



DYNAMIC

Steward

Exploring Partnership with God

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*Simplicity for Peter was a chosen attitude—
not a weakness.*

Simply Simon

How simple are you?! complained my computer-wizard friend, Sam, midway through my enthusiastic homily on Peter's miraculous escape (*Acts 2*). What Sam's interruption implied of course is that no post-modern sophisticate takes seriously Scripture's claim of angels plucking saints from prisons, and my faith makes him shake his head cynically. Even though his worldview cannot allow for divine intervention in our mortal mess, it strikes me—somewhat ironically—that his expressed taunt inquires more astutely into Peter's lifestyle than it does mine.

The Greek implies that Peter slept like a log the night before his set execution. *Why?* If I were chained to two soldiers and my path was blocked to the dungeon's huge iron gates, I would squirm sleeplessly through my final hours. Yet the angel ended up hitting Peter to get his eyes open. *Quick, get up!* he said. And the chains fell off Peter's wrists (*vs 7*). Even then, the angel led this dazed fisherman down the length of a street until familiar sounds and smells restored Peter's wits.

Was Peter simply tired? Or, more likely, did he simply possess a faith approach to life? No matter how you interpret the story, even my friend Sam had to admit that Peter's sense of peace was attractively uncomplicated. What of tomorrow? Death held no fear for a man whose life lay in his Master's hands. All he sought was a deeper connection with God, whose blessings since Pentecost had filled him with a spiritual jubilation.

The ultimate proof of his simplicity and contentment came as Peter ran to the home of Barnabas' aunt. After bursting through the doors, He praised God for sparing him from certain death, and nurtured the worried faithful.

Simplicity for Peter was a chosen attitude—not a weakness. He was, after all, a married man who owned a house and ran the family fishery. He was also the natural leader whom Jesus endorsed for his inspirational power. Yet what mattered most to Peter was not his relative wealth or influence, but how he used them with unceasing simplicity.

We can learn much from this great apostle. Owning assets holds no evil in itself, and prioritizing what is spiritually important keeps potential dangers at bay. For the rest of Peter's calling as an apostle, he used his resources for the church in Jerusalem and beyond, braving great difficulties from the simple perspective of serving God for the good of all.

The question we must then ask ourselves is Sam's challenge to me, *How simple are you?* How uncomplicated is your faith?

David J Wood, Senior Pastor, GreenLake SDA Church, Seattle, Washington

Application



Introduction

Ask class members to list life events that are reminders of the passing of time (death, age, seasons, the unexpected, birthdays, etc.). Then give the following stress test to evaluate how each copes with life's stressors.

- | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I'm frequently late or missing appointments. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 2. My emotions are near the surface (anger or tears come easily). | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 3. I feel that my time is controlled by others. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 4. I find myself engaging in mental arguments with my employer, family or others. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5. I feel like I'm always with people and am rarely alone. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 6. I wonder when I'm going to get around to what I really want to do. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 7. I feel tired emotionally, physically or spiritually. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 8. On my day off, I feel compelled to go to the office to finish work. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 9. If married: we seem too busy or tired for romance. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 10. I think <i>grass is greener</i> thoughts about my career. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 11. I find myself seeking escapes (food, sleep, TV, etc.). | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 12. I seem to rush from one thing to the next and always feel busy. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 13. I am not sleeping well. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 14. I'm overly concerned with finances. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 15. I don't have time to maintain my most important relationships. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 16. I'm always busy but wonder if I'm doing the right things. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

TOTAL: _____

(Scoring: 61-85 High stress. You are running on empty; 36-60 Medium stress. Make some adjustments; 17-35 Low stress in general. Address any 4s and 5s.) Next, have the class come up with ways to take control of stress factors to simplify life. Here are some suggestions:

1. *God gives you power when you make Him the first priority in your life.* When we try to run the universe, we experience stress. When we trust the outcomes to Christ, we experience what Isaiah wrote many years ago: *You will keep in perfect peace with him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you (Is 26:3).*

Reducing Stress

2. *Take goals in small bites.* At age 14, John Erskine said this about practicing the piano: *When you grow up, time won't come in long stretches. Practice in minutes, whenever you can find them—five or ten before school, after lunch, between chores. Spread the practice throughout the day and music will become a part of your life.* Erskine grew up to write *Helen of Troy* as he rode on streetcars to and from his work.

3. *Use the word NO.* We can say 'yes' to please other people—to make sure they'll like us. We people-pleasers can sniff out even the slightest hint of anger or disappointment, and this acute sense triggers a 'yes' to fend it off. Of course, there is nothing wrong in wanting to be accepted or to feel worthy. But when it gets out of balance, our need for acceptance tyrannizes us and leads us into wrong choices. We mustn't say 'yes' just to please.—Howard Macy

Less is more.
—Robert Browning

More great games for youth!

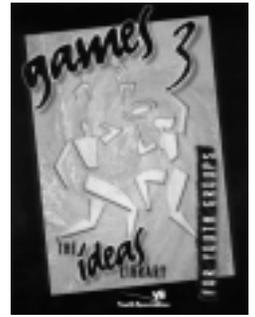
Games 3 comes through with about every game you could possible play with your youth group. The book starts off by listing the games in a table of contents and also includes an alphabetical list. Youth groups from all over the country have submitted the games, so you know that they work. I used some at our mid-week youth Bible study and they were a great success.

Another outstanding point the book offers is that it will work for any size group located anywhere. It does not matter if you are a large group looking for an outdoor game, if you are a small group looking for a game to play in the fellowship hall or you are just looking for a game to play in your living room. They are all there in a format that makes it easy to find the game, even if you are in a hurry.

Many of the games are not activities for Sabbath School. In fact, most of the games are not games I would use at church. They work really well for other occasions like Vacation Bible School or Day Camp, but many are active games that would be hard to use when kids are all dressed up for church. If you are willing to search a little or to adapt the games, then they could become acceptable during this time.

Another bit of advice I have to give is that you should be mindful of preparation time. Many of the games you find in the book require that supplies and equipment be set up. You need to plan ahead and not wait until the last minute. So if you know you need a great game, look a little ahead of time so you can have your supplies ready.

