

# Growing God's People

the journal for teachers and other learners

## The Blessings of Kingdom Simplicity

When friends return from trips overseas, having been on a short-term mission trip for a week or two in a developing nation, we will almost always hear them say, "You know [they] live with so little, and we just have sooo much stuff!"

Such is the perspective of modern Christians in North America. As vested members of our culture of affluence, we rarely question whether or not God wants us to make more money, own a bigger house, have a newer couch, or enjoy the latest toys and entertainment. So what are we to do about it?

Stuff becomes the stuff of life. Yet we are hollow at our core, surrounded by stuff and longing for a depth of relationship with God in which He is our source of contentment and joy. Yet

we are encouraged to never be satisfied—and by some authors to be forever going to God requesting more!

Perhaps you are like many others who long for simplicity, who long to embrace a lifestyle that says, "Hey, there's more to life than owning a bunch of distractions. There is a lifestyle that reflects the values of the kingdom of Heaven, even while living in the most prosperous and indulgent kingdom on earth."

The goal of our journal is love—greater love for God and greater love for our neighbor. That love will find its loudest voice when it's spoken from a life of simplicity. To that end, we look to the study of the discipline of simplicity, and the growth it requires of our life of faith.

## Seeking Simplicity

*When we practice the spiritual disciplines, we stand against the basic principles of this world. Through participation in these "disciplines of grace" we come to know more deeply the intimate love of God and the sufficiency of His grace. In each issue of GGP, we will focus on a spiritual discipline as it is practiced within the Christian faith.*

**By Robert Hodge**

The gospel message brings with it a call to simplicity, for in becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ all possessions, passions and pursuits are subjected to the supremacy of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The challenge in subjecting these lesser loves lies in the fact that we are surrounded by the successes of a modern, affluent society in which—for the most part—we participate as well-educated, well-compensated citizens.

Perhaps it is time Evangelicals embrace the discipline of simplicity as if we believe it's what Jesus would do, learn to love and enjoy it, and then live as "salt" and "light" in a culture corrupted by the idolatry of things.

Unlike the self-imposed piety of asceticism, true simplicity can flow only out a life that has been inwardly transformed by the radical norms of the Christian faith. When this happens, the Christian exudes a simplicity that

mirrors the transformed heart whose sole focus is her Lord and the Kingdom of Heaven.

"The Christian discipline of simplicity is an *inward* reality that results in an *outward* life-style. Both the inward and the outward aspects of simplicity are essential," writes Richard Foster in *Celebration of Discipline*.

"We really must understand that the lust for affluence in contemporary society is psychotic. It is psychotic because it has completely lost touch with reality. We crave things we neither need nor enjoy...Where planned obsolescence leaves off, psychological obsolescence takes over...It is time we awaken to the fact that conformity to a sick society is to be sick," writes Foster.

For the Christian disciplined by a biblical worldview, all things are received as gifts from God, all things are maintained and managed by God's sovereign care, and all things are made available to others by means of our proper stewardship of those possessions.

### **PRACTICING THE DISCIPLINE**

Ironically, not spending often costs more than spending money. Like the effects of a fast on our bellies, we become aware of God's presence and of God's sufficiency in bringing contentment. The sugar-high fades

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## Confession, continued.

and with it the anxieties of middle-class believers ashamedly concerned with keeping up with the Jones'. Simplicity brings her sweet reward.

As a faithful practitioner of simplicity (read his book *Freedom of Simplicity* to learn more), Richard Foster offers several practical steps to take as outward expressions of the centered life of faith.

*“First, buy things for their usefulness rather than their status. Cars should be bought for their utility, not their prestige...when you are considering an apartment, a condominium, or a house, thought should be given to livability rather than how much it will impress others...wear your clothes until they are worn out. Stop trying to impress people with your clothes and impress them with your life.*

*“Second, reject anything that is producing an addiction in*

*you. Learn to distinguish between real psychological need, like cheerful surroundings, and an addiction...if you become addicted to television, by all means sell you set or give it away...if money has a grip on your heart, give some away and feel the inner release. Simplicity is freedom, not slavery. Refuse to be a slave to anything but God,”* writes Foster.

