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DISCERNMENT

Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Simplicity and the Sermon on the Mount

Falon Opsahl Barton

Abstract: Jesus lived a life of simplicity in his possessions and his purpose. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus invites his disciples, then and now, into a similar life of simplicity that is fully focused on God alone to make whole our relationships with God, ourselves, each other, and creation. This article claims that simplicity is a primary theme of Jesus' longest discourse, and that Jesus' simplicity is not self-focused, but rather benefits all humanity and all creation. This article exegetes Matthew 6:25-34 specifically, and draws out some of the theological and missional implications of Jesus's model of simplicity. It lastly explains how Jesus' model of simplicity is worshipful, communal, complex, harmonious, and liberating.

The four gospels tell the story of a prophet and a Messiah who is characterized by simplicity. Jesus practices simplicity in every facet of his life: His possessions are few, his purpose is focused, his relationships are deep, and his faith is clear. His teachings match his example, and he invites his disciples into a similar simplicity that hones their devotion to God and God's mission in the world. This simplicity ultimately strengthens each disciple's relationship with God, themselves, others, and creation as a whole.

This article explores Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, especially Matthew 6:25-34, through the lens of simplicity. It then offers a synthesis of the five qualities that seem to characterize simplicity as Jesus models it.

Jesus' Invitation to Simplicity in the Sermon on the Mount, with a Special Emphasis on Matthew 6:25-34

Simplicity characterizes Jesus' teachings. Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' longest recorded discourse and a "peak event" in the redemptive work and ministry of Jesus.¹ Through the Sermon, Jesus reinterprets the instructions of the Hebrew Bible and

¹ Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 209.

sheds light on the eschatological significance of his own arrival.² Amos Oei observes that “the Sermon has been considered the epitome of Jesus’ ethical teaching and therefore, for many, the essence of Christian morality.”³ Through this three-chapter discourse, Jesus explicitly invites his followers into the life of holistic simplicity that he models for them. *Simplicity* is defined here as “wholeness,” “completeness,” and “singular devotion.”⁴

According to the Sermon on the Mount, being a disciple of Jesus means being totally focused on God alone.⁵ The simplicity of the disciple does not emerge from mere willpower; it is modeled after and strengthened by the simplicity of God. Just as God is indivisible, the disciple’s mind, heart, soul, body, and attention are also indivisible, wholly aimed at God.⁶ The formation of the disciple’s life and character into one of simplicity ties together all of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus calls us to practice holistic simplicity as an expression of righteousness and faithfulness to God.⁷ This includes simplicity in our hearts (5:21-32),⁸ simplicity in our words (5:33-37),⁹ simplicity in our religious practices—including giving, praying, and fasting (6:1-18)¹⁰—and simplicity in our material possessions (6:19-24). Even the “beauty and simplicity of the language Jesus uses” throughout the Sermon draws attention to the overarching theme of simplicity.¹¹ Combined, the ways Jesus addresses and models simplicity in the Sermon on the Mount calls

² Francois Viljoen, *The Torah in Matthew*, vol. 9, *Theology in Africa*, ed. Jan Van der Watt (Zürich: Lit Verlag, 2018), 349; Antonia Gorman, “Eschatology,” in *The Spirit of Sustainability*, vol. 1, *Berkshire Encyclopedia of Sustainability*, eds. Willis Jenkins and Whitney Bauman (Great Barrington: Berkshire Publishing Group, 2010), 155.

³ Amos Winarto Oei, *The Perilous Sayings: Interpreting Christ’s Call to Obedience in the Sermon on the Mount* (Carlisle: Langham Monographs, 2017), 1.

⁴ Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 79. See also Ben Witherington III, *Matthew*, Smyth and Hellwys Bible Commentary (Macon: Smyth & Hellwys Publishing Incorporated, 2006), 149.

⁵ Margaret Pamment, “Singleness and Matthew’s Attitude Toward Torah,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 5.17 (January 1983): 74.

⁶ Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms*, exp. ed. (Greenville: Ambassador-Emerald International, 2002), 417.

⁷ Viljoen, *The Torah in Matthew*, 109.

⁸ Brian N. Winslade, *The Essence: Unpacking Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020), 41.

⁹ Winslade, *The Essence*, 64.

¹⁰ Winslade, *The Essence*, 106; Oliver O’Donovan, “Prayer and Morality in the Sermon on the Mount,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22 1 (February 1, 2009): 23.

¹¹ Winslade, *The Essence*, xi.

into being a community that is “peculiar,” “nonconformist,” and “countercultural.”¹²

To understand simplicity in the New Testament as a whole, the Sermon on the Mount is a handy summary, a kind of microcosm of the life of simple discipleship. In *Freedom of Simplicity*, Richard Foster summarizes simplicity in the New Testament this way: It keeps Christ at the center; it identifies with the poor; it rejects obscene wealth; it self-sacrifices for the good of others; and it willingly renounces convenience and comfort as a witness to the kingdom.¹³ Foster identifies Matthew 6 as “the most radiant passage on Christian simplicity.”¹⁴ Rooted in Jesus’ announcement that the kingdom of God has drawn near (4:17, just before the Sermon on the Mount), Jesus’ Sermon invites us into whole-life simplicity, free from the burdens of seeking the approval of others, of worrying about things we cannot control, of accumulating possessions that ultimately come to own us, and of obsessing over security that is never certain apart from Christ.¹⁵ By letting go of our compulsion to amass possessions, prestige, and power, we can turn our attention to one of the central concerns of Christian simplicity: caring for the poor and the defenseless to the point of identifying with those described in the Beatitudes (5:3-11).¹⁶ Of course, the danger of possessions (and the co-conspirators of possessions, prestige and power) is a key refrain in the Sermon: “Many of Jesus’ statements on riches and caring for the needy” (e.g., 5:43-48; 6:1-4; 6:19-24; 7:1-6), Foster writes, “come to us in staccato commands that frighten us.”¹⁷

Willingly surrendering our own rights and renouncing cultural comforts “is central to everything about simplicity.”¹⁸ Not only is self-sacrifice and renunciation an opportunity for us to experience intimacy with Jesus, but it is also one of the greatest Christian witnesses, which becomes obvious when we look at the biblical disciples and the historical saints who followed Jesus into simplicity.¹⁹ Foster summarizes the

¹² Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw, *Jesus for President* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 246.