Over all I think this is an excellent book to add to your collection, especially if you already have *The Ideas Library* published by Youth Specialties. The collection is a great asset to have for youth ministry. No youth minister should be without the set!



Games 3: The Ideas Library ***Youth Specialties***

Zondervan Publishing House
Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001
US\$ 19.99

Brendon Prutzman, Youth Pastor, Spencerville SDA Church, Spencerville, Maryland



Quotes on simplicity . . .

“The greatest truths are simple—and so are the greatest men.”—*Chinese Proverb*

“Our life is frittered away by detail . . . Simplify, simplify.”—*Henry David Thoreau*

“Teach us to delight in simple things, and mirth that has no bitter springs.”—*Rudyard Kipling*

“We are not rich by what we possess but rather by what we can do without.”—*Immanuel Kant*

“To be simple is to fix one’s eye solely on the simple truth of God at a time when all concepts are being confused, distorted and turned upside down.”—*Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

“Let us cultivate the simplicity of little children. The precious Bible, the book of God, is our instructor. To all who will walk humbly with God, He will give His Holy spirit and will minister to them through the agency of Holy angels to make right impressions upon human minds.”—*Ellen White*

“The essence of life is simplicity. The great truths of live—love, forgiveness, unity, giving, are simple. Likewise, realized masters and teachers are simple, unpretentious and child-like. It is a challenge not to be overwhelmed by the multitude of choices and options that are presented to us each day. The way out lies in focusing on what is truly essential. Take a moment and ask yourself, ‘What are those simple activities—spending time with a good friend, taking a walk by the ocean, accomplishing a short-term goal—that bring me true peace and contentment? What steps can I take to reduce the clutter in my life so that I may live simply and joyously?’”—*Douglas Bloch*



A choice

Tom and Cheryl are struggling. After twenty years on the fast track of professional careers, they are strained and stressed. They face a choice—do they continue their treadmill existence or do they take the opportunity to downsize and move to a country community with the promise of a simpler lifestyle?

Simplicity! The very word rings with appeal. Trapped in a world where life's mad rush and slavery to the material dominate our agendas and control our energies, we long for something different. Finding a simpler way appeals to our confusion and seems to promise a solution to our frenetic frustration. Many are reacting to pressure and are turning to a simpler lifestyle. Is this what we mean by simplicity? Is this the solution to the challenges of a materialistic, secular culture? Surely not!

It all narrows down to the simple choice of lust versus trust—lust for material possessions and contemporary values, versus trust in God and what is His. Simplicity is not merely an exercise in self-control or restraint. It is not limiting possessions or choosing to live a simpler life, for all of this can be done from self-centered motives and selfish values. *Simplicity is a choice to follow God and allow Him to rule.*

Simplicity is the assimilation of key lordship principles into how we think and live. Let's explore simplicity in the context of our relationship with God. Simplicity is easier to *describe* than to *define*. It is a complex external expression of an internal reality. It begins in the heart, and, at the same time, builds our walk with God. True simplicity cannot come about without focusing on the heart on God. Living out simplicity in our everyday life through values and choices also strengthens our walk with God as we allow Him to be the priority focus of our lives.

Simplicity: God's Answer

It means putting God first in response to His invitation (*Mt 6:33*). It means leaving our anxiety and worry behind. *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything . . . present your requests to God (Ph 4:6).*

Simplicity is not a biblical call to escape from today's pressures. It is a call to move toward God. It is an extension of authentic Christianity as our focus on God replaces other passions and idols in our lives. The words of the classic hymn are just as true today:

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.*

A call to worship

Simplicity is a call to worship God. It begins with acknowledging Him as Owner, Redeemer, Creator and Sustainer. It means offering ourselves to Him as living sacrifices (*Rm 12:1*). It means not allowing the world to shape and control us, but allowing Him to transform us, beginning with our minds or hearts (*Rm 12:2*). We begin by accepting our identity in Christ. God rescues us from sin and leads us into an intimate partnership with Him. Every day by faith we accept the presence of His Spirit in our lives (*Gal 3:14*). Simplicity becomes a lifestyle as we walk in the Spirit. And by His Spirit, the presence of Christ dwells in our hearts (*Eph 3:16-17*). He is the primary force guiding and empowering our lives (*Ph 2:12-13*).

Oswald Chambers writes:

Simplicity is the secret to seeing things clearly. A saint does not think clearly until a long time passes, but a saint ought to see clearly without any difficulty. You cannot think through spiritual confusion to make things clear; to make things clear, you must obey. In intellectual matters you can think things out, but in spiritual matters you will only think yourself into further wandering thoughts and more confusion. If there is something in your life upon which God has put His pressure, then obey Him in that matter. Bring all your 'arguments and . . . every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ' regarding the matter, and everything will become as clear as daylight to you (2 Cor 10:5). Your reasoning capacity will come later, but reasoning is not how we see. We see like children, and when we try to be wise we see nothing (see Mt 11:25).

Even the very smallest thing we allow in our lives that is not under the control of the Holy Spirit is completely sufficient to account for spiritual confusion, and spending all of our time thinking about it will still never make it clear. Spiritual confusion can only be conquered through obedience. As soon as we obey, we have discernment. This is humiliating, because when we are confused we know that the reason lies in the state of our mind. But when our natural power of sight is devoted and submitted in obedience to the Holy Spirit, it becomes the very power by which we perceive God's will, and our entire life is kept in simplicity (My Utmost for His Highest, September 14 reading).

Simplicity becomes a discipline or choice. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, He invades the life and creates a new heart, a new mind. We are led into the discipline of putting God before material things and earthly priorities. Simplicity becomes the fruit of our walk with God and a method for integrating that walk into growing areas of life. We can now look at material possessions with new light. Surrounded by our relationship with God, we recognize that possessions are really His—we hold them in trust. As we manage His resources, we discover that material belongings are not intrinsically evil, and what we think we control ends up controlling us. We see that what we yield to God's ownership and control becomes an instrument for His glory.

