



Central Peninsula Church

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Simply Christian

Outdoor Service

Recently our staff and elders have been reading a book called *Simple Church* and so I've been thinking a lot lately about the importance of simplicity. The word simple can mean a lot of things. It can mean that something is easy to do like opening your car door. It can also mean something is easy to understand like why it's foolish to touch a burning stove. Things that are simple are usually not complicated or elaborate. Some things you think would be simple are too complicated, while other things you think should be complicated are surprisingly simple. For example, the number of pages of the U.S. Constitution, the operating manual for a nation of 258 million people is 21. The number of pages of the operating manual of a Toyota Camry, which seats only five, is 228.

I don't know if you've noticed but people are tired of this. More and more simple is in. People are hungry for simple because the world has become so complex. There is so much information available to us, who can keep up? Technology advances too fast. So more and more people seek simple, pay for simple, and even dream of simple.

Apple computer knows this. They're a part of the revolution against complexity. Pick up an iPod and you find one big button. Plug it into your computer and it automatically downloads music or whatever you want. "Plug and play" is a simple mantra. Even their logo is simple.

Google knows this, too. It has the most sophisticated technology behind internet searching simple and fast. About 75% of all web searches are done on Google. Why? The amount of white space on their home page screams simplicity. Their search page is kept simple because they know users are not able to process too much information.

Interior designers know this. *Real Simple* is the name of a popular interior design magazine and web site. It's been the most successful magazine launch in a decade. It promotes simple interior design and shows

readers how to keep their house, kitchen, and meals simple.

Think about your own life for a moment. Where are you craving simplicity? Is it a cluttered garage or a crowded, unmanageable schedule? Or maybe it's something deeper, like a way of thinking about life that cuts through the clutter and sees what really matters the most?

The interesting thing is that the concept of simple really isn't that new. Two thousand years ago another simple revolution started with the person of Jesus Christ. One of the reasons that Jesus was such an attractive and powerful figure whose message and ministry continues to impact millions today is that there was kind of a refreshing simplicity to who he was and what he said and did.

I. Salvation is simple.

When Jesus came on the scene, he stepped into a religious system that had become complicated and polluted. It was cluttered with various religious sects like the Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes, Herodians, Zealots and Essenes. Jesus refused to wear any of their badges.

The religious leaders had manufactured a religious system with 613 laws. They chose that number because that was how many separate Hebrew letters were in the text of the Ten Commandments. They divided these into positive commands (do this) and negative commands (don't do this). There were 248 positive commands, one for every part of the human body, as they saw it. And there were 365 negative commands, one for every day of the year.

Salvation was a very complicated matter for the leaders that was all about keeping these laws. Then Jesus came along. He didn't buy into their system. Instead, he simplified it. John 3 tells us that one day a Pharisee approached him. His name was Nicodemus. His whole life would have been devoted to keeping the 613

commandments. He was good at it, too. John says he was “a ruler of the Jews.” That means he’d climbed the religious ladder to become a member of the highest Jewish council. Nicodemus was a powerful man.

He comes to Jesus at night and respectfully and says, “*Rabbi, we know that you have come from God as a teacher, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.*”

Sounds like a good way to start to me. No need to challenge him right off the bat. But Jesus was always looking deeper. He responds with a startling statement. “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God.*”

Jesus sounds like he’s coming out of left field but he’s not. He knows, as a Pharisee, Nicodemus believed in the Kingdom of God. He looked forward to that day when he would enter that kingdom. He believed that to be a member of God’s kingdom was his right as a Jew because he kept the commandments with all his heart. If anyone was a member of that Kingdom, it was he, Nicodemus, a blue blood Jew, a teacher of God’s law. But Jesus says, “No! None of that will get you in. You have to start over. You have to be born again.”

Nicodemus took things at face value. It did not make sense to him. How could he throw his whole life away and start over? But something rang true. And so, he asks Jesus several questions: “*How can a man be born when he is old? He can’t reenter his mother’s womb and be born, can he?*” It’s like, “Come on! I heard this Jesus turned water into wine, but can he take an old man like me and make me a baby again?”

Jesus wasn’t talking about natural birth but about spiritual birth. The term “born again” really means “born from above.” So Jesus said to him, “*That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*” Nicodemus is curious about what that might entail. So he asks, “*How can this be?*” In other words, that sounds very difficult, complicated. What must I do to experience this spiritual birth?

This is where Jesus shows us how salvation really is. Jesus says there are just two things

you need to know. First, you need to know this is something only God can do. It’s not about you doing a better job at keeping the law, it’s not something you can study for; it’s not something you do for him; it’s something he does for you. Second, he says you have to believe, you simply have to believe in me. He says, “Nicodemus, I am God’s Son. And the day will come when I will be ‘lifted up’ on a cross. And anyone who believes in me will have eternal life.” And then he said the simple words that 2,000 years later would transform millions of lives: “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.*”

Jesus draws a simple line in the sand. You have to believe in him as God’s only Son and your only Savior. Nicodemus has to chew on this for awhile. He inches towards the line and he studies it, but he hasn’t crossed it yet. This is new to him. But he’s taken a big step.

This is where some of you are at. You’ve heard about Jesus. You’ve heard of the things he can do. You’re willing to admit that perhaps he’s from God. You’re interested in this new life he has to offer. You wonder what you have to do to get it. It must be very complicated. But Jesus says it’s very simple. It’s not about what you can do; it’s about what God has already done by sending his Son into the world as Savior. He came from heaven to earth for you. He died on the cross for you. All you have to do is cross that line of faith and put your trust in him.

II. Morality is simple.

Salvation is simple. But that’s not the only thing. Morality is simple. We wonder, what does it mean to be good? How can I possibly keep all those commandments?

