

## **“Cantaloupe--Simplicity”**

Today we're wrapping up this series we've been in called "Cantaloupe." These cantaloupe represent our stuff, our money and possessions. We've talked about how God is the source of everything we have either directly or indirectly, and how God always claims a divine portion of our money and possessions. Not because he needs it, but as a test of trust. Do we trust God and can God trust us? God says, "I've put that divine portion in your hands, if you trust me and bring it back, I'll open up the floodgates of blessing in your lives. Do you trust me?"

Last week we talked about the dark side of money and the light side of money and how to live on the light side. I ended last week with the challenge to work on eliminating the words "my" and "mine" from our vocabularies so that we can understand that everything is ultimately God's.

Today I want to take a look at a trait that exemplifies all of what we've looked at. A trait that I hear people say they want desperately. The trait is simplicity. We crave simplicity because our lives are so hurried, so full, so complex, complicated and busy. We are hungry for simplicity. For most of us, our lives are anything but simple. And it's killing us physically, relationally, and spiritually.

Hurry, fatigue, over-commitment, exhaustion are destroying marriages, crippling families, shriveling hearts, and eating away at people's ability to experience joy in life; eating away people's ability to experience a closeness with God and others.

What would it look like to live life with simplicity? I think it would be a life with a greater margin of time, a life of deeper friendships, of more caring families, a life of greater compassion, of more rest, a life with a greater amount of joy. A life of simplicity would be a life with greater financial margin and ability to give and share. A life of simplicity would be a life of true appreciation of the good things we have available to us. It would be a life of amazing gratitude. It would be a life of a growing closeness to God. Do you want that life? I know I do. I also know that one message on a Sunday morning isn't going to get you and me there. But defining the goal, setting the destination, is huge. And as we get ready for Thanksgiving and our preparation for Christmas, this is huge. Because this time of year can be anything but simple.

If we want to claim this trait that could wonderfully reorder our lives we recognize that **the trait of simplicity begins as an inward reality that results in an outward lifestyle.** Simplicity starts as an inward reality that results in an outward lifestyle. Jesus gives us the focal point of simplicity in Matthew chapter 6.  
<sup>25</sup>**"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? <sup>26</sup>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? <sup>27</sup>And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? <sup>28</sup>And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, <sup>29</sup>yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. <sup>30</sup>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? <sup>31</sup>Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' <sup>32</sup>For...indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. <sup>33</sup>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, NRSV).**

The central point in finding inward simplicity is seeking the kingdom of God and righteousness first and then everything else falls into place. Inner simplicity comes from trust. It comes from putting God's kingdom first.

How do we do that? First **"Traits of inner simplicity: We see everything we have as a gift from God."** Yes, we work, but we know that it's not our work that gives us what we have. Think about the food in your refrigerator at home. You can look at it and say, "I worked at my job to earn an income. I used that money to buy this food, therefore I provided this food." That's a short view. Inward simplicity begins with a long view. Who provided the rain, the climate, the nutrients, the environment to make that food even possible? Inward simplicity receives what we have as a gift from God.

And inner simplicity is also about **realizing that it's God's business to care for what we have.** Again, it's about trust. God is able to protect what we possess. We can trust him to take care of our stuff. Now, does that mean that we don't lock our doors or take the keys out of the car? No! But it does mean we recognize that it isn't the lock on the door that protects the house. Thinking our precautions protect us only makes us worry all the more. The same thing is true of our reputations and our jobs. Inner simplicity means we have the freedom to trust God for caring for these things. And if we lose those things we trust God to take care of us anyway.

Inner simplicity also means that **we make our stuff available to others.** Richard Foster writes, "If our goods are not available to the community when it is clearly right and good, then they are stolen goods." We have a hard time sharing what we have because we're afraid of what tomorrow might bring. But if we really believe that God is who Jesus said he is, then we don't need to be afraid. Inner simplicity means we make our stuff available to others.

