

Living Simply

Dear Kingdom People Group Leader,

This letter is a brief reply to your inquiry regarding the question of what it means to “live simply,” or perhaps how one learns in our culture to “live simply.” You asked if it is possible to “own a nice car and house and still be a Kingdom Person.” I will answer that question immediately by saying yes, it is possible to own a nice car and house and enjoy the cultural contributions of this world, which God has given to us, and still be a Kingdom Person. Having made such a statement, I will comment on some substance behind the statement.

When the rich young ruler asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus ended the conversation by saying, “You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (Luke 18:22). Jesus knew this man was conflicted because he was trying to serve two masters. Jesus challenged him to first be committed to the Kingdom of God. At this point, the man was unable to do that because of his primary commitment to wealth and power. *What Jesus is asking each of us to do is to get our priorities in order and to put the proper amount of trust in those priorities.*

The early Church included many believers who had wealth and influence. Some of those were Joseph of Arimathea (Mark 15:43); the “prominent” men and women of Berea (Acts 17:10–12); Lydia (Acts 16:14); rulers of the synagogue (Mark 5:22; John 12:42), including Crispus (Acts 18:8) and Sosthenes (Acts 18:17); even members of Caesar’s household (Philippians 4:22); many Pharisees (Acts 15:5); and the Pharisee Paul, who had been a member of the Sanhedrin. We know that these people (and others) gave substantially to the work of the Church, with many paying the price of their devotion to Jesus with their lives.

The Apostolic Fathers, who lived during the first two hundred years after Christ, all came from highly educated, influential, or wealthy backgrounds. Yet they counted their life in Christ and their ministry of infinitely superior importance. They gave all they had to the poor and eventually suffered martyrdom. The lives of countless men and women through the centuries portray the same example of fidelity to Christ, power over desires for the things of this world, assurance of the life to come, and absolute confidence that, as Jesus promised in Luke 18:22, when we give of what has been given to us, we will have “treasure in heaven.”

Timothy makes the same promise that our giving here on earth lays up treasure in heaven (1 Timothy 6:17–19.) These verses consist of advice to rich Christians who were members of

the early Church. First of all, notice that they are not condemned for having wealth. Secondly, they are not told to give it all away. What Paul is doing here is giving instructions about what not to do and what to do with the wealth that God has given to them. Paul tells them first not to be haughty or proud. These people would have been well versed in the many Scriptures that tell us that everything we have—whether wealth, gifts, graces, intellect—comes from God and belongs to Him. Next Paul tells them not to put their trust in the wealth that has been given to them, but rather to trust in the living God. The next line is of great importance: “who gives us richly all things to enjoy.” This is the balance we seek, is it not? It is given to us to enjoy some of the things of this world. At the same time, do we not want others to have the same enjoyment? Paul then goes on to instruct these wealthy Christians to do good works by being ready to share what has been given to them. In doing so, they will lay a “good foundation for the time to come,” meaning heaven.

We have the example of The Rev. John Wesley, who throughout his life lived on precisely the amount of money he lived on in college. Mr. Wesley once said, “And hear ye this, all you who have discovered the treasures which I am to leave behind me: if I leave behind me ten pounds (above my debts and the little arrears of my fellowship) you and all mankind bear witness against me that ‘I lived and died a thief and robber’” (*An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* [1743], *Works* 11:87-88).

Also we have the example of Francis Asbury, undoubtedly the most influential Methodist layperson in America, who significantly affected the political leadership in the developments of America. When Asbury died, he owned two saddlebags. You will recall he had worn out innumerable horses. Mr. Asbury was a layperson who, without benefit of a college education, was ordained a Deacon one day, an Elder the second day, and a Bishop the third day.

Now, is this the austere living required of all of us? The answer may be yes or no. God will call some of us servants to give all or most material possessions away and live strict lives. Neither the saints of Scripture nor the testimony of the saints of the Church have said that this is required of all. Without exception, they all have warned us of the power of money and the seductive power of greed. We are consistently warned of the necessity of securing control over our appetites and desires. We are urged to give as we have been given, and we are reminded that “to whom much is given, much is required” (Luke 12:48). The idea of proportional giving, which Jesus lifted up with the widow and her mite (Luke 21:2), is the example that is incumbent upon each of us who wants to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. One of the issues here is, who (or what) controls whom? Do the things of the world control us, or do we control them? There is nothing inherently bad about the material things of the world. In fact, it is my opinion that as reflected in 1 Timothy, God has given us material things for our enjoyment and for sharing with others, especially those of the household of faith, and secondarily, those who are in need of immediate sustenance and in need of opportunity.

The most important aspect of the stewardship of all of life, and specifically that of giving, is the overflowing gratitude and thankfulness in our hearts for what God has done in Jesus, and what He is doing for us currently in the gift of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It is because of this that we are moved to give to advance the Kingdom of God, bring people into the grace of Christ, help the poor find new hope, and seek justice for the oppressed. If the love of God is not implanted firmly our hearts, all the “you shoulds,” all the pressure and manipulation in the world, will do nothing except make people angry.