Celebration of goodness

We may grow in relationship to God to the point where simplicity becomes a celebration of His goodness—recognizing God's hand in little or much. We can learn to say with Paul: *I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength (Php 4:11-13).*

Biblical simplicity is an invitation to intimacy with God—focusing on Him in such a way so that our relationship with Him will be the controlling force of our lives. His presence transforms our values and priorities, and holy simplicity becomes God's answer for the pressures and pace of contemporary life.

*'Tis a gift to be simple,
'Tis a gift to be free.
—Shaker Hymn*

Benjamin C Maxson, Director, General Conference Stewardship Department

Stewardship Window over and over again . . .

At age 36 I found the prospect of attending college intimidating. It had been eighteen years since I had graduated from high school. Our family had grown to include five healthy, active boys. We had very little money but a strong belief that God was calling us into the ministry. We followed the example of Moses for a while, reminding God of how big the problems were and how little we had to contribute to the project. However, doors started to open that only reinforced the call for us to step out in faith and to walk as far as we could see His leading. The staff at Southern Missionary College (now Southern Adventist University) were most supportive, encouraging us that if God was leading us in this direction, He surely would provide for our needs.

Several weeks before classes started, we moved into college housing, and I found a job. Soon I received a letter from the school reminding me that a \$1,000 registration fee had to be paid before I could start classes. In addition to that, four of our boys would need to be enrolled in school—three in elementary and one in academy. It didn't take a certified public accountant to figure out that my paycheck was not going to cover all of this amount.

For the next two weeks I alternated between faith and despair. I was sure that God was leading, but I couldn't see how He could accomplish this task. . . . As the deadline approached, my anxiety level increased. My wife kept reminding me that we were following God's leading while doing everything that we could, and that we could trust Him to provide whatever we needed.

Just a few days before the money was due, a letter came from a friend back home. The line I will always remember was, *God has impressed me that you needed this.* In the four years that we were in college, I experienced the same test and God's faithfulness many times. When graduation day came, we were able to leave school with no debts and a greater trust in God's leading and ability to provide. *Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths (Prov 3:5, 6).*

John Moyer, Secretary, Oklahoma Conference, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma



Not quite enough

Dr. Tony Evans, pastor of the Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship, tells an anecdote about a man who came to church one weekend looking very discouraged and sad. The pastor noticed and asked him, *Hey, what's the matter?* And the man replied, *Oh, my uncle died two weeks ago, and he left me \$75,000.*

That was mixed news, so the preacher tried to comfort him. Then the man added, *Then last week my aunt died, and she left me \$50,000.* The preacher exclaimed, *Wait a minute! I don't get it. Two weeks ago your uncle died and left you \$75,000. Then a week later your aunt died and left you another \$50,000. So why are you so sad?* The man answered, *Because this week nobody died.*

Do you ever feel like that? You get a big windfall, but it's not quite enough. Then another windfall and it still isn't enough. And you begin to feel that no matter how much you receive, it will never be enough. There can't be enough rich-uncle deaths in the family to bring you lasting joy? I've discovered that the Bible says more about coveting than I imagined. It's there in the tenth commandment, of course, but the New Testament is also rich with counsel on this hugely important topic. In the very practical book of James, we find this in chapter four: *What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want (Jm 4:1, 2).*

Psychologist Leonard Felder authored a wonderful book called, *The Ten Challenges*. He describes covetousness this way: *To covet is to yearn with so much longing that you feel you'll never be complete . . . unless you satisfy this desire.*

A simple plan

I have discovered, both through case histories and the Bible itself, that it is a fruitless quest . . . to attempt to satisfy this desire. You can't get enough things, be it money or power or trinkets and toys. The quest never ends. You may be familiar with a best selling story that came out a few years back entitled, *A Simple Plan*. There is probably no better depiction of the raw, downward spiraling power of sin . . . especially the twin sins of covetousness and greed. Several friends were hiking along in the snow and stumbled onto a half buried, crashed single engine airplane with two deceased people inside. Also at the sight was a duffel bag containing nearly four million dollars! They debated back and forth, *What do we do with this money? Do we turn it in? Do we call the police? Do we split it three ways?*

They decide to keep it: four million dollars in hard cash, probably from some drug deal cut short by the collision in the snow. One of the men went home and asked his wife a hypothetical question. You know the kind: *Honey, if we found a bunch of money, like several million dollars, what would we do with it? Would we keep it?*

Well, his wife was indignant. *No way! We'd turn it in.* That would be the only thing to do with four million hypothetical dollars. She was very sure of herself and her conscience convicted her. He then pointed to the kitchen table and the duffel bag. There are four million real dollars in that bag. Forty thousand hundred dollar bills.

And do you know what she did? Instantly she inquired, *Where can we hide the money? How long do we have to keep it in the attic? Why do we have to split it three ways?*

As the story is told, greed asserts itself instantly. *I want that money. I need it. I deserve it. My life, which was fine ten seconds ago, would be unthinkable if I couldn't keep that money.* The whole story is one wrenching portrayal of the power of sin. People end up dead before it's over; and several lives are destroyed by the overwhelming grip of covetousness.

Pride means enmity

It's no wonder that Paul exalts the standard in his letter to the Christians living in Ephesus: *But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people.* Did you notice? He says, *not even a hint of greed?* It's God ideal that this deadly temptation should be completely foreign to His people. But the difficult thing

A Simple Plan

Scripture Reading

Philippians 1:21

Suggested Hymn

My Faith Looks Up to Thee

(Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal #246)

is that, instead of being foreign to us, greed and covetousness seem to be built in to our systems. It's like that little musical theme that plays when your computer starts up.

There is a direct-to-the-heart essay written years ago by C. S. Lewis in his book, *Mere Christianity*. In it Lewis suggests that our covetousness all boils down to pride. We want what our neighbor has because we're proud. We covet things that aren't ours because of how we believe they will make us feel and because we believe we are more important than our neighbor—especially if we can secure things by taking them from him. And of course, pride involves not trusting God nor being thankful for the things He has chosen to give us. In fact, as Lewis puts it, pride actually proclaims a declaration of war on God and His ideals and plans for us. *Pride always means enmity*, he writes. It is enmity. And not only enmity between man and man, but enmity between man and God.