These three things, seeing everything as a gift from God, knowing that it's God's job to care for what we have, and making our stuff available to others, these are the inner part of simplicity. But it can't stop there. This is where the rubber hits the road. What is going on inwardly needs to be lived outwardly.

Let me give a few suggestions for the outward expression of simplicity. But first I've got to warn you. This stuff is counter-cultural. This stuff is radical. But this stuff leads to real, lasting, freedom and a deeper connection to God and others. Don't tune this stuff out, we all need to hear this, especially as we get ready for the holidays.

The first outward expression of simplicity "**Outward expressions of simplicity: Buy things for their usefulness rather than their status.**" Buy a car for its utility not for its status. Ride a bike when you can. When you're renting an apartment, or buying a house or building a house to live in think about its livability, not how it will impress people. Don't have more living space than is reasonable. Who needs 7 rooms for 2 people?

And what about clothes? Most of us have do not need more clothes! We buy more to keep up with fashion. What if we just bought what we need? What if we wore our clothes until they were worn out? I often think about what it would be like to have 10 shirts. One for each day of the week, and a few extra for Sunday so you didn't have to look at the same shirt every time you come to church. Could you get beyond that in your pastor if I wore the same clothes all the time, or would you think I was just too weird and out of touch?

What if we stopped trying to impress people with our clothes and let them be impressed with our lives? That's one reason why we're a casual church, so you don't have to fuss, to primp, to get gussied up. Come as you are. We can be reverent and casual at the same time. That's what we strive for, casual and reverent.

Are you tuning me out yet?! Like I said, this is counter-cultural, especially right before the shopping season! I know I might as well be up here speaking in Chinese! But this is the truth, Ruth! You want to live a life that is as free from anxiety as possible? Do this.

Here's another outward expression of simplicity, **reject anything that is producing an addiction.** This means learning to know the difference between real needs, like cheerful surroundings, and an addiction. Eliminate, or cut down on the use of non-nutritional drinks like coffee, tea, soft-drinks, and alcohol. Chocolate has become a perceived addiction for lots of us. So have our TVs, our iPods, our cell phones, our computers, our magazines, and newspapers. Invite God's healing power in, invite friends in to help and eliminate anything that produces an addiction.

A third outward expression of simplicity is to **develop a habit of giving things away.** The more attached you are to something, the more you should consider giving it away. What if this Christmas, instead of buying things, or even making things, what if you and I gave away things that meant a lot to us? This facet of simplicity is about holding things lightly. We hold them lightly so that we can give them away if the time is right. We hold things lightly so that if they're taken from us, we weren't really attached anyway.

And it goes without saying that we need to de-accumulate, give away, the stuff that we don't use at all! Most of the stuff that we have that we don't really need just clutters up our homes, our offices, our lives. This

stuff just complicates life. All that stuff has to be sorted, dusted, resorted, stored. Think of the time we'd save by just giving it away. The woman who cuts my hair just moved. I asked her if she was unpacked. I love what she told me. She said, "I have everything I need. And I've decided that in two months, if I haven't gotten it out of the box, I don't need it and I'm pushing it to the curb." That's bold!

Most of us could get rid of half of our stuff without any serious sacrifice; and the impact would be less clutter, more time, more money available to do things of significance.

Here's another way to simplify outwardly, **don't give in to the latest and newest**. We are bombarded in ways we don't even realize in order to be convinced to replace things that work with something that supposedly works better, faster, more efficiently, whatever. But the difference is usually so minute that it is imperceptible. Our CD player broke last year. I wanted to replace it. I know this makes me sound old, but I just wanted the same thing: a 5 disk CD player. No fancy bells or whistles. Not an SACD, not CD/DVD/MP3 combo player. I had one of those, it took forever to start to play music, it couldn't shuffle all the disks, and it wasn't as good. I couldn't find what I was looking for. I had to buy something with stuff on it that I don't need. Call it planned obsolescence, call it design improvements, but it's all just marketing for the purpose of getting us to buy more, to convince us that what we have isn't good enough. Don't believe it!

