

“Beautiful Simplicity”

Reading: Matthew 6:19-34, 19:13-30

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You probably remember hearing about the landing of the *Curiosity* rover on Mars several years ago; I know I mentioned it last time we heard the call to be deep, beautiful, and fearless. It’s an incredible achievement to successfully land *anything* on Mars, but this mission was particularly ambitious. *Curiosity* is a car-sized, nuclear-powered robotic rover that is literally a mobile science laboratory. What was most ambitious about the mission was the actual landing of the rover on Mars: in order to get the rover safely to the surface, the engineers designed an intricate, incredibly complex landing system using a huge, specially-designed parachute followed by a rocket-powered sky-crane that lowered the rover to the surface. And of course because Mars is so far away, the landing could not be controlled from earth. Everything had to be controlled by the spacecraft itself, so NASA engineers could only watch while their \$2.5 billion mission lived or died. I remember thinking that the whole plan was insane when I first heard about it; surely even James Bond would look at this plan and think it was too unrealistic because of its complexity.

In fact, due to the size of the rover and the nature of landing on Mars, the insane landing system of the Mars Science Laboratory was no more complex than it needed to be. NASA engineers don’t typically take unnecessary risks or go out of their way to impress people. As complex as this mission is, it was no more complex than it had to be to complete the mission. To do what they wanted to do, this was the simplest way to complete it. And that’s the tension that NASA engineers live with, but most of the rest of us struggle with. We are an incredibly unfocused culture. Distraction and clutter are some of the most prominent features in an awful lot of people’s lives. For churches as well as individuals, staying focused on the mission at hand, doing what needs to be done for that mission, and doing *only* that, is a pretty rare thing.

And that’s why we’re including a message on simplicity in our focus on being deep, beautiful, fearless people. Because sometimes, following Christ is not a matter of doing more, it’s a matter of doing less. Simplicity does not necessarily mean that you have absolutely nothing except the bare essentials, as though we all live in one-room houses with nothing but one change of clothes, a blanket for warmth, and nothing but bread and water to eat and drink. Simplicity means that you have nothing except what is essential for the mission. Simplicity refers to a singleness of purpose, a simplicity of focus, a removal of distraction. Simplicity is a desperately needed message today, because the clutter we bring into our lives is one of the main things that keeps us from being as deep, beautiful, and fearless as we could be. Why don’t I spend more time in prayer and study of the Bible? Because I’ve got stuff to do and places to be. Why don’t I give more of my time and resources for those in need? Because I need to save for an upgrade to my computer, or a new car, or whatever. Why don’t I radically put my trust in God to save me in my hour of need? Because I’ve got a bunch of stuff that I can rely on instead of Him.

You may have heard the headline earlier this year about how the chief sustainability officer of IKEA, Steve Howard, said that the West is approaching “peak stuff.” His point was that sales of things like furniture and household goods are beginning to plateau in the Western world, and they’re not expected to go up. The reason is that by and large, people have more than enough stuff; the market is saturated to the point that stores like IKEA really can’t expect the market as a whole to grow

significantly. Researchers from UCLA reported a few years ago that Americans are “drowning in stuff.” We are literally buying more stuff than our houses can hold, and in many cases we do it because we feel inadequate in some other area. So in other words, we feel guilty for not spending enough time with the kids, so we buy them more toys, to the point that they physically could not clean up their room if they wanted to. We clutter our houses because we clutter our time, and we absurdly think that buying more stuff and distracting ourselves more with more entertainment will make everything better.

We are a culture of consumers in every sense of that word. We are duped into believing that more stuff will make us happy, even though we all know it isn't true. I'm one who enjoys technology; it's simply amazing what's available today. But I also know that the reality of technology is that you're lucky if it really saves you as much time as it promises to. When you buy a computer or a gadget, you've got to set it up the way you want it, you've got to maintain it with the latest software, you've got to keep your files backed up, and on and on to the point that you spend a lot of time maintaining your time-saving device. And that's assuming something doesn't go wrong. The same is true of just about anything: the more you have, the more time and effort you spend taking care of it, storing it, organizing it, cleaning it, protecting it, and, from time to time, using it. The result is that our distractions distract us from being as deep, beautiful, and fearless as we could be.

Now remember, a rocket-powered sky crane is not a distraction if that's what you really need to land on Mars. Simplicity refers to a singleness of focus more than it refers to a lack of stuff. Our culture is suffering from chronic lack of focus. We are, in fact, terminally distracted. The message of our gospel is a message of good news: good, but not necessarily easy, and it's certainly countercultural.

Jesus spent a good chunk of the Sermon on the Mount addressing the need for simplicity in the Christian life, because simplicity is ultimately not about happiness or being a good steward of resources, it's about loyalty. “No one can serve two masters,” He said. “You cannot serve both God and Money.” “Cannot” is a very strong word. You can only love one at a time, and if you think you're serving both at the same time, you're probably actually only serving the lesser of the two. You cannot serve two masters. Simplify. Narrow your focus. Choose whom you will serve. Jesus continues with a *therefore*: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear.” It's one of those nice, poetic passages that we like to quote without really listening to; think about how God clothes the flowers of the field, and you're much more valuable than them. “Seek *first* His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Simplify. Choose your master.