¹³ Richard J. Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity: Finding Harmony in a Complex World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 33-51.

¹⁴ Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 34.

¹⁵ Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 34-35.

¹⁶ Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 37.

¹⁷ Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 40.

¹⁸ Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 46.

¹⁹ Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 46-47, 55-56.

“scandalous invitation” to simplicity in the Sermon on the Mount and the whole of the New Testament this way:²⁰

Jesus Christ and all the writers of the New Testament call us to break free of mammon lust and live in joyous trust. Their radical criticism of wealth is combined with a spirit of unconditional generosity. They point to us a way of living in which everything we have we receive as a gift, and everything we have is cared for by God, and everything we have is available to others when it is right and good. This reality frames the heart of Christian simplicity. It is the means of liberation and power to do what is right and to overcome the forces of fear and avarice.²¹

No passage alone sums up this posture of simplicity better than Matthew 6:25-34.

Exegetical Analysis of Matthew 6:25-34

Jesus’ admonition in Matthew 6:25-34 emerges from his call to holistic simplicity throughout the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. Not only does this passage serve as the culmination of what it looks like to live a life of simplicity, but it also frames simplicity in a creation theology that values nature, both inherently and as a teacher to humans. Jesus says this in Matthew 6:25-34 (NRSVUE):

²⁵ 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? ²⁶ 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? ²⁷ And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸ And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven,

²⁰ Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 49.

²¹ Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 49.

will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” ³² For it is the gentiles who seek all these things, and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

This passage comes after the Beatitudes (5:3-12), in which Jesus acknowledges, with breadth and depth, the powerful reality of daily troubles: poverty, grief, violence, and injustice.²² Jesus knows the sorrows of hunger, loss, and forsakenness, and he does not take them lightly. Later in his ministry, after delivering the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus faced torrential storms, torture, and a humiliating death. At the core of natural disasters, human violence, corrupt systems, and daily concerns is sin and death, and God—through Jesus—offers not just a chance to survive, but the opportunity to thrive.²³ By following and fellowshiping with a suffering Jesus, we are empowered not just with a new attitude *about* our circumstances, but with a transformed heart that longs for *different circumstances entirely* for ourselves, others, and the world.

Matthew 6:25-34 begins with a “therefore” that is connected most directly to the immediately preceding passage, vv. 19-24:²⁴ Simplicity in our material belongings, our hearts, and our eyes makes us whole, or else we are split between worshiping God and worshiping mammon.²⁵ *Disintegration*, or lack of wholeness, emerges from our hearts’ desire for too many conflicting things.²⁶ Our desires control our attention and our actions; Jesus does not claim we need to eliminate all desire, but rather, he claims that focusing our desire wholly on God—not on fame or fortune or even

²² Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3-7:27 and Luke 6:20-49)* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 465.

²³ Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 465.

²⁴ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, vol. 33A, World Biblical Commentary (Colombia: Word Incorporated, 1993), 163; John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 135.

²⁵ Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 134.

²⁶ Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 80.

survival—is key to a fulfilling life.²⁷ Trying to serve two (or more) masters is at the core of un-Christlike complexity. Instead, like Jesus, we are called to seek wholeheartedly God’s kingdom (v. 33), trusting that God, who is gracious and generous, will provide the rest.²⁸ The fundamental imperative of this section of the Sermon on the Mount—“do not worry,” repeated in vv. 28, 31, and 34—is a categorical imperative, implying that there are no exceptions to the command.²⁹ The command, however, can only be obeyed once we have made the choices Jesus has laid out before us in the preceding passage: between corruptible treasures and incorruptible treasures, between darkness and light, between mammon and God.³⁰ If we have rejected the accumulation of possessions, prestige, and power, then there is no need to worry about those things, because the Master we have chosen is compassionate and kind.³¹ God longs to provide us with everything we need to survive—and much more.

Through the two core concerns for survival, food and clothing, Jesus distinguishes his disciples from the rest of the world.³² While everyone else focuses their attention on the *basics* of life, Jesus calls his followers to focus their hearts on eternal life and the greater calling of God’s kingdom.³³ Again, Jesus is not indifferent to our material needs; instead, he argues that our priorities must be in order (v. 33). Jesus’ point here is that the *telos* of human existence is not merely survival *nor* greedy accumulation; it is the holistic flourishing of individuals, communities, and creation.³⁴

The first of the three arguments (vv. 25c-30) compares humans to animals, represented by the birds, and then to plants, represented by the lilies. Jesus would have known that there are, in fact, animals that store up food, and that most animals work quite hard for their food, whether by hunting or foraging. Jesus is using rhetorical devices to illustrate why the

²⁷ Clifford M. Yearly, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2018), 64.

²⁸ Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 210; April Yamasaki, *Sacred Pauses: Spiritual Practices for Personal Renewal*, ProQuest eBook (Scottsdale: MennoMedia, 2013), 106, 108.

²⁹ Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 269.

³⁰ Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 135-136; Arren Bennet Lawrence, *Comparative Characterization in the Sermon on the Mount: Characterization of the Ideal Disciple* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017), 218.

³¹ Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 136.

³² Lawrence, *Comparative Characterization in the Sermon on the Mount*, 220.

³³ Lawrence, *Comparative Characterization in the Sermon on the Mount*, 220.

³⁴ Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 132; Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 210; Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 472.

birds and lilies do not worry: They rely on the abundance of nature, their innate sense of survival, and their lack of presumption that they even could control the future if they wanted to, let alone any attempts to actually do so.³⁵ Similarly, Jesus knows that the flowers are not “clothed” in the same way humans need to be clothed with items external to our created body. Unlike the “clothing” of petals on flowers, humans are created naked, and our clothing is not part of our bodies, but entirely separate and dependent on external resources.³⁶ Though necessary, clothing has no effect on our value as human beings or on our character; it is foolhardy and misguided to give too much attention to things like clothes that have no eternal significance.³⁷ For humans, these comparisons do not give us permission to be idle, but they redirect the focus of our work not toward the accumulation of possessions that help us feel a (false) sense of security and control, but rather toward seeking God’s kingdom and righteousness, trusting that God will provide everything else in its turn.³⁸ In this work, humans are called to mimic nature; nature is our teacher and mentor in simplicity.