Here's another outward expression of simplicity, **learn to enjoy things without owning them**. Owning things is an obsession in our culture. If we own it, we feel like we can control it; and if we control it, we feel like it will give us more pleasure. This is an illusion! Lots of things in life can be enjoyed without us owning them. Here's a radical concept: share things. Enjoy the beach without feeling like you have to buy a piece of it.

How about this as a way to experience simplicity, **develop a deeper appreciation for creation**. Get outside, get close to the earth. Have you played in the leaves yet this year? Oh we have! There is something spiritual about piling up leaves, running through them, rolling in them, stuffing them down your daughter's pants.

We have some amazing trails around Joplin now, use them. Soak up the outdoors. Walk whenever you can. Listen to nature. Enjoy the textures of the grass and leaves. Smell the flowers. Simplicity means to rediscover the simply beauty and awesome magnificence of this earth.

This next suggestion is very important for us to live with simplicity: **steer clear of "buy now, pay later."** It's the trap of debt. And way too many of us fall in head first. Maybe you can relate to this advertisement. **[VIDEO: Lending Tree, "I'm Stanley Johnson..."]**

"Somebody help me!" It would be funny if it weren't so tragic. Some of the other elements of simplicity help with this, but we've got to be vigilant. How? Here are my personal beliefs. If you can't pay off your credit cards every month, do not use them. Live within your means. To go into debt for stuff that has no value once you buy it, is simply foolish. I'm talking about household stuff, home décor, vacations, clothes, gadgets, even cars. Don't go in debt for these things. We are a nation of negative savers. For the first time since the Great Depression we are a country of negative savers. We regularly spend more than our yearly incomes. And for what? Fickle fashions, things we don't need, lifestyles based on image that nobody can afford!

I think the only debt we should carry should be on a home because at least you have something of value to offset the debt.

The Bible knows what it's talking about when it says that the borrower is slave to the lender (Proverbs 22:7). Don't become a slave.

Use extreme caution before taking on any debt and work hard, make sacrifices, go without things in the short term, to get long term freedom.

Here's another expression of simplicity that has nothing to do with money and possessions **use plain, honest speech**. This is what Jesus was conveying when he said, **"Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one"** (Matthew 5:37, NIV). If you say you're going to do something, do it. Don't use a lot of flattery when you talk, and avoid half-truths. Make honesty and integrity

the hallmark of how you speak. And don't talk to impress people, speak from your inner simplicity, that desire to seek God first, and his righteousness, then you will speak with simplicity.

The bottom line in simplicity is to avoid anything that distracts you from seeking first the kingdom of God. It's so easy to lose focus in the pursuit of good things. Our jobs, families, friends, security—these are all good things but they can all too easily become the center of attention. And if anything besides God is the center of attention, we will have problems. Inner simplicity is making God the center, outward simplicity takes many forms and brings many freedoms.

One definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. By that definition, most of us are insane. We want lives of joy, and meaning, lives that have margins of time, and financial margins, but we keep buying more, consuming more, accumulating more, taking care of more, thinking that's going to make us happy, and it never ever does! Every poll, every survey, shows that we are less happy and content than ever and we have more than ever. The way to contentment, and sanity, is God's way, it is the way of simplicity.

I want to end by giving you a chance to say, "These are the areas where I will strive to simplify, with God's help." Again, I realize that one message on Sunday isn't going to change our lives, but every journey begins with one step. So we're going to pause for a few minutes so we can write down some of the things that God is bringing to the surface right now. In these moments, write down one, two, three things where God is saying to you, "Together we can do this. Together we can find simplicity and sanity and life."

And don't stop here. Talk about this with your friends. Talk about this in your small group. Talk about it with your whole family. Talk about how you get beyond good intentions and actually simplify your life. Hear Jesus invitation, "**Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls...**" Connected to Christ, striving for inward simplicity, we can build a simple, sustainable life. God is ready and eager to help that happen. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*I thank Richard Foster for his book Celebration of Discipline, which has helped me in this message and in my life of striving for simplicity.*