning. When the sun grew hot this bread from heaven melted, but there was no need to store any food. God provides – every day.

The movement was growing. Jesus had sent out the Twelve (Luke 9:1-6) and now he was sending out seventy², thirty-five pairs of disciples to prepare his way. Like John the Baptism, the seventy were to go ahead of him into towns and places where Jesus intended to go. Like the Twelve, the seventy are to take *nothing* with them – no purse, no bag, not even extra sandals. They are to rely on the hospitality of others. They are to be dependent upon their hosts, eating and drinking what is put in front of them. God will see that the seventy are fed and housed. They are in his care.

²If you use the NIV translation, the number sent out is seventy-two. Luke's number is likely based upon Genesis 10, which contains a listing of all the nations. Thus, this commissioning of seventy foreshadows Jesus' later commission to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28). In the Hebrew OT text, seventy nations are listed in Genesis 10. In the ancient Greek translation of the OT, the Septuagint, the number of nations is seventy-two. Since the NT writers often relied upon the Septuagint, one can see how the confusion about Luke's number might arise.

¹The bread they take is unleavened because there was not enough time to wait for the bread to rise.

The discipline of simplicity

Both of today's stories speak to a common theme – God provides. It is God's business to care for us; we don't have to, and shouldn't, worry about it. We are to strive *first* for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, *then* all our needs will fall into place. Yet, we burden ourselves down with so much stuff on our trip toward the good life. I might need "it" someday, so how can I possibly get rid of "it" now! Of course, I write this as I sit amid my own massive collections of "stuff." I have boxes of "stuff" in the attic that I haven't opened in ten years. I keep promising myself that I'm going to "de-clutter," but I never seem to be able to really get going. *I might need it someday!!!*

I've made strides in simplifying my life. My weekly calendar was once nothing but a mass of meetings and appointments, but no longer. When it comes to "stuff," however, I've got a long way to go. Richard Foster observes that there is an *inward* reality of Christian simplicity and its *outward* expression.³ He writes, "the inward reality of simplicity involves a life of joyful unconcern for possessions." This is not about the denial of possessions, but about putting them in their proper perspective. All that we have is a gift from God. It is to be cared for by God. It is to be enjoyed by us and shared with others. If we could truly live out these truths, we'd find that freedom from anxiety and obsession would follow. But Foster sounds a caution – do not seek the simple life, seek first the kingdom. Do not even seek the good life, seek first the kingdom.

Foster suggests to us ten principles for the *outward* expression of Christian simplicity. The risk in any list like this is that we will instantly turn it into a list of rules. We often become legalistic about such things. These are not laws or rules, but an attempt to flesh out concretely what Christian simplicity really looks like. Here are Richard Foster's suggestions:

1. "*Buy things for their usefulness rather than their status.*" We'll talk more about status next week, but I think that we can all identify at least somewhat with this statement by Al Gish: "We buy things we do not want, to impress people we do not like."
2. "*Reject anything that is producing an addiction in you.*" Addictions are undisciplined compulsions. These don't have to be big things. Foster tells the story of a young man who so loved his morning paper that he considered stealing his neighbor's paper when his own was missing. The young man went back in the house and cancelled his subscription. Extreme? Perhaps. But I suspect that my own practice of Christianity ought to be more extreme than it is.
3. "*Develop a habit of giving things away.*" Foster suggests we try giving away some of the very things to which we are most attached!
4. "*Refuse to be propagandized by the custodians of modern gadgetry.*" I know the catalog is fun, but do I really need Hammacher's Wristwatch Television for \$199.95. (Yes, check out their home page).
5. "*Learn to enjoy things without owning them.*" How many of us have used the public library in the last month? The last year?
6. "*Develop a deeper appreciation for the creation.*" Yes . . . stop and smell the roses.
7. "*Look with a healthy skepticism at all 'buy now, pay later' schemes.*" Many of us have learned hard lessons about the dangers of debt.
8. "*Obey Jesus' instructions about plain, honest speech.*" No flattery, no half-truths, no attempts to impress or to obscure.
9. "*Avoid anything that breeds the oppression of others.*" Have I ever asked my children or spouse to do things that I thought were beneath me? Probably.
10. "*Shun anything that distracts you from seeking first the kingdom of God.*" Christians often decry what is on television or in the movies, but 'stuff and status' is probably the much larger problem.

Foster's list just seems so unrealistic, so at odds with life in the real world. I guess it actually is. Perhaps when my own inward reality is more closely attuned with the kingdom of God, then this list won't seem nearly so impractical. Instead, a life of Christian simplicity will seem only natural.

³from Richard Foster's chapter on simplicity in *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*.

Daily Bible Readings

(God provides!!)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 1 Kings 17:1-7 Elijah hides from Ahab and is cared for by ravens</p>	<p>Day 2 1 Kings 19:1-10 After defeating the priests of Baal, Elijah flees Jezebel and is cared for by an angel</p>
<p>Day 3 Luke 9:1-6 Jesus sends out the Twelve. They are to take nothing.</p>	<p>Day 4 Luke 9:10-17 The feeding of the five thousand</p>
<p>Day 5 Philippians 4:10-23 Paul has learned to be content with what God has provided, whether it is little or plenty (v. 12).</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

April Book Recommendation

The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse

by Gregg Easterbrook

Easterbrook is an accomplished writer and researcher with a reputation for evenhandedness and accuracy. His survey of the American culture is heavily footnoted and well-indexed. I think you'll find it very thought-provoking, especially as you read through his insights into the anxieties that characterize much of our lives. As a Christian, I'm sure that you will anticipate some of his conclusions about the place of kindness and gratitude in our search for happiness.

**The Six-Week Teaching Series with Scott Engle continues at 9:30
in Wesley Hall – Join Us!**

The Good Life: Biblical Perspectives on Abundant Living

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Richard Foster writes, “the inward reality of simplicity involves a life of joyful unconcern for possessions.” Discuss what you think he means. Are you joyfully unconcerned about your possessions? Foster is careful to say that he doesn't mean that we are to abandon our possessions. God has given us a beautiful world to enjoy. Still, do you find yourself to be the prisoner of your own possessions, whether a house or a bank account? How well do you think you could deal with the loss of your possessions? Look over Foster's list of ten suggestions for the outward expression of a joyful unconcern. What do you make of this list? Which ones are you doing now? Which would be most difficult for you? Why is all this even important? How might possessions affect our relationship with God and with others? (Don't forget that covetousness makes the “Top Ten” list that Moses brings down from the mountain.)

In his chapter on simplicity, Foster quotes Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher and theologian. What sort of effort are we to make to pursue the kingdom of God? Are we to give away all our money to feed the poor? Kierkegaard's answer: No – seek *first* the kingdom. Are we to get a job that will allow us to do a lot of good? His answer: No – seek *first* the kingdom. Are we to go out and preach the truth? His answer: No! – seek *first* the kingdom. Kierkegaard concludes, “Then in a certain sense, it is nothing I shall do. Yes, certainly, in a certain sense it is nothing, become nothing before God, learn to keep silent; in this silence is the beginning, which is, first to seek God's kingdom.” What do you hear Kierkegaard saying to us? What is he not saying? Since the Good Life is to be found in the kingdom of God, what might Kierkegaard be saying about our trip to the Good Life?