*May we as teachers long for the purity of heart that comes from desiring to see the Kingdom of God advance, and in that desiring see its values and goals consume the dross of our material possessions. May we discover in our hearts the simplicity of Christian faith, and may that simplicity show itself strong in a more simple lifestyle that conveys to the community that we are but sojourners and pilgrims living the life of faith.*

## Teaching and Learning God's Way



### Finding Favor with God

By T.M. Moore

In Genesis 6:8 we read, “Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.” This passage is often misunderstood; many read it to say something like this, “Because Noah was a preacher of righteousness [citing 2 Pt. 2.5] he was pleasing to God; therefore, God chose him to save the world through the flood.” But this is *not* what the

text says.

Noah was part of a generation of whom the Lord judged that “every imagination of the thoughts of men’s hearts is only evil continually” (v. 5). God determined to destroy that entire generation in a grand tragedy of judgment. None, it seemed, were to be spared. But then *Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord*. That is, of all the members of that sinful generation, Noah received a pardon, became the recipient of God’s grace, and was then commissioned to serve as a vessel of redemption for the rest of the creation.

As Christian educators we should have no greater desire than that our learners find favor with God. Let’s examine the various components of this phrase and consider what they might mean for us.

Noah’s finding favor with God depended, in the first place, *on his having a direct, personal encounter with the living God* (v. 13). God came to Noah, spoke to Noah, revealed his sin to him (“the end of *all flesh* has come before Me”), and extended to him the opportunity of repentance and obedience. Somehow the Word of God broke through to Noah, showed him his sin, revealed the wrath of God against wickedness, and called him to obedience.

*Second, God set forth the plan of obedience Noah must follow if he was to enjoy the favor of God and escape His*

*wrath*. Those who would benefit from the grace of God, being convicted of their sin, must then be instructed in how they are to obey Him – no matter how demanding the project.

Third, *Noah would learn through obedience the high cost of discipleship*. When Noah’s neighbors questioned him about his project, he became a preacher of righteousness, indicting himself and his generation for their sin, warning of judgment to come, and calling upon his contemporaries to forsake their wicked ways and seek the path of righteousness before it was too late.

Fourth, *God used Noah for the redemption of the creation* – people, animals, plants, indeed, the entire planet. God’s intention, in extending His favor to people, is that His renewing grace might reach as far through them as they themselves reach, to every aspect of human life and interest, every relationship, role, and responsibility.

Finally, Noah’s encounter with God, and finding favor with Him, *led to worship* (Gen. 8.20). Encounters with God *always* do.

What can we derive from Noah’s finding favor with God for our work as Christian educators? Just these things: First, *our goal as instructors must ever be to lead our students into an encounter with the living God*, where they may hope to find favor with Him. Second, *we must not shy away from denouncing sin – even specific sins – or from showing the clear path that they must take who would walk in the favor of God*. Third, as teachers we must *challenge our learners to take on redemptive work that is beyond anything they can accomplish apart from the grace of God, and that reaches to every area of life where they reach*. As part of this we must prepare them for a life of standing against the status quo, and suffering for righteousness’ sake. Finally, we must *teach our learners the importance and joy of worship as a way of life*.

Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord; may our learners find favor with Him as well.

Though their strict adherence to celibacy sadly led to their extinction (not their adherence to simplicity), the Shakers have left a legacy of simplicity for other Christians to study and follow.

Founded by dissenters from Quaker churches, the Shakers lived in gender-segregated communities, praying and working together. Owning only what was needed for work and life, all manufactured possessions found their beauty through a design process based on utility.

This now-famous song was sung in their communities as an expression of a profound belief in the practice of simplicity.

