

The Biblical Roots: The Old Covenant

- I. Introduction
 - a. Simplicity is rooted in the Old Testament
 - b. There's a theological principle in the OT, namely that God's nature and God's desire for how people are to live are related.
- II. Radical Dependence
 - a. The Creation Story
 - i. Humanity is the high water mark of God's creation of the world.
 - ii. The entire creation is radically dependent on God an idea which is pivotal to simplicity.
 - iii. We have no independent existence, no self-sustaining ability. All we have is derived.
 - iv. Humans are part of the created order and totally dependent.
 - v. Our posture is not one of arrogant acquisition, but of simple trust.
 - vi. Even our personal uniqueness and dignity are rooted in our creation in the image of God.
 - 1. Our personal value is not tied to achievement or wealth, but is a gift from God
 - 2. This truth flies in the face of the modern tendency to define people by their achievement and possessions.
 - vii. The Fall is human independence gone wrong. The first biblical humans mistrusted God's goodness by believing the serpent's lie that God was holding back from them something good.
 - viii. The nakedness that resulted points to the awful vulnerability which they assumed in repudiating their dependence. Independence comes at a high price.
 - ix. Simplicity means a return to the posture of dependence.
- III. Radical Obedience
 - a. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac is a tale of radical obedience.

- b. Radical obedience is possible only when God has our supreme allegiance.
 - i. The three first commandments insist that place God first in our obedience
 - c. The prohibition against covetousness is the tenth commandment. At its heart it blocks the inner lust to have.
 - i. Having things is fine. It is the inordinate desire, the inner compulsion, the undisciplined craving that is condemned. Covetousness is the idolatrous worship of things.
 - ii. The problem is that we, like the alcoholic, are unable to recognize the disease once we have been engulfed by it. Only by the help of others are we able to detect the inner spirit that places wealth above God.
- IV. The Generosity of God
- a. A dominant note in the OT is the generosity of God, who freely gives to his children.
 - i. All of the patriarchs are showered with God's blessing—even material prosperity.
 - ii. Deuteronomy is peppered with promised blessing. "He will love you, bless you, and multiply you; he will also bless the fruit of your body and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and your oil, the increase of your cattle and the young of your flock"
 - b. The promise of material blessing was a conditioned promise. Obedience is necessary: "If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land"
 - c. There is a strong emphasis upon the inward nature of simplicity—holy obedience—that conditioned all the promised provision.
 - i. And a vital aspect of that obedience was compassionate provision for the poor.
 - d. The connection between obedience and blessing
 - i. It is not performance and reward
 - ii. It is that obedience works a kind of spirit into us.
 - 1. Once an inner disposition has taken over our personality, material blessings cannot hurt

us, for they will be used for the right purposes.

iii. Promised provisions in the OT are invariably for the community rather than for the individual.

iv. The idea that one could cut off a piece of the consumer pie and go off and enjoy it in isolation was unthinkable.

V. Generosity Begets Generosity

a. God's generosity to us sets us free to model that generosity toward others.

b. Inherent in the Jubilee was a carefree spirit of joyous trust. God could be relied upon to provide what was needed.

c. The Jubilee would have completely eliminated the problem of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer.

i. In the mindset of the Jubilee, land had no intrinsic value, except that crops could be produced on it. God alone was lord of the land.

d. The Jubilee idea was just as revolutionary then as today.

e. And it was never implemented.

f. The Law of the first fruits

i. This law stipulated that the first of the crop to ripen was to be given to God. To do this is an act of trust in God that remaining 90% could be successfully harvested.

g. Tithing in the OT was a concept of joyful celebration. Tithing which was intended to express liberation and freedom has been so often turned into another way to put people into bondage.

h. Tithing money was used for the Levites, the sojourners, and the poor and needy. It was also used to underwrite the expenses of the festivities involved in celebrating God's generosity.

i. Tithing was God's special concern for the helpless and needy—which is always an important ingredient of simplicity.

j. It would be appropriate to ask of our own times who today's equivalent of the fatherless, widow, sojourner, and Levites.