And if that isn't countercultural enough, Jesus has some *really* uncomfortable things to say in chapter 19. Right after He tells us that the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who are good children of God the Father, who have that relationship of loving trust, Matthew contrasts that with a wealthy man who comes to Jesus and asks what else he needs to do to receive eternal life. Once they get past the preliminaries of following the basic commandments of God, Jesus cuts to the chase: “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” We like to minimize the impact of what Jesus is commanding here by saying that He wasn't giving a command to everyone for all time; He was just telling that particular man that

he had to sell all his stuff. But we have to ask: if Jesus was only speaking to that one man at that one time, why is this passage preserved in the Bible for us today?

We realize that Jesus does not command every Christian to take a vow of poverty. The point is not that we cannot be a genuine Christian without selling all our possessions. The point is that following Jesus is extremely costly, and we may have to take radical steps in order to follow Him well. If you have some other master in your life, you have to simplify it out, because you cannot follow two masters. If there is something in your schedule that is keeping you from following Jesus, “sell your possessions and give to the poor.” If your stuff is more important to you than following Jesus, “sell your possessions and give to the poor.” If you have a relationship or a habit that hinders your walk with Jesus, “sell your possessions and give to the poor.” What perishable thing do you need to trade for imperishable treasure?

We need simplicity in our lives, because the clutter is drowning our life in Christ. We need simplicity, because that narrowness of focus is something that will contribute to us being deep people. Remember, two weeks ago I said that deep people are careful about their priorities; they get worked up about the things that are worth getting worked up over, and they don't get worked up over the stuff that doesn't matter. If we make the choice to cut out those things that are not part of our mission as Christians, you'd better believe that it will help us sort through our priorities. How much time do I really need to spend being entertained? How many activities do I really need to be involved in, and which ones? How much money do I really need to live on, and how much can I give for kingdom work? Deep people usually are not distracted people; they have that focus on the priorities that really matter, and they cut out anything that doesn't. And as we simplify away those things that distract us from God, as we narrow our focus onto following Jesus Christ, we gain a better perspective on all those things our world tries to sell us that simply don't matter. Deep people can see through the lies and the flimflam, and they aren't taken in.

We need simplicity in our lives because simplicity contributes to making us beautiful people. Remember, beauty has nothing to do with how you look; it has everything to do with being a person who has received grace from God and lives in gratitude toward Him and grace toward others. So as we narrow our focus on Christ and become more like Him, we grow in that beauty that we seek. We trim the fat from our lives; all those things that mar the likeness of Christ in us get removed. In the famous “love chapter,” 1 Corinthians 13, the Apostle Paul says, “If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.” We do not simplify for the sake of simplicity, because it is not simplicity that makes us beautiful. It is nearness to Christ, and simplicity removes some of the things blocking us from Him. As we simplify, we are able to love better, rather than failing to have time to love others because we're too distracted, or trying to give people a substitute for real love by buying them baubles and trinkets.

And we need simplicity in our lives because simplicity helps make us fearless people. If our treasure is in heaven, where bugs can't muck it up and burglars can't steal it, then logically our treasure is pretty safe. When Jesus commands us not to worry about tomorrow, He's calling us to radical loyalty to God. We don't worry about tomorrow because we trust our Lord, and He will take care of us. And if we trust Him to that extent, if we trust in His provision for us more than money or power or possessions, what do we have to fear? And as we simplify our lives, maybe a little tentatively at first because we're not sure if we can do without some of this stuff we're getting rid of,

and we start to see God provide for us in our simplicity, and we start to get to know Him better and trust Him more, and so we give more over to Him, and He provides even more, and we become more and more fearless because we have seen with our own eyes that our Lord is faithful. Some of the most fearless Christians in history have been those who have had the least, because they have had no choice but to trust only in Christ, and He has been faithful to them.

We need simplicity to refocus our mission in Christ. We need this as individuals, as families, and as a church. Churches fall into the same traps people do, and sometimes we need to simplify. It's so easy for churches to get stuck in complexity and clutter because we start a program or a class, and maybe it's even a good thing for a while and it impacts lives, but then when it stops having so much impact we don't want to stop doing it because we're used to having it around. We get to the point that we don't evaluate what we're doing with our time and resources, and so we're not spending them in ways that are truly focused on our mission. So as we call one another to simplicity, we need to remember that this is also a call to the church as well.

The question might be this: "What do you need to simplify out of your life to give God more room in your life?" But there's another question we should ask before we get there: "If God asked you to do something great for Him, would you be willing to cut out everything unnecessary in your life to do what He asked?" And before you answer yes to that question, are you being faithful in the little things now? Embrace beautiful simplicity, make room for the work of Christ in your life, and watch as He makes you a deep, beautiful, fearless follower.



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