The question in v. 27 forms the bridge between these two analogies of birds to food and lilies to clothing: “Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” Interestingly, the word Jesus uses here is best translated not as *hour*, but as *cubit*, which is a unit of measurement for length, rather than time.³⁹ It is possible that this choice of vocabulary reminds us that anxiety neither increases the length of our life nor our metaphorical stature in this life.⁴⁰ This first argument concludes with v. 30, in which Jesus calls the disciples people “of little faith”—a phrase he also uses in 8:26, 14:31, and 16:8—to highlight that our singular focus on God prompts us to trust in God’s providence, because we can see the evidence wherever we look, even in the smallest of sparrows and the most fleeting

³⁵ Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 473-475. Fred Bahnson and Norman Wirzba call Jesus’ statement about the lilies “to be a kind of agrarian directive”: “Look at the created order God has established. You will never do better than this. So trust in this order and imitate it. Neither Solomon in all his glory—nor, we might add, Monsanto or Archer Daniels Midland or Cargill and their fertilizers or pesticides or genetically modified seeds—can out-create what God has created.” See Fred Bahnson and Norman Wirzba, *Making Peace with the Land: God’s Call to Reconcile with Creation*, Kindle ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012), loc. 997-1004.

³⁶ Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 479.

³⁷ Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 472.

³⁸ Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 473-475.

³⁹ Lawrence, *Comparative Characterization in the Sermon on the Mount*, 222.

⁴⁰ Lawrence, *Comparative Characterization in the Sermon on the Mount*, 222.

of flowers.⁴¹ If choosing simplicity means choosing to devote our lives to God's values and God's kingdom, then certainly, choosing simplicity means also choosing to care about the seemingly unimportant details of God's ecosystems, just like God does.⁴²

Jesus' second argument (vv. 31-33) compares the disciples not to animals and plants but to other people, specifically the Gentiles, who have no knowledge of God. However, instead of using it as an ethnic category, Jesus uses the word to refer to those who go about life anxious, because their attention, their commitments, attention, and devotions are complicated and confused by their desire for possessions, prestige, and power, rather than for God alone.⁴³ On the flip side, the people of God are those who follow in the footsteps of Christ's simplicity, devoting every facet of their lives to actively seeking the kingdom of God.⁴⁴ This is what sets the disciple of Jesus apart from the birds and the lilies: Humans do not just experience the absence of worry, but also the blessing of hope for God's coming redemption of all things, of which we receive a foretaste in this life.⁴⁵ Thus, eternal life is not the only reward: As promised by the latter half of v. 33, the earnest seeker finds not only eternal life, but also all the necessities of this life, too.⁴⁶

The final argument of Matthew 6:25-34 is found in v. 34. Since v. 33 seems to be the climax of the passage—the culmination of Jesus' entire argument—v. 34, at first glance, seems like an odd, anticlimactic addendum to the rest of the passage.⁴⁷ However, this final verse and its "memorable aphorism" serves as a conclusion not just for the subunit of vv. 25-34, but for the entire pericope starting in v. 19.⁴⁸ To live in anxiety is to live in the future, which we can neither control, nor rush, nor foresee. For the disciple seeking God's kingdom, the best and only thing we can do is simply seek God's kingdom in our present moment and situation.⁴⁹ If we are

⁴¹ W. F. Albright and C.S. Mann, *Matthew*, vol. 26, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 82.

⁴² Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 73; Bahnson and Wirzba, *Making Peace with the Land*, loc. 970-989.

⁴³ Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 208.

⁴⁴ Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 209.

⁴⁵ Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 482; Witherington, *Matthew*, 154.

⁴⁶ Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 483.

⁴⁷ Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 481; Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 165; Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 209.

⁴⁸ Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 209.

⁴⁹ Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 209-210.

overwhelmed with worry for the imagined problems of tomorrow, we will inevitably neglect the real, concrete, urgent matters that require our attention today.⁵⁰

On the whole, Matthew 6:25-34 makes a coherent argument for the absolute necessity of orienting ourselves wholly toward God. For both Jesus' ancient and contemporary disciples, this singularity of focus calls for not only a change in our mindset, but a change in our practices as well.

A Brief Note on Matthew's Parallel: Luke 12:22-32

Catherine Wright reflects on the Lukan passage, Luke 12:22-32, which parallels Matthew 6:25-34 quite closely.⁵¹ Like Matthew, Luke highlights that Jesus' primary concern is for his disciples to orient their lives not around money and possessions, but around the kingdom of God; not around greed and anxiety, but around generosity and trust.⁵² People in the ancient world, as today, have always been tempted to orient their lives around money, but, "Such a mentality chokes the beauty from life and reduces relationships to business transactions. Jesus would have more than that for us."⁵³ Indeed, of all the gospel writers, Luke is arguably the most careful to demonstrate that Jesus' lifestyle was "fully consistent with Jesus' teachings about simplicity," especially his comments in the Sermon on the Mount (or, in Luke's case, the parallel Sermon on the Plain in 6:20-49).⁵⁴ "Luke depicts simplicity, a lifestyle characterized by complete dependence on God, willingness to share possessions, and habits of almsgiving and generosity, as an indicator of one's participation in the kingdom of God."⁵⁵

Wright then asks the pressing question: To be serious about our faith and discipleship to Jesus, do we *really* need to sell *all* our possessions (Luke 18:22; Matthew 19:21)?⁵⁶ Though there are good reasons to see this as a hyperbolic statement, Wright challenges us not to brush it off with a spiritual or reductionist explanation: "[I]f we consistently interpret Luke's teachings on wealth in this way, we will mute the transformative shock value of the text. Jesus' teachings probably made his first audience

⁵⁰ Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 486; Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 166.

⁵¹ Catherine J. Wright, *Spiritual Practices of Jesus: Learning Simplicity, Humility, and Prayer with Luke's Earliest Readers* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020), 3-21.

⁵² Wright, *Spiritual Practices of Jesus*, 3, 5, 9.

⁵³ Wright, *Spiritual Practices of Jesus*, 7.

⁵⁴ Wright, *Spiritual Practices of Jesus*, 19, 21.