But then he goes on to paint a picture of possibilities. Could we simply abandon the chase for things, for feeding and stroking our egos? Could we possibly just step off the roller coaster of desire, of wanting more and more blow-up toys and patronizing friends? It is as if there is a diving board out there called self . . . and we're invited to simply jump off that board and trust in God alone for our being, for our identity, for our very lives. Here's how Lewis puts it:

If you really get into any kind of touch with Him you will, in fact, be humble, delightedly humble, feeling the infinite relief of having for once got rid of all the silly nonsense about your own dignity which has made you restless and unhappy all your life. He is trying to make you humble in order to make this moment possible: trying to take off a lot of silly, ugly, fancy dress in which we have all got ourselves up and are strutting about like the little idiots we are.

Leaping off

Maybe the apostle Paul had some of this strutting about persona back when he was still Saul, the ambitious persecutor. Saul was zealous to throw Christians in jail. He loved to push his way around, make himself feel important by locking up people who seemed to have something he didn't have. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, a group that was fixated on position, power and upward mobility.

And then Saul took that leap of faith. Right off the diving board. I'm willing to be a fool for Christ, he wrote later. If I'm rich or poor it's okay. If I'm well fed or hungry. If I'm free or in prison. It didn't matter anymore. His identity was in Jesus Christ. *For to me, to live is Christ*, he wrote (*Php 1:21*). And you can tell that he means it. The chase is finally over. The endless pursuit of personal glory, over. The ego and built-up sense of self-worth from your own résumé, over.

And you know, friend, this leap off the diving board has to happen 365 times a year. Maybe 365 times a day as well. In a later chapter of *Mere Christianity*, Lewis comes back to this very question: *The terrible thing, the almost impossible thing, he writes, is to hand over your whole self, all your wishes and precautions, to Christ. But it is far easier than what we are all trying to do instead. . . . The . . . real problem of the Christian life . . . comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals.*

That's true, isn't it? Climb the ladder! Lift yourself up! Knock your enemy down! Go! Go! Go! Try to find an airplane with four million dollars in it so that you can wear the millionaire tag on the lapel of your Armani suit for a few years before they bury you in that suit. These desires, these selfish, self-centered thoughts and aspirations rush at us like wolves every single morning, the minute the alarm clock goes off.

So what's the answer? Here's the rest of Lewis' suggestion: *The first job each morning consists in simply shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. And so on, all day. Standing back from your natural fussings and frettings; coming in out of the wind.* If I may borrow the title, it really is, *A Simple Plan!*

*Besides the noble art
of getting things done,
There is the noble art
of leaving things undone.
The wisdom of life consists
in the elimination of
non-essentials.*

—Lin Yutang



Path to Freedom

Introduction

Self-discipline is not a popular subject. It has all the appeal of doing budgets or schedules or anything else we've put aside for later. We just cannot think about these things without experiencing anxiety. Self-discipline is not a fun topic. And yet, it is the path to freedom. We can never be the person God wants us to be without it.

Now there are areas in our lives in which we do exercise self-discipline. We get up in the morning—even when we may not feel like it. We may not bounce out of bed at the time we know we should get up, but we do get up. Some of us do some of the things we know we should do around the house on weekends. These disciplines we exercise based on habits, often begun in childhood. Perhaps we feel we have no choice. But we can move beyond just doing those things which others require or which are mandated by ingrained habit. We can decide in advance what we will do, and then design a learning process to develop the necessary discipline. And it will not be nearly as painful as we might think.

Gaining control

First we need to examine what self-discipline is. Let's define it as having control of one's own actions or emotions. That means our objective is to gain control of what we do and how we feel. Can we just decide to gain control and do it? I think not. It is true that some people seem naturally disciplined. Perhaps early conditioning makes it easier for them. Nevertheless, everyone begins with a decision. Putting that decision into practice builds the habit or routine of being disciplined. So the first step toward self-discipline is a decision. Once the decision is made, there is still plenty to be done. But until it is made, there's very little else that can be done. Making that decision is really the most difficult part.

Finding God's direction

It is impossible for a Christian to look at the matter of self-discipline without realizing that the word *self* is really a contradiction. Ideally there should be no such thing as self-discipline. God, through the empowering of the Holy Spirit, first provides us with the insight and then the ability to do what He wants us to do. It is up to us to recognize and then accept that direction. It is there for the asking. In fact, often we need not consciously ask for it. God graciously provides it, if we are listening. So let's begin to think in terms of God-directed discipline.

We must first desire God-directed discipline and want to do the things God wants us to do. Sometimes this desire just seems to come naturally to Christians. In other cases we struggle. If you are struggling, be sure that you have specifically asked God to give you the desire to be obedient to Him.

Next, we must position ourselves so that God can provide us ongoing direction. That means spending sufficient time with Him on a regular basis. The reason for this is two-fold. We need to be available to hear Him when He has something to say. And we need the assurance that if we have not heard from Him, He has not had anything to say. We need the ongoing motivation and encouragement to continue to walk with Him even when we do not feel His presence in the process. Sometimes we cannot sense God's presence. But if we know that we have spent time with God, seeking His direction, it is a lot easier to keep on keeping on even when we do not yet have the answers we are seeking.

Beginning to exercise discipline

We want God-directed discipline. However, as important as it is to ensure that we are in line with God's will, it is also important to get started somewhere. How many Christians do you know who never seem to get far enough to give God anything to direct at all? If you have sought God's direction and are still unsure where He wants you to begin to exercise self-discipline, you may need to simply begin in the most obvious place. There is more than one way to determine what God wants you to do.

An example is your physical well-being. Have you made it a practice to get a physical exam periodically? If so, have you followed your doctor's advice

Scripture Reading

Galatians 5:13, 14

Suggested Hymn

Oh Master, Let Me Walk With Thee
(Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal #346)

regarding weight, diet and exercise? What about your relationships? Have you exercised the discipline to uphold your family responsibilities? What about your job? Are you well enough organized to please your employer and the Lord? What about your responsibilities within your church? Any room for improvement there?

