

“Living Simply” by Rev. Dr. Tony Larsen

Before I begin my sermon on living simply – which is a request sermon, by the way – I’d like to read you a few quotes from a website called: [Building the Simple Life](#).

- From Henry David Thoreau: “Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes.”
- Rimo’s Rule: “There are two ways to be rich – make more or need less.”
- Dr. Mark Albion: “Don’t get really good at what you don’t want to do.”
- And from A.A. Milne: “One of the advantages of being disorderly is that one is constantly making exciting discoveries.”

* * * * *

There’s a certain spiral that a lot of Americans fall into. They work at a job they hate; and to make up for the fact that they have to spend so much time doing what they despise, they buy themselves little trinkets and toys and gadgets to make it all seem worth their while. But the more things they buy, the more they need to hang on to that job they hate, just to pay for the things they need to buy because they hate their job!

And if their job takes up a lot of time – which often it does, if it pays well – then they don’t have much time to enjoy the things they bought (the things they bought to make up for the fact that they don’t have time to enjoy things). You know what this is? [*Tony turned around in a circle as he snarled viciously.*] It’s a vicious circle – and that’s what has happened in American society – we need to have this and have this, and have this – our economy thrives on it – and that’s the message we see on TV every day. You won’t find commercials on television that say: “Don’t spend your money. You don’t need all that stuff. Stay home, relax, and enjoy your friends.” You won’t find that ad on TV.

Which is why so many of us end up in the rat race. And the trouble with being in the rat race, as Lily Tomlin reminds us, is that even if you win, you’re still a rat. And we end up spending money we don’t have, to buy things we don’t need, to impress people we don’t even like. That’s the system we live in. And that’s what we portray to the rest of the world. When the rest of the world looks at us, and thinks about American values, they see materialism. And you can hardly blame them. I mean, we talk about democracy around the world, but we almost always tie it in with free trade and free markets and free enterprise – as if the right to vote is on a par with the right to shop! That’s what people in many other countries see when they look at the United States – that’s what they believe is the American way of life: unfettered materialism. Worshipping at the great Mall.

And I daresay, a lot of Americans would probably agree.

During the war in Afghanistan, a woman who had just purchased an S.U.V., was asked why she would buy such a gas-guzzler. And she said, “Americans have a right to do what we want and to buy what we want. Isn’t that why we are fighting?”

For some people the American way of life is materialism, and that's one reason people in so many other nations think we have our values mixed up. (And I think they may be right.)

And there are a couple reasons we might want to be concerned about this. For one thing, we're using up most of the world's resources. Americans make up less than 5% of the world's population, but we use a quarter of its energy. Five percent using 25%!

The same with many other natural resources. If we could simplify our lives, we'd do much less damage to the planet and we'd make more assets available to the rest of the world. This is what Gandhi meant when he said, "Live simply, that others may simply live."

But the other reason we might want to be concerned about simplifying, ties in with the theme we're celebrating today – freedom from slavery. Because excessive consumerism is a form of slavery, and unfettered materialism is a prison without walls. And that's because the more things you own, the more they generally own you. Or, as Henry David Thoreau put it: One "who owns little is little owned."

So, how do we change all that? Well, we can begin by getting rid of clutter. And what is clutter? Anything you haven't seen or heard or used or worn in the past year would probably be a good start.

When Craig and I moved from our apartment on Main Street to our present home on Ninth Street, we put a lot of stuff that we knew we wouldn't need right away in the attic. And we thought, we'll gradually get to that and bring down what we need. But you know, we didn't even look at that stuff for at least a year and a half; and when we did go up to check it out, we realized that if we could live without it for that long, we probably didn't need most of it anyway. We got rid of about a thousand books at that time – and a lot of other things we didn't really use or need.

By the way, there's often a trade-off between having what you want and doing what you want. If you want to have a lot of things, you'll probably have to spend a lot of time doing stuff you don't like in order to pay for them. But if you don't mind having fewer things, you'll probably have more time to do the things you like. So that's your trade-off.

Now, obviously, we need some of both of these [having and doing] – you need to have shelter and food and basic necessities. But how much more than that do you need? And if you were given a choice between having better things and doing better things, which would you choose?

Which brings us to the question of money, since it takes money to buy things, and money is probably the source of more complications than just about anything else.