Looking at what our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents achieved, we see a commitment to honor God and save souls from death. It was a level of Christian stewardship that was truly commendable. Those generations built great Methodist churches, seminaries, universities, hospitals, orphanages, and schools, and gave multitudes of money to mission and philanthropic work. They gave that money out of substantially less proportional incomes than we enjoy today. It was the desire of their hearts to set up the Kingdom of God on earth at any cost. A great salvation brought a great gratitude that motivated a great giving. The giving was in the totality of their lives, not just money. We have mostly been talking money here, but I urgently recommend that we put money in the context of the stewardship of our whole lives. The generation that is going home to heaven now is sometimes called the “Greatest Generation.” Christian history from time to time has produced several “Greatest Generations,” sometimes following each other successively. I personally was born into and saw the love, devotion, obedience, enthusiasm, and outpouring of one of those generations. I have witnessed vast numbers of people who gave 30, 40, and 50 percent of their gross income to the Christian Kingdom. These people were motivated by Mr. Wesley’s dictum “Make all you can, save all you can, give all you can.”

It is with anguish in my heart that I have watched the collapse of the Christian Church in Europe, England, Australia, and Canada, and that I am watching the collapse of the United Methodist Church in America. I suggest that the stewardship of life issue and the insatiable appetite for the things of the world are intertwined with the collapse of the Church. The Church in America has deemed that in order to secure people’s attention, it needs to preach a gospel of self-worth, sentimental love, and gratitude or appreciation that people come when they can. Precious few churches remind us of our propensity for self-centeredness (original sin) and our need for sacrifice, obedience, accountability, self-surrender, or total commitment to Christ through the Holy Spirit. Remember Dr. Carl Menninger’s 1973 book *Whatever Became of Sin?* It was a prelude of things to come. Subsequently, the lives of Christians in America, with few exceptions, are not different from the lives of non-Christians. I suggest you read Ron Sider's new book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*. When Sider gives proof after proof of Christians living in ways that are not substantially different, or not different at all, from non-Christians in the areas of giving, ethics, and morals, I suggest that these Christians are living at the lowest level of what it means to be Christian.

You mentioned that the issue of the stewardship of money had produced some anxiety in members of your congregation. It always does, because it strikes at the heart of our real values. It may be that the Holy Spirit is touching some of these people and calling them to a deeper life in Christ. It is not God's desire to harm us; rather, it is in His heart to lead us to a better life. Therefore, some anxiety produced by the presence of God is a good thing. Even some guilt is not bad or harmful then, if it is appropriate guilt. It is not my custom, orientation, need, or desire to place guilt on people. I have seen too many lovely people who carried inappropriate guilt all their lives and were not able to receive the cleansing power of forgiveness offered by Jesus. Our goal is forgiveness, restoration, transformation, and living the joyful, abundant life that Jesus desires for us (John 10:10). However, appropriate guilt placed on our hearts by the Holy Spirit is Love calling us to a newer, better life. I often ask myself the questions, "Am I doing my best? How can I do better? How can I become a more Christlike person? What is God trying to say to me?"

I would suggest you do a study on the stewardship of all of life. There are several valuable resources: Scripture is a good start. Then read a couple of Mr. Wesley's sermons, notably "The Good Steward." After that, read my paper "A Wesleyan View of Stewardship."

A final comment regarding your question about Kingdom People living simply. I know many Kingdom People who, with very modest incomes, have been wise enough with their resources to end up living in nice houses and driving nice cars. The people I am referring to did not spend money on expensive trips, boats, golfing, trailers, skiing trips, etc. And they were wise about not lavishing money on their children. When Americans get in a frenzy of greed over owning things and having every newest technological gadget, the image of how we Christians present ourselves becomes critical. This situation demands that we Christians present an alternative lifestyle that is distinct from the world. I suggest it has changed even in the past ten years. Setting an example of living simply may mean that those of us living in very nice houses, regardless of how we acquired them, should sell them and substantially reduce our housing accommodations. The reason would be to create an image of self-control that would speak to this generation about what real power is. We also know that a substantial number of older people have willed their homes to the Church and to Kingdom work that will benefit from the sale of those homes at their deaths. *The Millionaire Next Door* is an excellent book that explains how people have accomplished what I have discussed here.

In summary, those desiring and living united to God, being formed in the image of Christ, empowered, taught, and led by the Holy Spirit have less of a need for the material things of the world. Our identity, our self-worth, our future is found in love and obedience to God, who meets our real needs and gives us the peace and security that is never found in the pursuit of the things of the world. The happiest, most peaceful, most secure people I have ever known, whether of little or substantial wealth, are those who have determinedly pursued and learned how to give their lives away.

My main points, then, are:

Jesus calls us to make certain our priorities are in order, namely our love and obedience to God.

God does call some people to an austere or ascetic life.

Owning “nice” things is permissible so long as we have control of, and are abundantly giving of, the resources God has given us.

We find peace and joy not in the acquisition of things but in the distribution of them.

I would enjoy receiving your response.

Your friend and colleague in Christ,

James B. Scott

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