In Matthew 22 we read how the Pharisees gathered together to discuss how to make Jesus look like a fool. They chose their smartest guy, a scribe, to take Jesus on. He approaches Jesus and asks him, “*Teacher, what’s the great commandment of the law?*” Of all the 613 commandments, he’s asking Jesus which is the most important. Jesus replies, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.*” Think about the significance of that statement. He said everything, this entire vast religious system of ethics and

morality, can be summed up in this simple phrase. He wasn't lowering the standard of the law. He wasn't abolishing it. He was capturing all of it in two positive commands. These two commands summed up the 613 commandments.

Jesus simplifies morality. He said being good is not about dissecting complicated laws, but it's about love. One of Billy Graham's daughters, Anne Graham-Lotz, recounted a conversation with her father on the subject of aging. Billy told her, "All my life, I've been taught how to die, but no one ever taught me how to grow old." She replied, "Well, Daddy, you're now teaching all of us." She also says that she had learned an important lesson about aging after observing her father: "When you get older, secondary things, like politics, begin to fall away, and the primary things become primary again. And for Daddy, the primary thing is, as Jesus said, to try to love God totally and to love our neighbor as ourselves."

Of course, simple doesn't always mean easy. To love God with all that we are and to love our neighbor as ourselves is simple to understand but impossible to do without God's help. Because all of us deal with a fundamental problem of selfishness. That's why Jesus was constantly trying to teach his followers to depend on him. He often talked about his life being at work within us so that we might become the kind of people who really can love. It's a lifelong process of falling and getting back up again. Sometimes we even feel like we're going backwards. That's why Jesus said, *"Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in me"* (Jn.15:4).

III. Church is simple.

Salvation is simple. Morality is simple. But there one more thing that should be simple that is often far too cluttered.

This is illustrated by something that happened towards the end of Jesus' ministry. Jesus and his disciples were entering Jerusalem for the final time. Mark 11 tells us that as Jesus entered the city he went straight to the temple. The temple was the place where people went to connect with God. It was the equivalent of church for us. But when Jesus got there he found it to be cluttered with several things.

First, people were buying and selling in the temple

The people who came to worship had to purchase the sacrifices they were supposed to make to God right there in the temple because only those sacrifices had been inspected and declared worthy of offering to God. So there was livestock and fowl everywhere in a kind of makeshift marketplace. Mark says Jesus threw these people out on their heels.

Second, the money changers were cluttering the temple. They were there because to buy the sacrifices and pay the temple tax they had to convert their foreign coins to local currency, and the priests made a fat profit in the process because they tacked on a hefty fee. Jesus reacted to these guys by flipping over their tables.

Third, the temple was cluttered with people who were using it as a shortcut to pass through the city on the way to the Mt. of Olives with their merchandise. Mark says Jesus stopped them as well. It's like he shut the whole place down!

But that's not all he did. He then delivered a stinging sermon where he quoted two Old Testament prophets. *"Is it not written"* he said, *"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?"* He's quoting from Isaiah where the prophet spoke of how God would bless Gentiles right along side of Jews. These Gentiles will make a joyful noise in the house of prayer and their sacrifices will be accepted on his altar. Jesus is angry because instead they had made this place of prayer something akin to a shopping mall on the day before Christmas. And then to top it off he quotes from the prophet Jeremiah. He says, *"But you've made it a robbers den."* The temple had become a den of thieves where the poor were being ripped off instead of helped.

It's kind of like the woman in the Lexus commercial. On Christmas morning, she finds a full-sized luxury SUV in her living room. The vehicle is topped with a gigantic, picture-perfect red ribbon. Turning to her husband with a look of astonishment on her face, all she says, "Where did you get a bow that big?!" She has a fully equipped SUV in her living room, yet she is transfixed by an ornament. A decoration has distracted her from the real thing. Is it possible that we can become so focused on the incidentals of church that we forget to celebrate the

real substance of what God has for us in Jesus Christ?

What is the church supposed to be all about? Jesus reminds us that church is supposed to be a place where people can come and connect with God. That's what prayer is all about. It's a place to come to God, be in his presence, confess our sins to him, offer thanks to him, and share with him our needs and worries and cries for help. It also tells us that church is supposed to be a place where all kinds of different people are welcome and accepted. It's not just for an exclusive group. It's not a country club that exists for the membership. It's a place where anyone who is spiritually hungry can find a meal and a home. The church is a family. Finally, it's a place where you bring all that you are and all that God has given to you and offer it up to him. The Bible tells us that each of us has been gifted by God with time and treasure and talents which allow us to serve his purposes in the world. Each of us has a unique thumbprint which he calls us to use in serving others.

Sometimes churches have to get rid of clutter and get back to the simplicity of what we're to be all about. At CPC we invite people to connect with God through our Sunday morning worship gatherings. We invite people to connect with one another through being part of a small group community. And we invite people to connect in service in some concrete way as we use our gifts to glorify him. These three things define what church is supposed to be all about.

CONCLUSION

In 2 Cor. 11:3 Paul says, "*But I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.*" Let me ask you—have you embraced the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ?

Where do you need to simplify? Have you made salvation more complicated than it is? Just believe in Jesus as God's only Son and Savior. Have you cluttered goodness with so many regulations that you've forgotten the real purpose buried beneath the rules? Love God and love your neighbor. Has church become like a trip to the mall? Make it a place where you connect with God and with his people.

A.W. Tozer wrote this in his classic book called *The Pursuit of God*, "Now, as always, God [discloses] Himself to 'babes' and hides Himself in thick darkness from the wise and the prudent. We must simplify our approach to Him. We must strip down to essentials (and they will be found to be blessedly few). We must put away all effort to impress, and come with the guileless candor of childhood. If we do this, without doubt God will quickly respond."