### Simple Gifts

'Tis a gift to be simple,  
'Tis a gift to be free,  
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,  
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,  
It will be in the valley of love and delight.

When true simplicity is gained,  
to bow and to bend, we will not be ashamed  
To turn, turn, will be our delight,  
'Til by turning, turning, we come round right.

– John Renfro Davis

## Featured Book

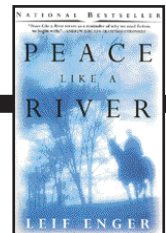
*Reviewed by Jan McKinney*

Conversations at a Christmas Party first introduced me to *Peace Like a River* because all my friends were discussing it. My appetite was whetted and thankfully, the book arrived as a Christmas gift. Leif Enger's first attempt at a novel, *Peace Like a River*, fills the bill for engaging fiction about family devotion, miracles, tragedy, sacrifice, and romance with rich biblical imagery and spiritual overtones on many levels. With the glut of "run-of-the-mill" trade fiction, it is a rare treat to find an engaging, morally uplifting story that is written in captivating and beautiful prose. I often found myself re-reading passages and basking in Enger's exceptional talent as a wordsmith. One reviewer accurately described some passages as "wondrous and wise." I agree.

Asthmatic, 11-year-old Reuben Land narrates through his childhood perspective and in retrospect as an adult and tells events from his 1960's upbringing in Minnesota. Many reviewers compare his child narrating ability with Huck Finn and Scout Finch of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. "Rube" recalls events surrounding his brother Davy's controversial murder trial and jailbreak and the family journey through Minnesota and North Dakota in search of outlaw Davy Land.

Reuben's father, Jeremiah, a school custodian, is a major player intertwined through the story with vivid descriptions of his prayer life, miracles, and strong character. Much of the action in the story is led by the father's prayer life, love, and wisdom. Swede, Reuben's younger sister, is endearing as a precocious young writer of western epics who has an edge for seeing life honestly, asking hard questions, and having wisdom beyond her years.

**TITLE:** *Peace Like a River*  
**AUTHOR:** *Leif Enger*



Many areas of tension arise as this story progresses, such as the scientific view of "what you see is all there is" versus the unseen spiritual world surrounding Reuben's dad. The media often glamorizes outlaws, but the Land family has to come to grips with sacrificial love for a child and legal justice and the realization that Davy is an outlaw for the rest of his life.

The characters also confront the families of Davy's victims and see the tragic effects of his crime. Passages about kindnesses given and received from strangers and enemies and grace to the undeserving were inspiring. But, by far, the main theme of the book concerns being a witness to the miracles God is doing in your life. Reuben and Swede say it well, "People fear miracles because they fear being changed—though ignoring them will change you also....No miracle happens without a witness. Someone has to declare, "Here's what I saw. Here's how it went. Make of it what you will."

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# Preparing to Teach

## *Biblical Interpretation*

### Matthew 6: 25-33



*“...For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you as well.”*



#### WORD STUDY

1

Look up each of the following passages, and see how each passage can add to your understanding of life to which we have been called—particularly where values and money are concerned.

#### seek

Matthew 7:7-8  
Matthew 13:45-46  
Luke 11:9  
Luke 12:29-31  
Colossians 3:1-3

#### riches

Ecclesiastes 5:1-20  
Ezekiel 28:1-10  
Matthew 13:22  
Mark 10:23  
Revelation 18:14-20

#### mammon

Matthew 6:24  
Luke 16:9-13



#### Kingdom of Heaven

*What parables of the Kingdom of God involve the act of seeking? How do those illumine your understanding of the life of faith as a follower of Christ?*

2

#### Worldly Wealth

*Read the parable of the shrewd manager in Luke 16. What is Jesus' view of worldly money (mammon), based on this text?*

3

#### The Apostle Paul

*What does Paul write regarding one's attitude toward money, when writing about the selection of elders and deacons?*

4



text



word study



commentaries



meditation



outline



presentation