

Simple Lifestyle

by E. Morris Sider

In an affluent age, why should Christians practice a simple lifestyle? Why should Christians deny themselves the relative luxury that most people in the West can have?

To ask these questions is to suggest the influence that our culture has on us. The advertisements by which we are bombarded insinuate that we are not truly happy, never quite fulfilled, unless we buy the latest and best products. Even the church sometimes reflects the thinking of the world: "Love Jesus and get rich" is the promise we occasionally hear from pulpits and religious communicators.

Other voices also deserve our attention, especially the Bible and, above all, the example of Jesus. His lifestyle was symbolized by birth in a manger. In his ministry he could claim that he had no place to lay his head. He called his disciples to leave everything and to follow him. He taught that it was difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. He elevated poor and humble people to positions of spiritual significance—the widow with the two mites, the lad with the loaves and fishes, the child set in the midst of the disciples.

Because we are Jesus' followers, His twenty-first-century disciples, we must translate His example into action appropriate for our lives and time. Some Christians propose to do this by composing a list of activities that do or do not conform to a Christian lifestyle. Whatever the value of such a list for the individual, on a broader level, it may imply that one's righteousness depends on how one conforms

to the list. This is the legalism that Jesus condemned in the Pharisees.

We may, however, rightly talk of principles. Principles for determining a Christian lifestyle are clearly established in the Bible; they may be applied to all times and places - to the disciples and the New Testament church, as well as to Christians in our own century. The following principles are among those that must be taken seriously by all who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ:

A simple lifestyle reflects rightness of heart and mind. If our lifestyle is to conform to God's will, we must have a heart that is right before God, a heart that seeks first his kingdom (Matthew 6:33). With that as the attitude of heart and mind, we shall find the other aspects of life falling into proper perspective.

This principle does not automatically condemn persons with riches, providing their attitude toward wealth is right. On the other hand, it does reprove persons with few possessions who unduly treasure the little he or she has and covets the possessions of others.

For both rich and poor—the principle calls us to be sensitive to the things of the Spirit. Then we shall not be dazzled by or made covetous of the material, thus essentially superficial things of life, whether they be large houses, expensive cars, swimming pools, or even impressive church buildings.

A simple lifestyle places values on human

dignity. Christians measure the worth of people not by the things they possess but by their being created in the image of God. That is why we are all - rich and poor - equal in God's sight. To measure worth by wealth, status, expensive possessions or other similar standards is to take away from the dignity of being created in the image of God. A simple lifestyle affirms our acceptance of that truth. Lazarus, for all his begging, was a nobler person than the rich man from whom he begged (Luke 16:19-31).

A simple lifestyle embodies stewardship. Christians know that they receive so that they can give. Our farms, our bank accounts, our professions, indeed all we have, are not ours but God's. To hoard our money, to exploit our land, to turn work only to our own advantage is to abuse the gift God has given us. Rather, with the Apostle Paul, Christians say that the reason for acquiring money is not to spend it lavishly on themselves but that they may have in order to share with others (Ephesians 4:28).

A simple lifestyle understands world need. Christians, above all others, are concerned about how their lifestyles relate to the millions of people who lack the means to live healthy, normal lives. The comfortable lifestyle of affluent people in the West is a major contributing factor to the discomfort of many people in developing countries. To make spiritual sense to such people, Christians in the West must also make economic lifestyle sense. "How can you Americans be Christian when you have so many possessions and so much wealth?" an African once asked a missionary. Centuries earlier, John asked much the same question: "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?" (I John 3:17).

A simple lifestyle recognizes that our needs are minimal. We have been conditioned to want much, and our wants have a way of

becoming needs. Yet, as Christians, our contentment is not in the accumulation of things, the satisfying of perceived wants, but in Jesus. Spiritual maturity for the Christian includes saying with Paul, "...I have learned to be content, whatever the circumstances" (Philipians 4:11b). Those words take on added meaning when we realize that Paul wrote them while in prison.

A simple lifestyle avoids the dangers frequently resulting from affluency. Riches are deceitful, Jesus said in the parable of the sower, because they choke out the word (Matthew 13:22). Jesus was warning us that unless we are careful, possessions have a way of affecting the soul. We may come to trust in our riches rather than in God. Our possessions may give us a false sense of power, leading us to think that we are in control of our lives when we are not. That is why Jesus, in another place, said that we cannot serve God and money at the same time (Matthew 6:24). To put our faith in material things, as one writer has said, is at best a detour on the way to the promised land.

A simple lifestyle values beauty and happiness. Christians may live simply but still enjoy life. Paintings on our walls, books on our shelves, music from our CD players, if conforming to good taste and bought at moderate prices, are means of enriching our lives and of glorifying God. Times of feasting-with family or with friends-may also be part of the joyful world of the Christian. Jesus himself feasted in the homes of the rich; he did not condemn the woman who poured expensive ointment on his feet; he undoubtedly admired the beauty of the Temple. Paul set the correct tone for us when he said, "So whether you eat or drink [if you are invited to a feast], do all for the glory of God" (I Corinthians 10:31).

John Cooper in *The Joy of the Plain Life* gives three guidelines (he calls them counterhabits) for putting biblical principles into practice.

The guidelines are not exhaustive, but they do illustrate the practical thinking that Christians should do something about the simple lifestyle:

1. Cultivate an attitude of aloofness toward advertising for some Christians, this may mean turning off the commercials on television and radio, cancelling subscriptions to magazines that specialize in lavish consumer-oriented advertising, overlooking Internet ads, and avoiding the sales sections of the newspapers.
2. Reassess what you already own. Ask yourself whether some of the things that you now possess are really necessary. Cultivate joint ownership of equipment and tools with your neighbors.
3. Resist comparing yourself with those who have more than you do. The North American dream is built on “keeping up with the Joneses.” Remember that this is measuring by the wrong yardstick. Feel good about yourself even though you have fewer “nice” things than do your friends or neighbors. We are in trouble, spiritually and otherwise, when we set our eyes on what we lack and on what others have.

Through the centuries, spiritual renewal among groups of Christians has nearly always been accompanied by a call to a more simple lifestyle. That call comes to our own age, perhaps more forcefully than ever before, as we consider how, in an affluent age and society, we may become worthy followers of the One who was born in a manger.