

The Celebration of Discipline: Training in Simplicity

1 Timothy 6:2b-10; 17-19

August 17, 2014

Dan Hoffman

[Pray]

I have been watching a Television series called “Arrow”. For anyone who hasn’t seen it, its main character is named Oliver Queen and he is a Robin Hood meets Batman vigilante. He is the son of a deceased billionaire who uses his resources to fight white collar crime that the police department has never been able to touch.

It is quite entertaining, but one thing that stood out to me was a line that gets thrown around – Oliver is referred to as part of the 1%, implying he is richer than 99% of people on earth. And it’s true he’s a billionaire. But it’s not the whole truth.

Last Christmas we did a series titled “Advent Conspiracy” which centered around the fact that we in the West are *all* exceptionally rich. So rich in fact that if your gross monthly income is \$1000 a month your standard of living is higher than 90% of everyone who has ever lived. That is surprising in and of itself since \$12,000 a year does not seem like a lot of money to us, but it is. But what is even more surprising is that if you make \$50,000 a year you qualify to join Oliver Queen in the richest 1% of people who have ever lived. So all of us here fall somewhere between the richest 1% and 10% of people on earth.

That’s quite a statistic, but what is a more sobering statistic is that on average the richer a person is, the higher percentage of their money they spend on themselves and the less they give away. In 2010 the Fraser Institute of research found that percentage wise Canada is one of the least generous nations on earth giving on average a dismal 0.68% of our total income away to charity.¹ Why is this?

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said:

No one can serve two masters, either they will hate the one and love the other, or they will be devoted to one and despise the other, you can not serve both God and money. (Matthew 6:24)

That means money always seeks to be king in our lives and a nation full of rich kids like us are particularly vulnerable to this danger. Those of us who have pledged our lives to Christ aren’t free from this either. In fact we find ourselves torn. We want to honour Christ with our resources, but we also feel the need to provide the best we can afford for our children – whether that is the right school, the right clothes the right house. And of course on top of this we seek our comfort. Sometimes we make financial decisions based on Christ’s reason but the next

¹ <http://www.fraserinstitute.org/research-news/news/news-releases/Charitable-giving-on-the-wane-in-Canada:-Manitobans-remain-the-most-generous-Canadians/>

moment we do things out of fear of what those around us will think. And this means Canada is a scary place to be a Christian. Jesus said:

Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (Matthew 19:24)

But this isn't a bad news sermon, this is a good news sermon. There is hope even for those of us who were born rich beyond the imagination of the vast majority of the world. Instead of giving ourselves to money, we can give ourselves to the pursuit of godliness.

...

So today we are continuing our Celebration of Discipline series. The spiritual disciplines are tools that Christians have at our disposal to follow Paul's command to Timothy:

...train yourself to be godly. (1 Timothy 4:7)

Friends, if you are a Christian you control the level of your godliness – it is up to you. Your being the godliest person here or just fitting in with everyone else in our culture is dependant on whether or not you decide to train yourself. And training requires great effort.

So it is important to know we don't train because training is fun, it isn't. We train for the reward it promises. Young hockey stars train for the chance to make the NHL, to play the game with the best in the world, and to take home an insane paycheck. And Christians train for the joy getting what God has for us. Hebrews tells us:

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:11)

Now I have said this before but it needs repeating – this is not works salvation. Grace starts with God and comes to us free of charge, but when it hits us it changes the way we live. And the way we live then is the evidence that we have been saved. And so we train ourselves in godliness working out the salvation we have received.

Now our journey through the disciplines began with training ourselves to read scripture and meditate and pray. And the challenge was to read through the New Testament in 60 days. And a lot of us have taken up the challenge and I'm really excited about that.

If you still want to get on board, or you spilt coffee on your last reading plan or your wife put the grocery list on it you can pick up another copy in the back on your way out today. And again if you started this but have missed a few days, don't beat yourself up. Nobody starts training themselves in a discipline already proficient at it. Pick yourself up and keep going. Don't give up your training because the reward is worth it. Ok?

Then two weeks ago we shifted away from the inward disciplines to some outward disciplines – disciplines we practice in relationship with each other. And we looked first at training ourselves to submit.

