

September Book Summary

Freedom of Simplicity

Richard J. Foster, Harper One, 1981/2005, \$13.99, 254pp.

By Dan Brent

Life tends to get “strained, hurried, breathless”. We suffer from “technocratic obesity”. The cure, the author suggests, is in simplicity which is both a grace and a discipline. “It is learning to walk in the Spirit” which manifests itself in an outward lifestyle, lived with a carefree spirit of unconcern.

The book begins with the insights of the Old Testament. Creation is God’s; all we have is derived, God’s gift. “Simplicity means a return to the posture of dependence.” (p.19) God wants us to replace greed and covetousness with a spirit of compassion and outreach, sensitivity and trust. The sojourner, the fatherless, the widow were everyone’s responsibility. Hosea tells God’s people to “do justice, love kindly, and walk humbly with your God.”

In the New Testament, Jesus claims as his favorites the poor, the sick, the victims of society, and the sinners. And he warns about the dangers of wealth. “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth.” Instead, “blessed are you poor in spirit.” The early church wrestled with the implications of his mandates. The Jerusalem community even tried communism. The norm for generosity was set by the needs of others. “The tithe simply is not a sufficiently radical concept to embody the carefree unconcern for possessions that marks life in the kingdom of God.” (p.58)

Foster moves on to the lives of the saints. The desert fathers and mothers fled to escape the busy-ness of acquiring possessions and honors. St. Francis walked naked away from his family wealth. Calvin explored the political implications of Jesus’ call for justice and service. The Quakers still make a major point of keeping life’s trappings simple. Kierkegaard urges focus on single-mindedly choosing God – an early version of the “What would Jesus do” approach to decisions.

The book moves on to the *so-what* part. Foster writes about the “divine center” where God preoccupies our thoughts and life becomes simple because it has one focus. No matter how many responsibilities we have, if we tackle them with a mind-set of obedience to God, our lives take on a “refreshing balance”. “Once we have understood the mind of the Father, we can speak our yes or no with confidence.” (p.97) “One of the most profound effects of inward simplicity is the rise of an amazing spirit of contentment.” (p.103) He quotes John D. Rockefeller’s response to the question about how much is enough: “Just a little bit more!”

Foster encourages the cultivation of silence. “Don’t just do something; stand there!” (p.106) He recommends creating space for silence by logging your activity for a time. Then sort out the activities into what’s essential or important and what’s not. “We could cut out a great deal of our activity and not seriously affect our productivity.” (p.109)

Expenses too. The book encourages doing a family budget and sticking to it. “Always there seems to be more month than money.” (p.140) He suggests that we revolt against television, advertising, junk mail, and impulse buying. “To acquire an unneeded item at a ridiculously low price is no bargain.” For recreation try music, art, books, travel, prayer. “The fruit of the Spirit is not push, drive, grasp, and trample. Happiness is not a right to be grasped, but a serendipity to be enjoyed.” (p.146)

The book offers a plethora of ideas for consideration. Many sound over the top – but the author is serious and obviously his own family has adopted some of the practices. Fast: find unique ways to share, cut back on television and telephone time, volunteer. Give away money and things; for our own sakes – not just for the recipients. Foster tells the story of a wealthy woman who wanted to enter the Koinonia Farm in Georgia. She was told to first get rid of her wealth. She asked, “Like how?” and was told that for all they cared she could throw it over a bridge!

Take more time with the kids. We must take care, he says, not to imprison our children in ghettos of affluence. To get perspective, write a money autobiography: what is my history of having and dealing with money? Enjoy things without owning them: parks, beaches, libraries.

The simplicity mind-set must carry over into our institutions as well. Our prayer must impact our activity. (“Martha and Mary were sisters!”) The churches must address social issues. We must learn to see our own work as service. Challenge our own motives for starting or stopping projects and programs. Seek out “the help and counsel of those who are endowed by God with the spiritual gifts of discernment and wisdom.” (p.186)

Remember, Mary exclaimed to Gabriel, “God has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.” This was, Foster reminds us, an unmarried, pregnant teenager in a subordinated culture on the margins of world politics. (p.203) Meanwhile our country is the leader in a lifestyle of consumption that is unsustainable by the world’s resources. It’s a national, even world, issue but we can start with our own lives. The author says that the “I shop, therefore I am” lifestyle is “one of the principalities and powers we need to challenge.” (p.215) Businesses and governments need to learn similar disciplines.

We are called to do all of this because “Simplicity is part and parcel of our call to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.” (p.231)