⁵⁵ Wright, *Spiritual Practices of Jesus*, 20.

⁵⁶ Wright, *Spiritual Practices of Jesus*, 10.

uncomfortable, and if we are reading Luke [and the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew] the way we should be, it will do the same for us.”⁵⁷

Theological and Missional Simplicity in the Sermon on the Mount, Especially Matthew 6:25-34

Matthew 6:25-34 offers both practical advice to the average lives of disciples *and* a vision of God’s promises for the future being activated in the discipleship community of the present. In the context of the Sermon on the Mount, the words Jesus speaks in 6:25-34 flip Maslow’s hierarchy of needs on its head: Jesus argues that seeking God’s kingdom—meaning to *see* it, *testify* to it, and *reflect* it—is foundational not just to our survival but to our ultimate fulfillment,⁵⁸ a message that should be particularly alarming in a culture that valorizes workaholism and idolizes the amassing of the same treasures that Jesus calls us to renunciate.⁵⁹

On the whole, the Sermon on the Mount casts a vision for a simplicity of devotion (*teleios*) to the kingdom that leads to holistic flourishing (*makarios*) for both humans *and* creation.⁶⁰ While *teleios* is often translated as *perfect* (5:48; 19:21), a better translation would be *whole* or *complete*.⁶¹ In the Bible, *teleios* is characterized by wholehearted self-sacrifice for, obedience to, and companionship with God.⁶² While *teleios* is not specifically used in 6:25-34, the argument in these verses emerges from Matthew 5 and the first half of Matthew 6, which hinge on the command to “Be *teleios* as your heavenly Father is *teleios*” (5:48).⁶³ Thus, *teleios* is a foundational theological concept to the admonition not to be anxious. However, rather than making us more anxious because we are not being *perfect*, we can receive *teleios* as an invitation into a *simplicity* of mind, heart, body, and soul that makes us *whole* by empowering us: (1) to reflect, in all facets of life, the image of God in which we are created, and (2) to fulfill, in our relationship with each other and the created order, our potential to embody the character and values of God.⁶⁴ In short, Matthew 6:25-34 admonishes us to receive God’s mission *to us*: a mission to restore our bodies into eternal life, our hearts into singular

⁵⁷ Wright, *Spiritual Practices of Jesus*, 10.

⁵⁸ Yearly, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 68.

⁵⁹ Winslade, *The Essence*, 140.

⁶⁰ Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 72.

⁶¹ Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 72.

⁶² Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 76.

⁶³ Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 79.

⁶⁴ Winslade, *The Essence*, 85.

devotion, and our minds into peaceful attentiveness. In turn, we become missional to other people and to all creation.

Paul—probably drawing from traditional stories about Jesus, as he sat in prison anticipating the end of his own life—offers his Gentile congregants in Philippi the same advice that Jesus presents on the mountain: “Do not worry” (Phil. 4:6).⁶⁵ As the community of Jesus-followers grew and matured, it became apparent that to not worry about possessions, power, and prestige made them quite generous, compassionate, and loving. Trusting in God’s provision for each individual, for the community of God’s people, and for all God’s creatures, the disciples rejected the hierarchical power struggles of the Roman Empire; instead, they broke bread together, forgave each other, and showed hospitality to outsiders.⁶⁶ Thus, we see in the lives of Jesus and his earliest disciples how freedom from anxiety emerges from trusting in God’s mission of provision, sustenance, and generosity to us.⁶⁷ We know this is true, because we witness daily God’s mission to the least significant of the birds and the flowers.

Based on God’s mission to creation, Matthew 6:25-34 also offers insight into *humanity’s* mission to creation. In the larger pericope of 6:19-34, Jesus’ comparison between God and mammon takes on new meaning in a post-industrialized world.⁶⁸ In enslavement to mammon, humans have devastated the earth, further impoverished the world’s most vulnerable people, caused mass extinctions, committed genocides, and obliterated the beauty of God’s creation across the globe.⁶⁹ The chaos that ensues when we fail to focus our devotion on God alone is more apparent now than ever, and it has created increasing interest in lifestyles of simplicity that allow us to separate ourselves from the overconsumption, overproduction, and overstimulation that characterize those who do not fully trust in the Lord.⁷⁰

To “look at the birds of the air” (v. 26) and “consider the lilies of the field” (v. 28) requires us to be attentive to nature and to God’s Spirit within nature.⁷¹ Indeed, it means that striving for God’s kingdom is not only for our own peace of mind, or even for the flourishing of humanity; it is also so

⁶⁵ Amy-Jill Levine, *Sermon on the Mount: A Beginner’s Guide to the Kingdom of Heaven*, ProQuest eBook (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020), 15w.

⁶⁶ Levine, *Sermon on the Mount*, 15x.

⁶⁷ Diane J. Chandler, *Christian Spiritual Formation: An Integrated Approach for Personal and Relational Wholeness* (Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2014), 231, 239.

⁶⁸ Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology*, 74.

⁶⁹ Bahnsen and Wirzba, *Making Peace with the Land*, loc. 997-1004.

⁷⁰ Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 131.

⁷¹ Levine, *Sermon on the Mount*, 15w.

that our *peaceful, non-anxious* presence as the Body of Christ may be *truly good news* to the land, the plants, and the animals alongside humans.⁷² In practical terms in the twenty-first century, this means rejecting the over-extraction of resources in fear that there will not be enough for *me* and instead trusting that the sustaining fertility and sustainable abundance with which God created the earth will provide enough for us all.⁷³ Thus, rather than being a random example, the birds and the lilies are “essential” to Jesus’ message:⁷⁴

We cannot appreciate Jesus’ message in this passage unless we place ourselves as creatures within God’s creation, along with our fellow-creatures the birds and the wild flowers. We cannot appreciate Jesus’ message unless we see ourselves not as masters of creation entitled to exploit its resources to our heart’s desire, but as participants in the community of God’s creatures. No doubt we are *eminent* participants. Jesus does say we are of more value than the birds, though he says this not in order to disparage the birds, who do have value of their own, but to reassure the anxious. No doubt we are eminent participants in the community of creation, but *participants* nonetheless. Considering these other creatures, we see a natural world of abundance and beauty that exists by the Creator’s gift, independent of all our efforts to create our own world of plenty and beauty for ourselves. If we can recover our own real relationship to that world of God’s creatures, then we can begin to seek God’s Kingdom and further his purposes for his creation.⁷⁵

Later in *The Bible and Ecology*, Bauckham adds:

What we have in common with the lilies of the field is not just that we are creatures of God, but that we are fellow-members of the community of God’s creation, sharing the same Earth, affected by the processes of the Earth, affecting the processes that affect each other, with common interests at least in life

⁷² Bahnsen and Wirzba, *Making Peace with the Land*, loc. 970-989.