Now submission is a dirty word in our culture. We think of submission as something that is forced on the weak. But the biblical picture of submission is not something for the weak at all. The strongest and most powerful man who ever lived – not Samson but Jesus – was a man of submission.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, in the moment of His arrest Jesus chose submission over self-defense telling Peter:

Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? (Matthew 26:53)

Can you imagine how things could have been different – how close the world was to apocalyptic Armageddon 2000 years ago! The High Priest's rag-tag militia armed with clubs and spears show up to capture Jesus only to find themselves routed by legions of invincible angelic warriors responding to Jesus' command. That would have changed history alright... for the worse.

Friends, Jesus was not weak, He had the power but sheathed it to lay His life down in submission to His Father's will. And He did this because while He knew the cross was before Him, He also knew that the reward of doing God's will is always worth the cost.

That's why it says:

For the joy set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame. (Hebrews 12:2)

Jesus lived for the Father's reward and we can too. So today we are going to look at a second outward tool that we, in spite of our wealth, can use to train ourselves to be godly – the discipline of simplicity.

If you haven't already, please open your Bibles to 1 Timothy chapter 6. Today the big idea that is going to guide us through our text is as follows: **Training in godly simplicity brings the reward of life that is truly life.**

Now in this passage Paul doesn't specifically use the words "godly simplicity", but in verse 6 he speaks of godliness with contentment. And it is this being satisfied with what we have rather than always seeking to get more that I have defined as living simply - simplicity. And I'll unpack that a little more as we go along.

Let's pick this up in verse 3. Before this in the letter Paul has been advising Timothy to teach people how to relate to each other in the church and what errors in theology to avoid. And so in verse 3 he says:

[Read 1 Timothy 6:3-5]

Now I want to start by defining “godly simplicity”. Godly simplicity means choosing to live with less in order to seek the Kingdom of God first. Let me say that again, “Godly simplicity means choosing to live with less in order to seek the Kingdom of God first.”

But before we unpack exactly what this might look like we need to examine three things that godly simplicity is not.

First and most obviously, godly simplicity means not living extravagantly.

...

Now probably none of us here think of ourselves as living extravagantly – few in the world do. But it is essential to realize that extravagance is not defined by driving hundred thousand dollar sports cars, but rather extravagance is when the percentage of your income that you spend on yourself is close to 100%.

And in Canada the cultural expectation is that we all live as extravagantly as possible. We max out our credit cards to live just beyond what we can afford. We want to drive the nicest car and live in the nicest house and wear the nicest clothing and buy the best we can for our kids in order to prove we love them and that we have arrived. And this kind of pressure has put the average Canadian in \$27,131 dollars of consumer debt – this does not include the mortgage on your house if you own one.²

And since nobody takes out a loan to give to charity it is pretty safe to say that while Canada is one of the richest countries on earth what we have done is spread ourselves so thin seeking out new luxuries for ourselves that we can't afford to put any more of our finances towards seeking God's kingdom first. Is that you?

But to people like average Christian Canadians Paul says:

Instruct those who are rich in this present world... to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share (1 Timothy 6:17-18)

If we are going to be godly we must free up our wealth to bless those around us. And so the challenge of embracing godly simplicity is to understand just how much we have, and then to choose to give some of our luxuries up in order to put more of our money towards seeking God's kingdom first.

So godly simplicity means choosing not to live extravagantly consuming close to 100% of your income. Second godly simplicity means not believing that our godliness has led to the wealth that we have. And this is what Paul addresses in verse 5 where he talks about those who believe that godliness is a means to financial gain.

² <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/economy/debt-by-numbers-troubling-trends-in-consumer-spending/article14017219/>

So some Ephesians believed that their wealth was evidence that their godliness was being rewarded, and others believed they could use godliness to get riches. The words we use to describe this error is “the Health and Wealth Gospel.”

But notice Paul doesn't just say these people are wrong, he actually says they have been robbed of the truth. In other words they are poorer than they would be because of this mistaken thought – they have been robbed.

Now most of us know the Bible does not promise that following God will make you healthy or wealthy and so we despise white suite wearing, holy water selling televangelists. But actually this danger is closer to home than we think. In fact you and I may be following a health and wealth gospel ourselves.

Here is the test: if you have ever looked down on someone who was begging or homeless and thought “if only they worked hard like I do or was wiser with their money like I am then they wouldn't be in this spot?” Have you ever had those thoughts? I have. But this judgment is actually a form of the health and wealth gospel.

