

Followers Of The Way

Ancient Discipleship For Modern Christians

Reading: Matthew 16:19-34

“Live as simply as possible”

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Matthew 6 v 19-34

¹⁹ “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

²² “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy,^[c] your whole body will be full of light. ²³ But if your eyes are unhealthy,^[d] your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

²⁴ “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life^[e]?

²⁸ “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Today we are continuing our series called 'Followers of the way' looking at various passages from the bible based on a framework of 10 'Waymarks' or markers of the Way of Life recommended by the Community of St. Aidan and St. Hilda. Simon Reed has written this excellent book to accompany the series which I recommend you have a look at – it is full of practical wisdom for learning ancient ways of discipleship for modern Christians.

We started a few weeks ago with the first waymark which is *be a lifelong learner* – learning from Jesus through the Bible, from other Christians both past and present and through the wonders of Creation around us.

Then Pippa helped us think about the second Waymark – *journeying with a Soul friend*. This is all about finding one or two people who will meet up with us at regular intervals to encourage and challenge us to go deeper in our faith and be real about the joys and challenges of discipleship.

Last week Dave shared about the 3rd waymark – keeping a rhythm of prayer, work and recreation. Instead of being simply Sunday Christians how do we take time out of our day, week and month to spend time with the Lord and recalibrate ourselves to keep in sync with him. What we are discovering from studying these waymarks of a distinctive way of life is that they look simple on the surface and many of us would agree they sound great, but actually putting them into practice is not quite so easy!

This week's topic is no exception because our waymark for this week is 'Live as simply as possible.'

For me personally this is one of the greatest challenges of the series. It is coming up to a year since we moved to Bath and navigating the complexities of life and ministry has felt far from simple at times. The realities of church, family, tenants, buildings, badgers, bats, and bees all seem to conspire to distract attention from prayer and seeking the Lord. But much as it might be tempting sometimes just to ditch responsibilities and go and live as a hermit, it must be possible to learn to dwell in the peace and simplicity of Christ despite the complexity and craziness that surrounds us. Rather like Jesus managing to sleep in the back of the boat whilst there was a storm raging, part of the answer is to do with letting go of control and having faith that God will provide for all our needs.

A couple of years ago a friend of ours called Jennifer gave me a present as she was getting ready to move house and needed to downsize a few things. She wrote in a card 'I know you and Mims prefer to be minimalist so thought you might just like the enclosed.' And this is what she gave me - a lovely wooden coaster that she had bought just some years back from a man making them by the side of the road when she visited Crimea. I love it – it sits on the table next to my quiet time chair ready for my morning cuppa. But I was also delighted that Jennifer thought of us as minimalist!

Minimalism and simplicity is something that many of us aspire to, but life happens doesn't it and perhaps that is the source of our problem: maybe we are all products of our Western bondage to autonomy, ownership, productivity and stuff. Perhaps it's not just me that is guilty as charged.

I don't actually meet that many people who blatantly claim to seek after money and material things, myself included. But most people I meet do want to feel secure and comfortable. And I wonder whether that is where we start to deviate from the narrow path and start making life more complex for ourselves. How comfortable do we need to be? Recent estimates put UK wealth at about £12.8Tn and our annual national income per person at over £25K compared to Burundi at £155. We are amongst the wealthiest people on earth and that brings trouble with it. You see, Jesus said that wealth is actually *deceitful* bringing with it both worries and unfulfillment.

In the parable of the sower Jesus describe some plants that grew up but were choked by thorns. But he went on to say that thorns symbolise 'The worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things which come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.

So Jesus not only describes wealth as deceitful, It has a suffocating effect on the soil of our hearts, choking out the life of the Kingdom.

The gospel of the West says the more you have, the happier and more secure you will be. We even start to build our identity around products – you hear people saying I am an Apple person. Or Android. You are what you wear. Are we really what we buy?

In today's passage, Jesus is brutal in his verdict: ²⁴ 'No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Mammon.'

John Mark Comer points out that this is the only occasion that Jesus actually names a false god. Serving Mammon, wealth or call it 'financial security' can easily become a religion which can deceive us all.

Long before it spectacularly collapsed in 2008 Lehman Brothers' banker Paul Mazur wrote in a book titled *The causes and consequences of American prosperity*: 'The community that can be trained to desire change, to want new things even before the old have been entirely consumed, yields a market to be measured more by desires than by needs. And man's desires can be developed so that they will greatly overshadow his needs.'

In other words, we can easily be manipulated to desire more and more. In 2021 Facebook and Google's advertising revenue was \$117Bn which is just about the same as Kenya's entire GDP. Just as I write this on my desk, I spot a dozen logos and brands within 2 foot of my laptop. (Actually 13 because I just noticed it is a Dell laptop!)

So, we have a problem. What is the solution?

The first thing to realise is that the more stuff we have, the more worries we will have!

Mims snapped a pic of an art installation called 'Venus of the Rags' by Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto and now we have a print of it hanging next to our washing machine:



The simple beauty of the classic Venus statue is contrasted against an overwhelming pile of clothes in front of her.

It makes a good point. But it also follows, more stuff means more worries. But Jesus' warning against consumerism extends to not idolising food and drink.

God does provide for our needs. When he had to inspect the cupboards daily to see if there was enough to feed the orphans in his care, George Muller said: 'This kind of living keeps the Lord very close'. Spiritually, sometimes less is more.

The second thing we can do is to consciously declutter and downsize. It takes effort but it can be very cleansing to get rid of some of the clobber we accumulate. A friend of mine went to Africa on mission for a few years and they sold or gave away the vast majority of their possessions, which he found to be wonderfully freeing. But he told me the trouble was on their return to the UK people kept giving them stuff, until they now have more clobber than they did before! We have to consciously resist the tide of accumulation and learn that generosity and giving is actually a route to feeling free.

Simon Reed points out that there are two more areas to focus on when it comes to simplicity.

The first is in our relationships. Complexity in our lives can arise from not being transparent with others and this is rooted in one of the 10 commandments – not to bear false witness to others. Exodus 20v16. In the previous chapter to our passage Jesus talks about the importance of being straightforward in our speech, plain speaking at all times. 'Let your yes be yes and your No, No' Matthew 5v37. How

many times does life get tangled by miscommunication that could have been prevented if we grasped the nettle and deal with issues early on. Simplicity means being straightforward and trustworthy and sometimes that means being the first to apologise to get things straightened out.

The final area is about the use of our time. What I am learning is that patience and simplicity are very linked. Sometimes life is *obdurate* – in other words the harder I push the more resistance I encounter. It comes down to control. If I insist on being in control then my mind will be plagued by plans and schemes. If I can pray about it – then I leave it in the hands of God, and life is simpler.

On Saturday I was in Cheltenham at 5pm but I got the sense that it was urgent to go and see Jenny that evening. I called Robin and Jo and we all went in and said prayers and anointed her. Although my talk was only half finished I just figured, if I was just obedient to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the talk would take care of itself – and here we are. You are kind and I know the Lord is with us, it's ok!

Jesus warned of the dangers of a mindset of accumulation, because it brings anxiety right along with it. He warned about worrying too much about tomorrow because we might miss what he is saying today. The answer is to focus on obedience and the Kingdom of God. When it comes down to it we simply need to listen and follow what Jesus tells us.

³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.