- k. The New Testament does not make use of either the tithe or the first fruits. Jesus had a great many things to say about our attitude toward possessions, but he mentioned the tithe only twice—both negatively.
- l. Paul said much about giving, but nothing on the tithe.

VI. The Call for Justice

- a. The call for justice is a great OT theme.
- b. Hebrew word *mishpat* (justice) means morality above strict legal justice—including observance of customs especially the equitable distribution of land.
- c. *Mishpat* was used in conjunction with with righteousness. They may have been synonymous.
- d. It is a prominent prophetic theme to rail against injustice at the expense of the poor.
 - i. Isa 3.13: "What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?"
 - ii. Amos: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream."
 - iii. The people were so greedy that they could hardly wait for the end of the Sabbath so that they could "make the ephah small and shekel great, and deal deceitfully with false balances" (Amos 8.4-6)
- e. The prophetic interpretation of the Exile was that occurred because Israel failed to repent and give up oppressing the poor.

VII. The Call for Compassion

- a. Loving kindness is reflected in the Hebrew word, *hesed*. This word also carries the idea of endurance as in God's unwavering compassion for his people.
- b. Hos. 6.6: I desire steadfast love [*hesed*] and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings."
- c. Compassion and justice blended to call us to simplicity of life.
- d. The law of gleaning illustrates this: The farmer was to leave some of the crop along the borders and the grain which fell as he worked, so that the poor could gather it.
- e. God appeared indifferent to whether a person deserved to be poor; the simple fact that the person was

without was sufficient reason to provide for his or her need.

- f. Regulations on lending are useful illustrations:
 - i. If a neighbor borrowed an oxcart and left his coat in pledge, you had to be sure to give the coat back before sunset, even if he hadn't finished with the oxcart. This was because the night air was cold and the neighbor would need the coat for warmth.
 - ii. If a millstone was taken in collateral it was to be returned so a man could make his living.
 - iii. What about lending practices today?
- g. Since it was assumed that debtors would be among the poor and vulnerable, the charging of interest on loans was forbidden. It was viewed as an unbrotherly exploitation of another's misfortune and served only to deepen his dependency
 - 1. What about our contemporary practice of taking auto title as collateral, foreclosure on a home?
- h. Further, wages were to be paid to the poor on the day the work was done, undoubtedly because the money would be needed for supper (Deut. 24.14-15)
- i. If you were hungry you could eat from your neighbor's vineyard or grain field, but not put grapes or grain in a bucket.
- j. The Hebrew law provided instruction over our dominion over the earth and the little creatures that creep upon it.
 - i. The Sabbath was provided not only for the farmer's rest but also the rest of ox and ass.
 - ii. Even the soil is given rest on the jubilee year.
- k. The manna in the wilderness: always enough for the community's needs, but never for hoarding.

VIII. The Call for Wholeness

- a. The vision of wholeness and peace is gathered up in the Hebrew word, shalom which suggests wholeness and balance.
- b. The Bible begins and ends with the shalom vision: God both orders the chaos and brings glorious wholeness in the vision of God's design for human history.

- i. Justice, righteousness, and peace are characteristic of God's shalom.
- ii. All nations will stream to the mountain of God's temple to be taught his ways and to walk in his paths;
- iii. Harmonious unity in the natural order—the cow and the bear become friends, the lion and the lamb lie down together.
- iv. Excessive extravagance, vaunting ambition, ravaging greed—all are foreign to the complete, contented community of shalom.