At its core this belief is grounded in the supposition that our goodness or wisdom or godliness has earned us what we have. But the reality is quite the opposite. Yes, many of us have worked hard, and we should. But our ability to earn is largely dependant on factors well outside our control. None of us chose what country we were born in, none of us had any input into the color of our skin or our level of intelligence, and to a large degree we lack any control over how healthy we are. And yet these factors have been essential in getting us to where we are financially.

We have what we have not because we are godly, but because God has decided to give us the responsibility to steward His wealth to build His kingdom. That's how you got your money, and that's what your money is for. In verse 17 Paul says:

[Read 1 Timothy 6:17]

So second, godly simplicity means not arrogantly believing we have earned the resources we have, but instead seeing them as an enjoyable responsibility God has provided us with.

Now there is at least one more thing that godly simplicity is not.

Some of you may have heard of a woman named Hetty Green. She was the wealthiest woman in American at the advent of the twentieth century. She was worth the equivalent of 4 billion dollars at her death but she died with a terrible nick name – she was known as the Witch of Wall Street.

She gained this title by never wasting and never giving away a cent. Green never turned on her hot water. She wore the same old black dress and overcoat all the time. Legend has it every morning she ate oatmeal cooked on the radiator in the small office she rented where she didn't pay heat. When her son Ned broke his leg she tried to have him treated at a free hospital for the poor, but when discovered she stormed off. Her son's leg never healed properly and later in life he had to have it amputated.³

Hetty Green lived a simple life below her means but she did not live a godly life. And so I want to make very clear that simplicity for simplicity's sake or simplicity for the purpose of storing away money for our future safety serves no godly function. Just because you might be tight with your money does not mean you are using your resources in a God-honoring way.

Godly simplicity, alternatively, means intentionally choosing to live with less in order to seek the Kingdom of God first.

And so in contrast to living extravagantly, and in contrast to believing we have earned what we have and so are entitled to it, and in contrast to simplicity for any reason other than seeking God's kingdom first, Paul urges Timothy and us to train ourselves in godly simplicity.

And Paul urges us towards this not because living on less than we have in order to give more away is fun, no discipline is, but because the reward is worth it. Paul says: **Training in godly simplicity brings the reward of life that is truly life.**

Look with me now at verse 6.

[Read 1 Timothy 6:6]

Now throughout this series we have been stressing that the spiritual disciplines are not ends in themselves – Christians are not called to train ourselves to be godly just because it is good, but we are actually instructed to work for a reward.

In verse 6 Paul could easily have said “Timothy, oppose those people who think godliness is a means to financial gain. Just do what is right because it is good. Christians shouldn't be motivated by profit.” But he doesn't say that.⁴

Instead he says: “Godliness with contentment is great gain.” Godliness is the way to incredible profit and it comes when we are content with simplicity rather than greedy for riches.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hetty_Green

⁴ This section adapted from John Piper's sermon “Money: Currency for Christian Hedonism”

Friends, when your godliness frees you from the desire to be rich and helps you be content with what you have then your godliness is tremendously profitable. In chapter 4 Paul said:

Train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. (1 Timothy 4:7b-8)

Godliness that overcomes the desire for more money results in great spiritual wealth worth way more than any other kind both in this life and in the life to come. And this is the reward of life that is truly life.

Friends, do you want that? William Wallace said “All men die, but few men really live.” Can you see that temporarily giving up some of the luxuries we have lavished on ourselves that disappear overnight and leave us desperate for more would be worth giving up in order to joyfully live life that is truly life?

If you are hungry for that kind of life look at Paul’s challenge to rich people like us in verse 18:

[Read 1 Timothy 6:18-19]

Paul says life that is truly life is a treasure; it is a reward worth pursuing. And the way to gain this reward is by training ourselves in godly simplicity. So what does godly simplicity look like for us as individuals and for us as a church?

Let’s start with two challenges for us as individuals or families:

First, ask yourself or yourselves: “How can we push back against the North American Dream for more in favor of freeing up our resources to seek God’s kingdom first?”

Now I am not advocating selling everything you have and giving it to the poor, though we should not assume none of us are called to do that.⁵ But I am advocating making a plan with your spouse and perhaps your children to live on less than you currently do with the goal of giving more away.