If any of you saw the movie "Oh God" with George Burns, you may remember the part where God says, "The reason I created Adam and Eve and gave them no clothes to wear

was because I knew that as soon as they had clothes, they'd want pockets, they'd want money – and then there'd be trouble.”

Somehow we instinctively know that money can be a big problem in our lives, but we're not sure we'd like to be free of that problem. There was a “Gem of the Day” in one of the old Ann Landers columns that came from The Prairie Rambler. It went: “They say it is better to be poor and happy than rich and miserable – but how about a compromise, like being moderately rich and just moody?”

There's a Jewish story I like where a rich person – could be a man or a woman, I'll say a woman here – a rich woman comes to Jacob the Baker to seek his advice. She says, “What must I do to attain freedom and happiness?” And Jacob says, “You must learn to give your money away.” And she says, “But why?” And he says, “Because either the key to your wallet is in your heart, or the key to your heart is in your wallet. You can't have both. You see, you can give without loving. But you can't love without giving.”

Of course, the question comes, how much should I give? Well, I can't tell you what's right for you, but I do know that I have found it helpful to give a certain percentage of my income to charity. Each month, when I get my paycheck, I set aside my designated percentage as a charity account. I then think of the income I have left as my real income – for food, bills, spending money, etc. Then, as charitable requests come my way during the year, I donate to them out of the charity fund. When I get my income tax refund, I give the same designated percentage of that amount to charity. So my charitable giving is always a percentage of my net income. (This is easier for me than using gross income, because taxes can vary from year to year.) One of the benefits of planning my charitable giving this way is that I never have to feel guilty when someone asks me for a donation. You see, once you have decided on your percentage, then it's never a question of whether you'll be generous, but who you'll be generous to. So when you get a request to donate to the firefighter's pension fund, or to the disabled veterans, or to the Shriners for circus tickets for handicapped children, you don't have to feel guilty if you say no to one of these causes. Because the truth is, if you give to one of these, you are taking away money from other projects that you would otherwise have more money to give to. So you never have to feel stingy for turning down a charitable request – you're just being a good steward of the money you have available. And I'm very clear on the amount I give over a year. It's neither more nor less than the percentage I've decided on.

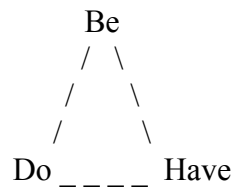
So that's how I do it. The percentage I give is not important, because it might not be the right amount for you. But I do think designating a certain amount is an easier way to do this. If you designate a certain proportion of your income for charitable causes – one that's high enough to be a sacrifice but low enough to be achievable – then you won't end up giving out of guilt. You'll give out of your fullness, you'll give more wisely, and you'll simplify your life.

Now, I could point out various different ideas and techniques for simplifying your life – and if we had time, we could just share our ideas right here. But I want to suggest that what might be simplifying for one person might not be for another. For example, Craig

and I have a cleaning person come in every two weeks to clean part of our house. Now, we could do it ourselves, and of course it'd be cheaper, but having her come frees up a lot of time that we wouldn't otherwise have. It simplifies our life; for others giving up the cleaning person might be the way to simplify. There's no one-size-fits-all.

Also, simplifying your life doesn't always mean spending less money. A couple in our church, Frank and Andrea Egerton, recently bought a Toyota Prius hybrid. (I know, because Craig and I bought their old car.) The car they bought was more expensive than the one they sold, of course, but it will do a lot less damage to the environment than ours will. Because it's a hybrid, it runs on electricity and gasoline and uses much less energy, and pollutes a lot less. Financially it's more expensive up front – but in its effect on the earth, it represents a net gain in simplicity. (Also, Andrea told me its effect on your income tax is a \$2,000 write-off!)

More important than telling you exactly what to do, is giving you a guide by which you might decide for yourself what do to. And here's my guide.



Consider what kind of person you'd like to be. Or who you already are. What you do will affect that. The more you do a certain kind of thing, the more you become a certain kind of person. And who you are is affected by what you have. (You are what you own ... and what owns you.) And your having and doing affect each other, as we've already seen. So these three all influence one another. And if you want to simplify your life, consider who you want to be – and out of that will flow what you should do to become that kind of person, and what you should have. And the things you're doing or having that don't fit that person – you can let go of, like the clutter they are, and make room for the person you most want to be.

Simple?