

THE FREEDOM OF SIMPLICITY¹

One of the words we keep hearing during these days of economic downturn and distress is "simplicity." As our home and investment values have gone down, many people are looking at life with new insight. And one of the insights is that the lifestyle of doing more, having more, and living faster can become overwhelming. As a consequence, a lot of people—maybe including you—are wondering if all the demands and all the stuff and all the busyness need to be scaled back. Is this really what abundant living is all about? Might we live meaningfully if our lives were less complicated? Hence simplicity.

There's another reason for simplicity. Can the earth take all of our gasoline use, trash bags, waste water, and our turning our forests into farms and shopping malls? What if every person on the planet lived as I do? Produced the rubbish and ate the food and bought the goods I do? Could planet Earth keep up with the environmental impact of 6.67 billion Dougs?

So simplicity—scaling back and decomplicating—is in the air these days. Chances are you've given thought to living a simpler lifestyle—skipping a purchase or saying "no" to another activity.

What does our faith have to say about simplicity?

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on January 25, 2009 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, Ga.

Above all, biblical faith clearly encourages simplicity. What's the most fundamental principle? One and only one God! How does Paul put it?

This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark of the prize of the high calling of God in Jesus Christ.

Our lesson today states the Christian call to simplicity most directly. Your eye is the lamp of the body. If your eye is sound or single or simple (all three are good translations), if your eye is single, your whole body is full of light.

To me this says that our attention needs to be focused on a single great principle in life rather than shifting from one focus to the next. When we concentrate our attention and seek our purpose in the one thing—that of course, is Jesus Christ—a beauty and brilliance floods our being. Put differently, when we understand our faith correctly it will never guide us into an intolerable scramble of panting feverishness."

Now, Jesus' words come with a warning. If our eye is not single our lives, our inner selves, will be full of darkness. Let me try to illustrate this with a true story.

Not too long ago one of my church members, a successful businessman, bought two printing companies and merged them into one business with two plants in different cities. With his life savings and a huge loan he bought for himself two buildings, two

workforces, two workplace traditions, and two product lines. One of the businesses had one dominant customer that didn't exactly need printing but instead customized cardboard displays. The company had to buy a lot of specialty equipment, not commonplace for printers, to manufacture those products. Also, and this sounds strange, they sold computers.

You see where this story's going. With a downturn in the printing business, this company couldn't close one plant because the workforce couldn't travel to the other site. The customer with the strange orders suddenly left. And the business went bankrupt. We can understand why businesses these days have purpose statements. It is all too easy for a business to be tied up in all kinds of enterprises and not really do one central thing.

This can happen to our lives. We want to have relationships and be loved. We work to have a good reputation and respect. We also want our kids to make us proud, and to be prosperous. We want to be moral and upright. We have political convictions. We want to play and enjoy toys and recreation. And we may have secret passions for sensuality or revenge, or to get high, or be thrilled or for security and on and on. Pretty soon we find that it doesn't all fit together.

Last week, I was reading an article which coached readers not to say "yes" to every request, every need, and every

opportunity. Because our lives—especially in our culture these days—can quickly get out of control.

I believe that chaotic conflicted, unfocused living is what Jesus means when he talks about our being being filled with darkness.

If, however, our lives are organized around one center—Jesus Christ—our inner being is filled with light. It's important to notice that when the Bible talks about simplicity and focusing our lives around one person that it really does promise that wonderful things will happen. There's a reward here for our obedience. Let me give a couple of examples.

A dominant theme in the Old Testament is that God gives freely to his children. So, when God called and Abraham followed, there was a promise that Abraham's name would be great and that he would be prosperous. All of that happened. The same can be said of Abraham's son, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and later Job.

We miss something important if we spiritualize or bypass the tangible promise that follows single-minded obedience. The last OT book, Malachi, flatly declares that if only the people would open their hearts in obedient giving, God would open the windows of heaven and pour out on them material blessing beyond what they could possibly contain. I'm talking about a theme, not an isolated curiosity in the Bible. To make Jesus Christ

the singular focus of our hearts is to be flooded with a wonderful light that isn't just a subjective inner satisfaction. It's a rich new life.

If the economic difficulties of these days or the thoughts I've just shared find you longing to live a more focused, faithful life and you feel that in reality you could never pull it off, thank God for your longing. What did Jesus say? What is impossible with people is possible with God. Ask for help. "Lord, my life is an over-scheduled, over-busy, encumbered mish mash and I know I've missed something. Help me to find the single eye and the yearning for the one thing that matters. Let that prayer—which is simple in itself—be a first step. And wait to see how God answers.