So how might you do this? First research a cause worth supporting. Last Christmas we highlighted organizations like World Vision and Living Water International, but really there are limitless options. If you have a family consider taking your kids on a mission trip to a third world orphanage or perhaps support and volunteer together at a food bank or homeless shelter right here at home. Agreeing together on a cause worth supporting is important because it guards you from taking on simplicity for simplicity’s sake.

⁵ Consider Luke 18:22

After you have chosen a cause set up a plan for how you will finance your support. Rather than just deciding as a family to put \$50 aside towards your charity of choice choose things in your life that you could cut back on and put the money you save into a separate account. And this is where the challenge lies for us wealthy Canadians. It would not hurt most of us at all to set aside \$50 a month more than we currently do, but that isn't really the point here. The point is to train ourselves in godly simplicity for the purpose of seeking God's kingdom first.

So that might mean going to Starbucks only once a week and putting your second weekly Starbucks trip's money away. Or deciding to buy your next shirt at Value Village instead of the Gap and putting the money you save away.

If you have kids I would encourage you to let them come up with ideas for how you as a family might do this in order to have them excited about what you are taking on. Kids have spent less time saturated by the culture than us adults and so are often more faith-filled and generous than we are.

By giving something up in order to give more you will be practicing godly simplicity in order to seek God's kingdom first.

Verse 19 says there is an incredible reward when we do this – an eternally valuable reward. It's so clear that Paul's eyes were always on the essential, always focused on what truly matters. And so here he is most concerned with our salvation and the salvation of our families. He knows rich people like us run a great risk of loving money and ending up robbed of eternal life and pierced with many griefs, and he doesn't want this for us.

So friends seek this reward, in spite of how wealthy you are, choose to train yourself in godly simplicity to gain the reward of life that is truly life.

The second challenge for us as individuals and families might seem a little surprising at first and that is to ask yourself "am I using the abilities and gifts I have been given to maximize my earning potential so I am able to give as much away as possible. Look at verse 9

[Read 1 Timothy 6:9-10]

Many people misquote this verse saying "money is the root of all evil", but notice that the error here is the "desire to get rich" and the "love of money". Money itself is not evil and there is nothing wrong with having lots of money in and of itself.

I think this is important to point out because in my younger years I thought that the warnings about money that we find in the Bible – and there are lots of them – meant that to be a Christian required a voluntary vow of poverty. And I felt guilty for the fact that I had been born in Canada and into the situation that I find myself in. But this is a great mistake. Verse 17 says God has richly provided us with

everything for our enjoyment.” God doesn’t want us to be poor. Rather He wants us to use all the resources we have been gifted with the ability to collect to seek and build His kingdom first.

And so if He has gifted you with a mind for business then you would be burying your talents in the ground if you do not invest what you have in order to put yourself in a position where you are able to provide greatly for those around you.

So as an individual or as a family ask yourself is there any way we can make more money than we currently do in order to seek God’s kingdom first?

Finally I think there is an implication here for us as a church family as well.

Statistically if you are a member here at Fort George and attend weekly you give much more to charity than the average Canadian, more than three times as much in fact.⁶ And of course most of that giving is directed right here at Church and that is not a bad thing. But many churches are starting to realize that similar to us as individuals, our churches in North America have fallen in to spending most of our money on ourselves.

The budget at Fort George for 2014 is a little over \$170,000. That’s a lot of money. If you are a member here, and I encourage you all to become members here, then you get to choose how this money gets spent. And the question we should ask is are we spending most of our resources on ourselves or can we say that the way we spend our money as a church proves that we seek God’s kingdom first?

So two thoughts: perhaps we need to ask “how can we use our building more during the week to build God’s kingdom since currently just keeping the lights on and paying the taxes takes up a lot of our yearly budget and we currently use this building for ourselves just a few hours a week.

Second, and I say this a little tongue a cheek, but I say it none the less, another one of the major expenses here is yelling at you this morning. So when it comes to making the budget for next year ask yourselves does the pastor, who spends most of his time with you, really need a raise or could that money be better directed somewhere else?

The point is this: **Training in godly simplicity brings the reward of life that is truly life.** I want to get that reward and I want to be part of a church that gets that reward. So train yourself, as individuals and as a church, in godly simplicity.

⁶ <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2012001/t/11637/tbl02-eng.htm>