. . . Usually the problem is not in identifying the one area which requires discipline—it is getting started on just *one* of any number of areas. If you are having trouble choosing a starting point, try this: make a list of several areas you need to work on. Then pick the one that will relieve you of the most pressure. Carve out some time to decide the best approach. For instance, if you need more physical exercise, you might sign up for a weightlifting course. You could choose swimming or golf. The idea is to begin somewhere, anywhere, but start.

Honoring God

Self-discipline can be seen from at least three perspectives: God's, ours and others. The way we conduct ourselves is very, very important. When we project an image inconsistent with the image God wants us to project, we run the risk of damaging God's reputation. Of course, God is perfectly capable of taking care of his own reputation. However, when He has to overcome our poor witness in the process, we may suffer some consequences.

I find it difficult to discipline myself to see only movies that are totally pleasing to the Lord. I just love action movies. The problem is that there are very few action movies that are acceptable. Most have offensive language or excessive violence or sex. However, if I do not exercise discipline, I am being disobedient. Worse yet, weaker Christians who see me attending a particular movie may believe that it is acceptable. It is one thing for me to be disobedient, and quite another to be responsible for leading others where God does not want them to go. . . .

It is bad enough to set a poor example for Christians. It is much worse to have unbelievers who know us as Christians observe our lack of discipline. I have to struggle to keep my mouth shut when a stranger does something stupid like blocking me in the parking lot. And for me it really is just a matter of discipline. I do not lose my temper or have an irresistible urge to kill. I just like to correct stupid people. Well, I did that the other day, and a member of my church was there watching me give such a wonderful witness. To top it off, one of the people I was correcting was not even guilty of the error I was accusing them of.

Putting discipline into practice

There are some practical steps we can take to overcome lack of self-discipline. The most effective thing we can do is to pray regularly and consistently for God's help in this area. . . . We must also establish habits and routines that support the discipline we are seeking. We must root out procrastination, overcommitment and lack of punctuality because they hinder self-discipline.

You can approach self-discipline from the positive side. If your problem is watching too much television, plan other activities for some of that TV time. Maybe you can catch up on household projects you have been putting off. List the projects, prioritize them, then do them. You will soon wonder how you ever found time to watch. In fact, you may find that you are completely weaned from TV!

Rather than giving something up that you want to do, concentrate on doing something that you know is a better use of your time. This approach can apply to all areas of your life. You need not consciously decide that you will never again watch television; but decide that for the next while you will set it aside in favor of something you know you should do. After a while, you may discover that it was not as much fun as you thought. Of course, you always have the option of returning to the original routine.

Another effective technique for establishing discipline in an area is to work with someone else. This adds the element of accountability. If you can build self-discipline with someone you enjoy being with, so much the better. Start today as God directs you to gain control of your life by exercising self-discipline. It is a step toward freedom which can bless you and honor the Lord.

Another difficult area for me is my diet. I am blessed with a high metabolism, and I do not have a serious weight problem. But that is a blessing and a curse. Since it does not show, I do not have much natural incentive to eat the things I should and avoid the things I should not. I know there are natural as well as spiritual consequences to my disobedience, but so far I have made precious little progress. When I am in the company of others who may struggle even harder to discipline their eating, I know I tempt them to sin through my bad example.



No longer of value

I once took advantage of my wife's absence to make a couple of trips to the landfill. In the past my life had been rather simple. I had a formula: take care of what you have and when it is broken, used up, or of no value, then throw it away. Then I got married, and the formula changed: take care of what you have until it is broken or useless to you or anyone else, and then store it in the garage.

So I went to the landfill. In my opinion what I threw away was useless. There were boxes, the bottoms of which had rotted out. . . . There was some bad birdseed. (At least, I assumed it was bad. I had planted some of it three times, and no birds ever came up. So I tossed it.) This is a common drama in everybody's house. . . . Things get used up. . . . Things get broken, are no longer of any value and they have to be disposed of. But once in a while, just once in a while, there is a case of somebody throwing away that which is very valuable. Something very good gets tossed.

I am not talking about careless families, families that are full of waste and indifference toward the things they have because they have more than they can use and so just scatter it everywhere. I'm talking about those rare occasions when something good and valuable is thrown away. You can think of such times. They do not occur very often. Suppose a man in a very expensive suit sees a child drowning. He goes into the water. He can't swim with all that on so he removes his valuable suit to rescue the child. The suit is still good, but compared to the life of the child? He throws the suit away.

Imagine pioneers moving West, trying to get to California and Oregon. They come to the Rocky Mountains and snow begins to fall. Those Conestoga wagons are heavy—squeaking wheels straining, horses pulling; they can go no further. They go up as high as they can . . . and the leader says, *We're going to have to unburden some on the wagons.* Children are crying; parents are crying; but over into the rocks and ravine go furniture, chests of precious things, a piano. The group cannot go on if they hold on to these things. Even in the Bible I have read of ships at sea

Throwing Away Good Stuff

tossed by storms that had to unburden themselves of precious cargo . . . all kinds of good things tossed away. It's a matter of life and death. In view of the crisis, even that which is good has to go.

An exception

It is very likely that no such occasion will arise in your life. This is more the stuff of novels and movies. Interesting and moving, but so what? Well, even though it is rare and may never happen to you, I still feel I ought to share with you a case of someone who tossed away what was extremely valuable.