⁷³ Bahnsen and Wirzba, *Making Peace with the Land*, loc. 1194-1206.

⁷⁴ Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology*, 75.

⁷⁵ Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology*, 75-76, emphasis original.

and flourishing, with the common end of glorifying the Creator and interdependent in the ways we do exactly that.⁷⁶

Of course, just because the birds rely on God for their sustenance and are not anxious about where their next meal will come from does not mean that their sustenance is always provided. Even more commonly in the post-industrial world that is tortured by pollution and climate change, animals die of starvation, and plants do not germinate or get pollinated. Ecosystems are changing, and the environment is paying the price for pollution, habitat destruction, and anthropogenic climate change. Both on the literal and metaphorical level, we are called to be the missional people who meet those needs, too, as followers of Jesus and as the Body of Christ. As image-bearers and co-creators, we tend to the earth to ensure that nature sustains life as God intended it, and that human needs are met as God wills it. To pursue God's kingdom and righteousness is to be so aware of God's love and grace in our lives and in creation that it overflows into love for others and for the earth itself.⁷⁷

Thus, in this short passage, Jesus invites us to simplify our attention, expectations, and desires (6:25-30), so that we are wholly focused on God.⁷⁸ Indeed, when we give up our own anxiety about whether our plates are full enough, we missionally turn a compassionate eye toward those whose plates have nothing on them.⁷⁹ Fred Bahnson and Norman Wirzba put it this way:

God knows that we need to eat. Our task is not to worry but to trust that God will provide. Although we should certainly care about the fact that well over a billion people still do not have enough to eat, it is tempting to assume that this distinctly Christian concern about eating ends when food has been adequately distributed and shared. This is a serious mistake. Jesus' admonition is directed to the ways in which worry dominates and distorts our relationships with the world and each other. Clearly life is more than food. We can, if we are not careful, turn eating into an idolatrous affair by making food our obsessive focus. But there is no life without

⁷⁶ Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology*, 88.

⁷⁷ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 165.

⁷⁸ Yeary, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 67.

⁷⁹ Witherington, *Matthew*, 151.

food. God created a world in which every creature lives by eating. God daily sustains creatures by providing them with gifts of decomposition, photosynthesis and digestion, which are essential for the eating we enjoy. On the first Sabbath sunrise, God looked out on the world and pronounced it good. Seeing the creatures eat, he also made it delectable. That Jesus ate with sinners is both a practical and a profound action because it shows us how God relates to us, how we are to relate to each other and how we need to relate to the food itself. When our relationships in these three areas are properly configured, creation is nurtured and reconciled, God is glorified and heaven is tasted.⁸⁰

When we look to nature not as a resource to extract but as a mentor to guide us, we do not worry about whether there is enough, but rather, we inhabit abundance so that there is always enough to go around, not just among humans, but for the delicate and biodiverse environment that God created. This is what Jesus means when he invites us to seek, to keep our eyes, and to move ourselves constantly toward the kingdom of God. The word translated as *seek* or *strive for* (v. 33) is in the continual present tense to emphasize that this is not something we can achieve in its totality, but rather, it is “the vocation of our lives.”⁸¹ Jesus’ model of simplicity reorients us and our priorities: It not only keeps us focused on our true needs and the will of God, but it also contributes to a world in which there is enough to go around for the flourishing of all people and all creation.

Five Qualities of Simplicity in the Way of Jesus

Based on Jesus’ model of simplicity during his ministry, especially through the Sermon on the Mount, simplicity in the way of Jesus can be described as worshipful, communal, complex, harmonious, and liberating. Specifically, this synthesis of Jesus’ simplicity focuses on holistic well-being and environmental concern.

The Worshipful Focus of Jesus’ Simplicity

At its core, Jesus’ model of simplicity is an act of worship. As an expression of our love for God, we love what God loves, serve what God serves, and embrace what God embraces—and God loves, serves, and

⁸⁰ Bahnsen and Wirzba, *Making Peace with the Land*, loc. 1194-1206.

⁸¹ Witherington, *Matthew*, 153.

embraces creation.⁸² Simplicity helps us do this by focusing our attention on Christ alone so that every other decision and relationship flows from the singularity of Jesus at the center of our lives.⁸³ The Shema—“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul [and with all your mind] and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:4-9; Mark 12:29-31)—articulates this integrity, or being undivided in our relationship with God.⁸⁴ Love of God is meant to be a worshipful choice in favor of life-giving and life-enhancing behaviors, not just for ourselves, but also for the sake of all that God loves.⁸⁵ We cannot love the earth as God does while simultaneously committing violence against it.⁸⁶

Jesus embodied this worshipful love for God by slowing and simplifying his life to, what we would call today, an extreme.⁸⁷ In a contemporary culture where “slow” and “less” are pejorative, Jesus’ unhurried commitment to love his neighbors, to have as little impact on the environment as possible, and to experience and share peacefulness epitomizes the upside-down kingdom.⁸⁸ Instead of prioritizing money and security, followers of Jesus are called to love and imitate God through justice, self-sacrifice, gentleness, and solidarity with the poor.⁸⁹ While

⁸² Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 15; Malinda Elizabeth Berry, “Shalom Political Theology: A New Type of Mennonite Peace Theology for a New Era of Discipleship,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 34 1 (Winter 2016).

⁸³ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 84; Wendy J. Miller, *Simplicity: Spiritual Practices for Building a Life of Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2020), 28; Jan Johnson, *Abundant Simplicity: Discovering the Unhurried Rhythms of Grace* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011), 51; Mindy Caliguire, *Simplicity* (Downers Grove: IVP Connect, 2010), 15, 18.