Biblical Roots: The New Covenant

- I. The belief about poverty in Jesus' day
 - a. People believed that poverty signaled God's displeasure; wealth signaled God's blessing
 - b. When rich young ruler failed to follow Jesus and Jesus said that it is harder for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven than for a camel to get through the eye of a needle, the disciples were understandably amazed.
 - c. In the economy of God, which Jesus came to expose, the poor, the broken, and the halt were special objects of God's blessing and concern. This must have lifted a terrible guilt burden from people.
 - d. Jesus spoke of the "deceitfulness" of riches (Mt. 13.22). Jesus saw the rich young ruler in this dilemma.
- II. Christ the Center
 - a. Most radiant passage on simplicity in the bible is Matthew 6, on carefree living under God's provision.
 - b. People have a powerful need to secure ourselves by means of amassing stuff
 - c. Three reasons to store up heavenly treasure:
 - i. The insecurity of this world. Wealth just does not last.
 - ii. Also, where your treasure is there also will be your heart.
 1. There is no option in this matter. Our whole mind will be fixed around our treasure.
 2. The further impossibility to not be able to serve two masters.
 3. Singleness of purpose toward God and generosity of spirit are twins. The single eye is contrasted with the⁴ "evil eye."
 4. This is how Jesus lived, did nothing of his own accord
 5. Jesus lived in singleness of purpose (with a single eye).

6. He invites us to the same life of the single eye

iii. Finally, provision for what is necessary has already been made.

1. This is the lilies and birds example.

III. Identification with the Poor

a. The life of Christian simplicity is tied to a concern for the poor.

b. Luke's gospel is the gospel of the poor

c. This is strongly visible in Mary's Magnificat

*He has shown strength with his arm,
He has scattered the proud in the
imagination of their hearts
He has put down the mighty from their
thrones,
And exalted those of low degree;
He has filled the hungry with good things,
And the rich he has sent empty away.*

d. The circumstances of Jesus birth are more than curiosities, they are God's modeling what ideal human life looks like.

e. Jesus' Inaugural Address

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me to preach good
news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the
captives
And recovering of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed,
To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.
Lk. 4.18-19*

f. The Beatitudes of Luke: "Blessed are the poor...Blessed are you that hunger...Blessed are you that weep...Woe to you that are rich...Woe to you that are full...Woe to you that laugh"

g. Christ's instructions to his dinner host to invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind.

h. Luke's account of the rich man and poor Lazarus

i. Zacchaeus exclaimed upon his conversion to Christ:
"Half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold (Luke 19.8)

IV. The Dangers of Wealth

- a. The NT warns of wealth's dangers.
 - b. Some of Jesus' teachings are alarming: "Whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple"
 - c. You cannot serve God and mammon
 - d. In the New Testament is the combination of a penetrating criticism of wealth with a carefree, almost lighthearted attitude toward possessions. It is a combination seldom found today.
- V. The Incendiary Fellowship
- a. The infant Jerusalem church is a powerful example of the Christian vision of simplicity
 - b. "And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need" (Acts 2.44)
 - c. There appears to be a linkage between spiritual power and witness and the lifestyle of the community.
 - d. There is something fascinating about the Ananias and Sapphira deception that is detected amazingly quickly and corrected.
 - e. God breaks in upon a sufficiently prepared people.
 - f. It is important to see that in the early church, simplicity is a fruit of the power of God at work in the community. Simplicity is not a stand-alone life style.
- VI. Freedom to Surrender Our Rights
- a. The ability to surrender our rights for the good of others is central to everything about simplicity.
 - b. The story of the neglected widows is a powerful example of the fair-handedness of the early church (Acts 6.1-7)
 - c. The committee to oversee the distribution was all Greek. The Hebrews claimed no need for representation.
 - d. Giving way to others is embodied in Paul: "Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?" (1 Cor. 6.7)
 - e. Note how over and over the interest of others is the controlling principle. Banished is the obsession to demand one's own rights. Uppermost is the good of the fellowship and the advance of Christ's kingdom.
- VII. The Scandalous Invitation
- a. Freedom from mammon entails an attitude that everything we have is God's gift and is available to others.
 - b. This reality frames the core of Christian simplicity

- c. The tithe requirement in the OT is not sufficiently radical to embody the carefree unconcern for possessions that marks life in the kingdom of God.
- d. Jesus is Lord of all our goods, not just the tithe.
- e. The widow's mite demonstrates giving of all one has.