His name was Paul. He said when he wrote to his friends in Philippi, *If I were to enter a bragging contest, I would win. Not for what I have, I'm not a wealthy man, but for who I am. My identity, genealogy, my family tree, my connections, my standing in the community—I can win any bragging contest. I want you to know I am a Jew—a member of the House of Israel. I am proud of that. We have been mistreated severely. . . . But I remind you that we have clung to faith in God. We have kept the light on when darkness was everywhere. We have given the world the basis for all moral and ethical standards—the Ten Commandments, and we have contributed the writings that have shaped three of the great religions in the world: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. I'm proud of that.*

In some places it is very popular to join a synagogue if you fall out with your church. . . . Paul said, *Not me. . . . I was born a Jew. I was circumcised on the eighth day of my life. My family, Benjamin, the smallest tribe, did not amount to much in a lot of people's eyes, but God has always used the smallest, the weakest . . . to accomplish what He wants to do. Did you know that my tribe gave Israel its first king, Saul? I am named for him, you know—Saul of Tarsus. And I am proud of that.*

My denomination? Pharisee. . . . I am proud to be a Pharisee. Being one simply means that we believe in and follow the Bible. When the Temple was destroyed, we built a substitute called the synagogue. We are zealous about the synagogue. We establish synagogues everywhere we go. But one thing that we hold at the center is how important it is to know, to listen to and to obey the scripture. I am proud of that. As for myself, I have

Scripture Reading

Philippians 3:12-14

Suggested Hymn

Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee
(Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal #158)

kept true to the scripture. You can ask my teachers. I outstripped all my classmates in zeal for the scripture. . . . I live by the Book. I am proud of that. In fact, I am so conscientious about it that I have a passion against anybody who weakens or distorts the scripture or trades it for something else. I cannot stand it. . . . If I went into a bragging contest, I would beat out everybody. My standing, my character, my genealogy are all unsurpassed!

And yet Paul said *I count all this as garbage. I've tossed it. I took it to the dump.* Why? We do not have a story here of a man who regrets his past, who is . . . burdened with guilt . . . saying, *Oh what am I going to do?* No. This is not about guilt. All of his zeal and achievements are good. It is not a case of a new Christian being asked to give up terrible old habits. *If you're going to be a Christian, they say, You've got to give up those bad habits and clean up your language, quit beating on your kids, be nice to your wife and quit all the ugly things you've done. You've got to lay them down and come to Jesus.* While that may be true, we are talking about a man who said that if anyone reviewed his past before he came to Christ, one would find only good stuff. *Nevertheless, said Paul, I took it to the dump.*

Why? Was the church an occasion for some sort of upward mobility? Did Paul say, *Well, looks like everybody who is anybody is joining the church. I might as well switch my membership? . . .* No! Then why did he do it? He did not have to do it. Every church that ever existed would have been glad to have him. He is the kind of folk we need in the church—good, clean, upright, honest, productive, love the Bible, follow the Ten Commandments kind of folks. . . . He does not have to do all this tossing of his past. Just add Jesus and join the church—that would have sufficed. In fact, Paul could have done what some other people do: join the church and . . . choose the parts you like. Come now and then, give a little now and then, do a little now and then, and maybe serve on a committee now and then. And now and then you die and now and then you go to heaven. Maybe. There are many people who do that. Paul could have done that. . . . Yet he threw it all away.

Why would Paul throw away what he has just called good? This man believed that Jesus Christ was with God but that he did not count being equal to God something to covet or grasp. Instead, Jesus emptied himself, became a human being and was obedient to the hour of death, even death on a cross. That is what Christ is like, not upward mobility but downward mobility. He came from God's presence, from all that was so good. He came from . . . the throne, from glory, from the angels, from the praise . . . but he tossed it and became a human being like you and me, obedient even to death. Paul says, *How can I, how can anyone, claim to be a follower of that man and still seek upward mobility? How can I tack Christianity around the edges but keep my life intact when this new faith is in the name of Jesus, who gave it all up, took it to the heavenly dump, and came down and became a servant?*

Still running

. . . . Paul thought, if you are going to be a Christian, then you should be like Jesus. So then, what do you do with your pride? What do you do with your own agenda? . . . Your own selfishness? . . . You take it to the dump in order that you might be like him. This unusual man Paul had the idea that the ideal Christian life would be to be like Jesus: to love, to care, to give, to serve, to suffer and to sacrifice like he did. *I am not there yet, he said, I do not mean for you to get the idea, he protested, that I have arrived, that I have attained my goal. Oh, no. But I'll tell you this: being like Jesus is the one thing on my mind. I'm running toward this. I'm running toward this, temples pounding, heart pumping, bones breaking, muscles aching, face swearing, running. If I could just be like Jesus.*

I know Paul is unusual. You may never in your lifetime meet anybody who takes Jesus that seriously. But I felt obligated to bring it up to you today, because once in a while when somebody does, I had the feeling it might be you.

*I thank thee Father, Lord
of heaven and earth,
because thou has hid these
things from the wise
and prudent and hast
revealed them unto babes.
—Jesus Christ*



Introduction

Christians today are called to live in a world that listens to the voices of profits and prophets. One promises immediate satisfaction to an individual or corporation, the other, taking a larger scope and value looks to the betterment of others.

Profit or prophet? Which voice speaks with more conviction for you? Which is the voice of scripture?

Now lest you make the mistake of many and think that the prophetic voice of scripture has to do only with the future and apocalyptic images of beasts and dragons, let me point out that the prophetic voice of scripture speaks more about how to live now than it does the future.

As Christians we are called to have a prophetic voice, one that challenges the routine perspective of society. One that dares to ask Why, or why not of the behaviors of our modern day. A voice that dares to make a mind think, that speaks of the fundamental worth of humankind, a voice that speaks to and for our brothers and sisters around the world who have no voice.

Sent by God

In the Old Testament it was the prophet sent by God who interrupted the lives of the people in the midst of their misguided ways. Lives that were perhaps lived faithfully to what they believed true, but misguided nonetheless. It was the prophet who invited them to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God.

It was the prophet who dared to call evil by its right name, resisting the temptation to explain it or sooth it away. It was the prophet whom the people killed, for few like to hear of the need for reformation and change.

Prophet killing

So too, we kill the prophets today. We call them extremist or radicals as those in the Sierra Club or Green Peace were called until the environment became a politically viable platform, or even good marketing. Yet today in the midst of energy shortages the lure of corporate profit struggles with the prophetic voice that calls for responsible stewardship.

Profit or Prophet?