⁸⁴ James K. Bruckner, “The Whole and Healthy Person in the Biblical Tradition: Where Is It Written?” *The Covenant Quarterly* 64 1-3 (2006): 259, 261-262, 265-266, 269.

⁸⁵ Bruckner, “The Whole and Healthy Person in the Biblical Tradition,” 263-264, 271-272.

⁸⁶ Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 14.

⁸⁷ Johnson, *Abundant Simplicity*, 8-10; John Mark Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry: How to Stay Emotionally Healthy and Spiritually Alive in the Chaos of the Modern World* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2019), 19, 22-23.

⁸⁸ Johnson, *Abundant Simplicity*, 18, 135; Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, 24-25; Richard W. Carlson and Mary Chase-Ziolek, “Wholeness: Rhythms of Intimacy and Health,” *The Covenant Quarterly* (January 2006): 277; Roger Heuser and Norman Shawchuck, *Leading the Congregation: Caring for Yourself While Serving the People*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 34.

⁸⁹ Chandler, *Christian Spiritual Formation*, 231-232; Miller, *Simplicity*, 40-41; Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Following Jesus: Finding Our Way Home in an Age of Anxiety* (New York: Convergent, 2019), 46-49, 59.

money and possessions can serve God-honoring purposes, they are cruel to us, our neighbors, and creation when they replace God as our master.⁹⁰ We are reminded that the point of simplicity, especially when it is oriented toward creation care, is not efficiency, productivity, or even relaxation (money might be a better master for these goals in some cases); the point, instead, is “making space for treasuring God’s own self” and all that God treasures.⁹¹

The Communal Focus of Jesus’ Simplicity

Though Jesus’ model for simplicity has many personal benefits, it is not a primarily individualistic act, but a spiritual practice that emerges from and is for the community, including creation. One of the most basic definitions of simplicity is to “take less,” so that there is more for other people, other creatures, and the earth.⁹² We abandon our selfishness and greed, and the violence that so often accompanies them, for the greater good of seeing the entirety of our environment flourish.⁹³ Simplicity is the recognition that our actions impact our immediate community and, because of globalization, the whole world.⁹⁴

From this perspective, self-sacrifice is certainly a virtue, but the self-sacrifice entailed in simplicity should not be thought of as one-sided:⁹⁵

God created all living things—the earth, the sky, the water,
the plants, the animals, humankind—and proclaimed them

⁹⁰ Chandler, *Christian Spiritual Formation*, 233, 237-238, 240; Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 3; Miller, *Simplicity*, 15.

⁹¹ Johnson, *Abundant Simplicity*, 10.

⁹² Jim Merkel, “Sharing the Earth,” in *Voluntary Simplicity: The Poetic Alternative to Consumer Culture*, ed. Samuel Alexander (Whanganui: Stead and Daughters Limited, 2009), 207, 212. See also Miller, *Simplicity*, 38; Jan Johnson, *Simplicity and Fasting* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 16-17.

⁹³ Sallie McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 19, 212; Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1996), 22; Christopher Key Chapple, “Sacrifice,” in *The Spirit of Sustainability*, vol. 1, Berkshire Encyclopedia of Sustainability, eds. Willis Jenkins and Whitney Bauman (Great Barrington: Berkshire Publishing Group, 2010), 348.

⁹⁴ Chris Doran, *Hope in the Age of Climate Change* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 3-4.

⁹⁵ James A. Nash refers to the virtue of frugality in place of self-sacrifice, which could be helpful in terms of connotations. See James A. Nash, “Toward the Revival and Reform of the Subversive Virtue: Frugality,” *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1995): 137-146, 151-160.

good. God created us deeply connected to each other and deeply connected to all of life. Our bodies cannot exist independent of the rest. We are dependent on the earth for food to eat, water to drink, and air to breathe. Wholeness, thus, ultimately includes all of creation. Throughout the ages, the actions of people around the world have diminished our natural environment beloved by God and so essential to our health. We are part of creation and therefore our wellbeing is dependent upon how we care for creation as well as how we interact with creation.⁹⁶

The personal and the communal are intertwined; spiritual and social transformations cannot be detached.⁹⁷ The linchpin is whether we perceive the world to be scarce or abundant: While the empire functions as if life were a zero-sum game, in which I lose if another wins, Jesus lived without anxiety for himself because he trusted that God created a world of abundance, in which there is always plenty for everyone.⁹⁸

Becoming whole cannot happen without the communities and ecosystems of which we are apart. When we sacrifice the earth and others for what we perceive to be our own benefit, we experience what Hartmut Rosa calls alienation: “a mode of relating to the world in which the subject encounters the subjective, objective, and/or social world as either indifferent or repulsive.”⁹⁹ *Ecoalienation* is when we experience: “a lack of close, positive bonding with nature and an inability to feel at home in God’s creation and renewed by relating intimately with it. This is a personal loss, but it also reduces people’s motivation to care for the earth.”¹⁰⁰ Wendell Berry puts it starkly:

[W]e can [not] live harmlessly, or strictly at our own expense; we depend upon other creatures and survive by their deaths. To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of

⁹⁶ Carlson and Chase-Ziolek, “Wholeness,” 287.

⁹⁷ Doran, *Hope in the Age of Climate Change*, 5; James H. Evans, Jr., *We Shall All Be Changed: Social Problems and Theological Renewal* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 10, 89-90.

⁹⁸ Nouwen, *Following Jesus*, 38-39, 42; Carlson and Chase-Ziolek, “Wholeness,” 274; Wright, *Spiritual Practices of Jesus*, 64.

⁹⁹ Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, trans. James C. Wagner (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 178.

¹⁰⁰ Carlson and Chase-Ziolek, “Wholeness,” 288.

Creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want.¹⁰¹

However, the opposite of alienation, resonance, is attainable. Resonance, Rosa says, is “a kind of relationship to the world, formed through affect and emotion, intrinsic interest, and perceived self-efficacy, in which the subject and world are mutually affected.”¹⁰² In other words, while it may be counterintuitive, self-indulgence is self-destructive, while self-sacrifice for the sake of other people and creation is self-care, because humans cannot flourish without intimacy, and intimacy requires resonance.¹⁰³ Each one of us, after all, is a part of the community of creation.