Fundamental to this struggle are the values upon which they are based. Profit is about power, gain and responsible investment return for shareholders, retirement plans and the like. Prophet is about doing what is right regardless of who benefits, but intentionally to benefit all.

Profit has unfortunately seen the end as justifying the means. Examples are many: tobacco industry hiring scientists to deny the toxic nature of cigarettes; major sugar producers holding lands in third world countries preventing indigenous agricultural development, further impoverishing the people. Unfortunately even the church throughout the ages has been guilty of letting the ends justify the means...think of the crusades.

Enough is enough

But before you feel indignant, think about this: corporations focusing on profit, are vital to our world's development. The question of how development differs from exploitation is dependant upon our societal values and principles. As long as we choose sports utility vehicles over the diminishing supplies of energy, as long as we choose to demand continuous short-term profits we will have short-term exploitation. After all, everyone enjoyed the soaring stock market didn't they?

How high must the standards of living be before we can say enough is enough? It is the prophetic voice that has been muted by the explosion of wealth, power and success. The prophetic voice that calls us to values that includes the well-being of others, including planet earth, is muted by the turmoil of modern priorities and values.

Scripture Reading

Matthew 23:11,12

Suggested Hymn

O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go
(Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal #145)

Gordon Dahl describes it this way: *Most . . . tend to worship their work, work at their play and play at their worship.* Think about it. We worship our work, which for most of us is the source of our identity. We then find ourselves becoming weekend warriors—working at our play with an intensity that challenges the idea of play, struggling as a broken people to further prove ourselves. And then we play at our worship, for God has become just another good-luck charm on the bracelet of life. Dahl goes on to say, *The result of all this is that our meanings and values are distorted. Our relationships are disintegrating faster than they can be repaired. And our lifestyles resemble a cast of Hollywood actors in search of a plot.*

How are you doing?

In the New Testament, Jesus spoke of money more than anything else except the kingdom of God. He spoke of it as being both dark and sinister, as being that which controls and yet he also spoke of it as a blessing. He ate with the rich and the powerful, the poor and the powerless alike. It is in all that He said and did that we are to see that we are invited to regard and experience money not as master but as servant. To relate to it as prophet not profit. As one submitting all that I have to the will of the Father. Ultimately all business is His business.

So how are you doing as you listen to profit and prophet? I express my kingdom priorities best through the two books that I write every day, books of values that record how I spend my time and my money. The challenge I face is to ensure that my values and priorities are aligned with those of the kingdom, with the prophets of God, not the profits of man.

*Certitude. Certitude.
Feeling. Joy. Peace.
Forgetfulness of the world
and of everything, except
God. . Joy, joy, joy,
Tears of joy.
—Blaise Pascal*

Book Reviews



The Divine Intruder

by James R Edwards
NavPress
Colorado Springs, Colorado, 2000
US\$ 10.00

Slow Down and Simplify

by Beverly Graham Stickle
Pacific Press
Nampa, Idaho, 1998
US\$ 10.99

This exciting book explores ways in which God intrudes into our lives. Edwards uses different Bible characters and stories in a series of conversations to demonstrate the ways in which God breaks into our world to touch us. The overall theme is that God does not draw us up to Him, nor does He expect us to use our abilities to seek and find Him. Instead, He joins us where we are, in the details and struggles of real life.

Edwards also uses examples and illustrations from contemporary life to demonstrate ways in which God intervenes and seeks us. The author takes us back to the reality of our total dependence upon God. *Human inadequacy and weakness make obvious our need of God and make us more open to God. The success of the call is not in our abilities, but in our dependence on God* (p 67).

Grace is a crucial component of God's intervention in our lives. *God is in the business of transforming what is, into what might be. Censure does not achieve that transformation, but solidarity and affirmation do. That is why God comes to us in our deepest troughs and needs with his forgiving and saving presence rather than with condemning judgment. At the point where we are most vulnerable and alone, God says, 'I am with you'* (p 79).

One of the author's strong contributions is in the area of discipleship. *The great irony of discipleship is that God must first make us weak in order to use us* (p 85). These moments of weakness make clear our need and dependence upon God. It is during these moments that we become open and responsive to God's invasion of our lives. Then God uses us in ways that we cannot anticipate. *God makes us weak so that we may be serviceable to his kingdom. God makes of us what we could not imagine; he assigns us to posts that we would never choose. He does this not to inflict pain on his servants, but to use them for greater purposes than they are capable of on their own. It is a divine mystery, like pruning: God cuts away so that something greater may appear* (p 136).

This is a powerful book that helps make God real in our lives. It assists us in understanding how God can break through—how He can become more real in what we do and say.

Benjamin C Maxson, Director, General Conference Stewardship Department

In her book, *Slow Down and Simplify*, Beverly Graham Stickle begins by saying, *I think Jesus was thinking of people who need to slow down or simplify their lives when He mentioned people being 'choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life' (Lk 8:14 KJV). He knew most of us could benefit from making our lives less complicated (Slow Down and Simplify, p 12).* And thus she begins a journey to help her readers in the challenge to simplify life.

The tips in her book are based on interviews the author conducted involving over 200 "experts" who were just regular people struggling for control in their very busy schedules. Stickle points out that making life easier means different things to different people. The plan you choose needs to fit you.

Chapters deal with topics like, setting limits on others' expectations; controlling paper in your life; what to do with *stuff*—control clutter; easier homemaking, using technology wisely and many more.

Some tips include: 1) Don't answer the phone. Instead, use your answering machine as a private secretary. 2) Make the most of your personal computer. Stay in touch with treasured friends through e-mail; use software to balance your checkbook. 3) Learn to say *No* and prioritize your activities, leaving important chunks of time for church and family.

There are 38 concise chapters consisting of a few pages each. The book is full of ideas. Because of the nature of her research, the book's strength—loads and loads of tips—is also its weakness. Ideas are often at opposite poles and that is understandable because the work is based on interviews. But if you keep the basis of the book in mind, you're bound to find lots of ideas to help in your journey to gain more perspective, *rediscover God's promise of peace*, and find time for the things in life that really matter!