Berry reminds us that humans are best equipped to worship God by sharing in God’s love for the community of creation through the particular: the local or regional environment in which we find ourselves.¹⁰⁴ The health of each of us, our families, our communities, and our species is dependent on the health of the land, and while we cannot solve the climate crisis as individuals, we can all do something to heal the earth that God has given us to steward.¹⁰⁵ This is where green simplicity has immediate and visible ramifications. We can see our choices to share and to serve affirming the community of creation around us; since all things are interconnected, we can trust that our choices to live more simply and sustainably are a small way that we are participating in God’s work of restoring the whole world.¹⁰⁶

The Complexity of Jesus’ Simplicity

Simplicity is not always easy. It’s not always convenient, and it often requires more planning. Sometimes it can make life more complex as we

¹⁰¹ Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2003), 304.

¹⁰² Rosa, *Resonance*, 174.

¹⁰³ Carlson and Chase-Ziolek, “Wholeness,” 279; McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 19; Johnson, *Abundant Simplicity*, 28.

¹⁰⁴ Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace*, 1.

¹⁰⁵ Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace*, 47.

¹⁰⁶ McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 209; Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 53-54.

figure out how to live differently than the defaults of our cultural contexts.¹⁰⁷ Richard Foster summarizes it this way:

We must never confuse simplicity with simplism. ... Simplistic answers, by their very nature, fail to perceive the rich, ordered complexity of life. ... Christian simplicity lives in harmony with the ordered complexity of life. It repudiates easy, dogmatic answers to tough, intricate problems. In fact, it is this grace that frees us sufficiently to appreciate and respond to the complex issues of contemporary society. The duplicitous mind, on the other hand, tends to confuse and obscure. While the dogmatic person cannot understand the diversity in simplicity, the double-minded person cannot perceive the unity in complexity. This brings us to the central paradox of our study: the complexity of simplicity. The fact that a paradox lies at the heart of the Christian teaching on simplicity should not surprise us. The life and teachings of Christ were often couched in paradox.¹⁰⁸

Contrary to some popular versions of simplicity, simplicity is not primarily about refraining from action in such a way that others must compensate.¹⁰⁹ Simplicity is primarily an active, conscious choice to transform how we live and heal our relationship with creation.¹¹⁰ While practices of simplicity can make some facets of life healthier, more interesting, and sometimes, indeed, simpler, *ease* is not the goal of simplicity; after all, ease rarely makes life more vibrant or meaningful.¹¹¹ Instead, the goal of simplicity is integrity, in the fullest sense of the word: a sense of focus in our purpose and wholeness within ourselves and, by extension, our communities.¹¹² That focus can sometimes lead to inconveniences that temporarily complicate our lives, but in the long term, invest in personal and communal simplicity.

With that in mind, the opposite of simplicity is not complexity, but duplicity. Duplicity, as Foster alludes to above, is far more detrimentally

¹⁰⁷ Yamasaki, *Sacred Pauses*, 105.

¹⁰⁸ Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 5.

¹⁰⁹ Patrick M. Carrion, "Simplicity Not So Simple," *Priestalk* 71 5 (May 2015): 30.

¹¹⁰ Duane Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich* 2nd ed. (New York: Harper, 2010) 8-9.

¹¹¹ Caliguire, *Simplicity*, 11.

¹¹² Caliguire, *Simplicity*, 13, 19; Heath, *Simplicity*, 38.

complicated than the graceful intricacies and attentiveness of simplicity. Duplicity is not only cheating or deception or hypocrisy; it also describes whenever any of us are torn in multiple directions, both inwardly and outwardly.¹¹³ Foster continues on duplicity:

Duplicity costs the joyful communion with the divine Center, faith that sees everything in the light of God's governance for good, abiding peace, and the ability to walk cheerfully over the face of the earth in the power of the Lord. In short, it costs the abundant life Jesus said he came to bring. Simplicity may be difficult, but the alternative is immensely more difficult. The joyful paradox in all this is that while simplicity is complex it is also simple. In the final analysis we are not the ones who have to untangle all the intricacies of our complex world. There are not many things we have to keep in mind—in fact, only one: to be attentive to the voice of the true Shepherd. There are not many decisions we have to make—in fact, only one: to seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness. There are not many tasks we have to do—in fact, only one: to obey him in all things.¹¹⁴

As we discern how to hear God's voice, seek God's kingdom, and obey God's will, Jesus' model for simplicity helps us to remember that the priority is not our own convenience, but the demands placed on our community and our planet.¹¹⁵ In *Red-Letter Revolution*, Shane Claiborne and Tony Campolo wonder, "What is the cost of our way of life? Whose pain sustains our lifestyle?"¹¹⁶ There are some actions that are momentarily more efficient for us but that are unfathomably complex for others, for the earth, and for the future generations that have to bear the consequences of our convenience.

¹¹³ Caliguire, *Simplicity*, 12, 24; Yamasaki, *Sacred Pauses*, 108; Johnson, *Simplicity and Fasting*, 11-12; Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 18; Wright, *Spiritual Practices of Jesus*, 67, 80-81.

¹¹⁴ Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 184.

¹¹⁵ Wendell Berry points out that seeking to avoid the good gift of work that God gave us through the pursuit of convenience and efficiency is damaging, even murderous, to our souls. See Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 12.

¹¹⁶ Shane Claiborne and Tony Campolo, *Red-Letter Revolution: What If Jesus Really Meant What He Said?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 106.

The accompanying article that will be in the next issue of *Discernment* will explore multiple practices that might, at first glance, appear to complicate life, but their practitioners experience them as commitments to simplicity. Consider, for example, grabbing a plastic fork, using it to eat a meal, and throwing it in the garbage. The efficiency and thoughtlessness required of the *individual* in this act could be confused for simplicity. However, when one considers the complex systems required to create the fork — including fracking the oil, processing the plastic, and making the packaging — as well as dispose of the fork — including driving the trash truck, sorting the garbage, and managing the landfill — then suddenly, the minor inconvenience of carrying around a reusable fork and rinsing it in the sink after the meal no longer sounds so burdensome.

The Harmony of Jesus' Simplicity

Just as integrity within ourselves is a primary goal of simplicity, integrity in the community of creation is also central to Jesus' model for simplicity. The biblical word for this holistic integrity, or harmony, is *shalom*. *Shalom* is often translated as peace, but it is also more than that: It is health and wholeness in the deepest and widest sense, both for a community and for each person and environmental component that make up that community.¹¹⁷ Wendell Berry identifies four facets of *shalom*: material well-being and prosperity, just interpersonal and political relationships, morality, and the renewal and transformation of communities.¹¹⁸ *Shalom* is not only the practice of peaceful nonviolence; it is also the active movement toward healed and harmonious relationships.¹¹⁹ Ted Grimsrud connects *shalom* with salvation and harmony:

Salvation has to do with wholeness. To gain salvation leads to harmony with God, other human beings, and with the rest of creation. We need salvation when we live with disharmony, when we experience brokenness instead of wholeness. The Old Testament begins with a portrayal of creation at peace. However, after the beginning, the Bible presupposes disharmony and brokenness—and focuses on the struggle for salvation. Salvation results in healed brokenness, restored health and wholeness. The Bible presents salvation on three

¹¹⁷ Bruckner, "The Whole and Healthy Person," 25, 258-259.

¹¹⁸ Berry, "Shalom Political Theology."

¹¹⁹ Berry, "Shalom Political Theology."

levels: (1) salvation as liberation from Powers of brokenness, (2) salvation as restoration of harmony with God, and (3) salvation as restoration of harmonious human relationships. The Old Testament story places priority on salvation in the first sense (liberation). The other two follow from and depend upon the first. Because God acts to deliver, people are then freed to respond to God and restore harmony in their relationships with God and to live in harmony with one another.¹²⁰

Simplicity helps facilitate these harmonious relationships with others by caring for the earth and its resources that we share. Berry points out that the opposite of harmony, of *shalom*, is exploitation, which seeks to “divide and conquer.”¹²¹ Consumerism that demands an ever-expanding market is a “gluttonous enterprise of ugliness, waste, and fraud [that] thrives in the disastrous breach it has helped to make between our bodies and our souls.”¹²² Berry elaborates:

What I have been trying to do is to define a pattern of disintegration that is at once cultural and agricultural. I have been groping for connections—that I think are indissoluble, though obscured by modern ambitions—between the spirit and the body, the body and other bodies, the body and the earth. If these connections do necessarily exist, as I believe they do, then it is impossible for material order to exist side by side with spiritual disorder, or vice versa, and impossible for one to thrive long at the expense of the other; it is impossible, ultimately, to preserve ourselves apart from our willingness to preserve other creatures, or to respect and care for ourselves except as we respect and care for other creatures; and, most to the point of this book, it is impossible to care for each other more or differently than we care for the earth. This last statement becomes obvious enough when it is considered that the earth is what we all have in common, that it is what we are made of and what we live from, and that we therefore

¹²⁰ Ted Grimsrud, *Instead of Atonement* (Eugene: Cascade, 2013), 27. See also Chandler, *Christian Spiritual Formation*, 244.

¹²¹ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 11.

¹²² Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 11.

cannot damage it without damaging those with whom we share it. But I believe it goes farther and deeper than that. There is an uncanny resemblance between our behavior toward each other and our behavior toward the earth. ... By some connection that we do not recognize, the willingness to exploit one becomes the willingness to exploit the other. The conditions and the means of exploitation are likewise similar.¹²³

As an alternative to this dysfunctional way of living, God invites us into the upside-down kingdom. Simplicity is one way we can live out the holistic harmony that God longs to see permeate all creation.

The Liberation of Jesus' Simplicity

Simplicity is not rooted in fear or rigidity, but in a desire to experience freedom and share freedom, and freedom is the outcome of Jesus' model of simplicity.¹²⁴ As an embodiment of our devotion to God, simplicity is a discipline to experience the transformation and enrichment of our characters.¹²⁵ As an act of trust in God's abundance, simplicity is a release from the anxieties and captivities of a broken world.¹²⁶ As an expression of *shalom*, simplicity is an avenue for us to participate in the healing freedom of God's kingdom, however imperfectly.¹²⁷ Through simplicity, we experience a reconnection with God, ourselves, other people, and creation. Instead of binding us, the intimacy we were created for helps us experience true freedom by helping us become fully ourselves and lead us into flourishing. Perhaps even more importantly, green spiritual practices of simplicity allow us to give creation the gift of being free, even in minuscule ways, from the unnecessary burdens under which, like us, it groans and aches for freedom.

Conclusion

¹²³ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 123-124.

¹²⁴ Caliguire, *Simplicity*, 76; Courtney Carver, *Soulful Simplicity: How Living with Less Can Lead to So Much More* (New York: TarcherPerigee, 2017), xvii; Carrion, "Simplicity Not So Simple," 30; Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, 10.

¹²⁵ Johnson, *Abundant Simplicity*, 14. For more on the freeing dimensions of discipline, see Charles Cummings, *Monastic Practices* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2015), 85, 87, 91.

¹²⁶ Caliguire, *Simplicity*, 16, 85.

¹²⁷ Caliguire, *Simplicity*, 82.

If we take Jesus seriously, then his model of simplicity should be at the center of our discipleship to him. Simplicity, in the way of Jesus, is not just concerned with individual faith, but with the community of God's people, humanity, and all of creation. At its most basic, simplicity means devotion to God alone, and by extension, the things that God cares most about. How to literally *practice* honing our devotion to God and God's ways requires systematic changes to our mundane habits, choices, and behaviors.

In the next issue of *Discernment*, there will be an accompanying article that explores how emerging adults (18-29 year-olds) integrate pro-environmental behaviors with spiritual practices of simplicity. Through qualitative analysis, the article will explore how a small sample of Western Protestant emerging adults practice pro-environmental simplicity in their daily lives. As a result of integrating spiritual practices that focus on simplicity and pro-environmental behaviors into their spiritual expressions, emerging adults experience profound spiritual formation and a meaningful way of participating in the mission of God in the world.

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