Claire L. Eva, Assistant Director, General Conference Stewardship Department

Richard Foster, author of a classic in spirituality—*Celebration of Discipline*, revisits us with the theme of simplicity in his 224 page volume, *Freedom of Simplicity*. We live in a world that is marked by busyness, materialism and the sheer complexity of things. Everything we face confronts us with a complexity of life that leaves us frustrated, stretched and straining.

Foster deals with the complexity of simplicity and its reality and impact. It becomes an inward reality before it becomes an outward lifestyle. Too often we focus on coercing individuals to external simplicity without empowering them with the internal reality which is needed. *The outer expression of simplicity must flow from the inner resources. It is learning to walk in the Spirit that builds the life of purity, unity and grace. There is an inwardness that is central to our task; without it all is lost. We delude ourselves, however, if we think we can possess the inner reality of simplicity without its having a profound effect upon the way we live . . . (p 9).*

This book also highlights that simplicity as a discipline is part of the greater whole of the Christian life and devotion to God. It serves as both cause and effect. The integrated walk with God will lead us to simplicity, and simplicity will enhance our relationship with God.

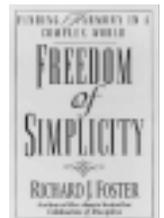
Foster develops the foundations for simplicity from its biblical roots and the historical heritage of the church. Then he moves into the practice of simplicity. He presents practical steps for inward simplicity before moving on to application of outward simplicity.

In this latter section, Foster develops biblical concepts for financial discipleship that are practical and productive. However, Foster falls short when dealing with the subject of tithe in both the New and Old Testaments. He does not communicate the deeper meaning of tithe as a sign of loyalty and an as an extension of our walk with God. Instead he sees tithe as too small a sign when compared to the radical attitude of freedom from the tyranny of possessions as demonstrated in the New Testament models for giving.

The book concludes by exploring the concept of corporate simplicity. The practice of our walk with God cannot be isolated by our individuality. We are part of a greater whole, and the application of simplicity carries over to the church and our interaction with the world.

This work is foundational and crucial for maturing discipleship in God's church. *The Spiritual Disciplines (of which simplicity is a vital part) are the conduit through which our obedience flows; they are visible ways by which we express our discipleship. And more importantly, they set us before God in such a way that we can be transformed and conformed to the way of Christ . . . Nothing is more clear than that Jesus Christ walked in a well-nigh amazing simplicity of life. He was centered in God and had a transparency toward God that ordered everything. Simplicity is part of what it means to be a follower of Christ (p 184).*

*God is in the business of
transforming what is,
into what might be.
Censure does not achieve
that transformation, but
solidarity and
affirmation do.
—James R Edwards*



Freedom of Simplicity

by Richard J Foster
Harper and Row
San Francisco, California, 1998
US\$ 6.50

A few weeks ago, I received an e-mail announcing a new stewardship website. I was pleased with what I found and wish to share it with you.

thegoodsteward.com is a source of information of all areas of stewardship. It is constantly growing and is dedicated to helping *you become a better steward of the time, energy and resources God has entrusted to you.*

thegoodsteward.com is a ministry program produced by Wall Watchers, an organization that promotes biblical principles of stewardship. The website offers educational materials in some of the following areas: Biblical Principles, Life Stewardship (health, spiritual issues, talents, time management, relationships), The Environment (ecology, conservation, recycling, environmental management), Financial Matters (budgeting, saving, investing, taxes, insurance, estate planning), and Giving Wisely (tithing, responsible giving). You will note that one of the sermons in this issue of *Dynamic Steward* comes from thegoodsteward.com. Have a good look. It's an excellent resource!

Editorial

The topic of simplicity is in vogue today. There are numerous books published from various perspectives on this theme. I recently purchased a set of audio tapes on the subject—knowing it to be an upcoming topic for *Dynamic Steward*, true, but also longing to hear something that would help me simplify my life.

Who of us does not want a simpler life? One of my favorite books of all time is *The Gift of the Deer*, by Helen and Adrian Hoover. It is still getting rave reviews! This true story is about a middle-aged writer-illustrator couple who leave their successful city careers and move to a remote lakeshore log cabin home in the North wood country of Minnesota. They are visited by an injured stag, whom they name Peter. Helen and Adrian feed their new friend and continue to nurture the family he brings along as they spend their later years subsisting in a challenging but beautiful new world!

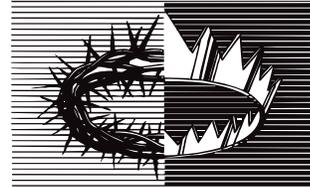
How does one simplify his or her life? In his book, *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard J. Foster says: *Simplicity is freedom. Duplicity is bondage. Simplicity brings joy and balance. Duplicity brings anxiety and fear. . . . The Christian Discipline of simplicity is an inward reality that results in and outward life-style.*

My audio tapes repeatedly reminded me that simplicity cannot exist without discipline. If I want to begin with a slow, uncomplicated morning, I cannot stay up late and mistreat my body. Ken Smith's article tells me again of the important link between simplicity, freedom and discipline. In his sermon, *Throwing Away Good Stuff*, Fred Craddock complements these authors by highlighting an important aspect of Christian simplicity which Foster illuminates: *The central point for the Discipline of simplicity is to seek the kingdom of God and the righteousness of his kingdom 'first' and then everything necessary will come in its proper order (Celebration of Discipline, p 86).*

Freedom from anxiety, states Foster, *is characterized by three inner attitudes. If what we have we receive as a gift, and if what we have is to be cared for by God, and if what we have is available to others, then we will possess freedom from anxiety. This is the inward reality of simplicity (Ibid, p 88).*

To be simple is to fix one's eye solely on the simple truth of God at a time when all concepts are being confused, distorted and turned upside down (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p 68). Consider the lilies . . . said Jesus. He simply asks us to choose *the better part (Mt 6:29; Lk 10:42)*. If our focus is centered on Him—one Kingdom, one Savior, one Lord—the clutter will fall away!

Claire L Eva, Assistant Director, General Conference Stewardship Department



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