

# How To Live A Simple Life

[On Living Simply](#) by St. John Chrysostom is a little book that is packed with Christian wisdom. As an anti-materialist, St. John teaches the Christian to keep his eyes on the next world instead of accumulating wealth in this one. Nearly every page has a memorable passage that I wanted to capture.

## **Not sharing wealth is a sin**

The rich usually imagine that, if they do not physically rob the poor, they are committing no sin. But the sin of the rich consists in not sharing their wealth with the poor. In fact, the rich person who keeps all his wealth for himself is committing a form of robbery.

Does this contradict the American idea of getting as rich as you can by any means possible and believing that your wealth is yours alone to use for the fulfillment of all your desires and passions? It's not hard to understand the current state of America upon recognizing that it strayed from basic Christian principles long ago.

## **The act of charity**

When we commit an act of charity, in which we use our excess wealth to help someone with too little, we are acknowledging our unity with others. After all, the rich and the poor have the same flesh, the hunger of the poor should cause pain to the rich; and the pain can only be soothed through assuaging that hunger.

[...]

Every act of charity on earth is an investment in heaven.

[...]

When a rich man makes a large gift to the church, he is heartily thanked; and although he will not feel the lack of that money himself, he is praised for his generosity. When a poor man makes a small gift, nothing is said; even though that gift may cause him to go hungry, no one praises him or thanks him. It would be better to praise no one than to confine our praise to the rich. Better still, we should take trouble to observe every true act of generosity, whether by the rich or the poor, and then offer our praise.

[...]

Do you want to honor the blood of Christ? Then do not ignore his thirst. You have donated beautiful gold chalices for the wine, which becomes a symbol of Christ's blood; and it is right that you should honor Christ in this way. But on your way to services, you passed by beggars who

pleaded for food and drink. It is no good putting gold chalices on the Lord's table unless you give food and drink to the poor from your own tables. The service which we celebrate in church is a sham unless we put its symbolic meaning into practice outside its walls. Better that we do not come at all than we become hypocrites whose selfishness can only besmirch the Gospel in the eyes of others.

I am in the process of learning how to give. During my secular adulthood, I maintained a tight grip over money and only opened my hand when it yielded me benefit. Since then, I've started small by giving gift cards to the homeless and modest donations to churches and monasteries. From this I hope to build further. When I die, if I have no children, my goal will be to leave this world with not even one dollar to my name. Otherwise, I know I will have to give an accounting to God for the money I saved that I did not use to help my neighbor.

### **It is better to need your spouse**

In a family the husband needs the wife to prepare his food; to make, mend, and wash his clothes; to fetch water; and to keep the rooms and furniture in the house clean. The wife needs the husband to till the soil, to build and repair the house, and to earn money to buy the goods they need. God has put into a man's heart the capacity to love his wife, and into a woman's heart the capacity to love her husband. But their mutual dependence makes them love each other out of necessity also. At times love within the heart may not be sufficient to maintain the bond of marriage. But love which comes from material necessity will give that bond the strength it needs to endure times of difficulty.

In these times, does anyone need a spouse? Satan has structured modern society so that a woman can do without a husband and [a man can do without a wife](#). Instead, they look upon each other as heavy anchors that limit insatiable appetites and the need for "freedom." I can wash my own clothes and cook my own food, and a woman can make her own money, so neither sex needs each other, and when times get rough in a marriage, it is a simple matter to swap out a spouse for an exciting new lover, or double down on feeding all those appetites that are forbidden within a marriage, and we'll never go without the support of the culture that insists the right thing to do is pursue our temporal happiness instead of maintaining marriage vows made before God.

### **Trust in God, not money**

Many poor people are gripped by fear: their hearts are caught in a chain of anxiety, worrying whether they will have food on their plates tomorrow or clothes on their backs. Some poor people are constantly formulating in their minds devious plans to cheat the rich to obtain their wealth; this is no different in spirit from the rich making plans to exploit the poor by paying low wages. The art of being poor is to trust in God for everything, to demand nothing—and to be grateful for all that is given.

If I am robbed tomorrow, perhaps that is because I have too much wealth, and God is distributing that wealth involuntarily because I did not do so voluntarily. Besides, why is it that I have gained so much in this world that I have become a target for thieves?

## **Usury is evil**

When a family falls into poverty, it may be compelled to borrow money in order to survive. But if the lender charges interest on the loan, then that family will fall deeper into the pit: not only will they have to repay the loan but also the interest that accumulates on it. The lender may pretend, even to himself, that he is acting kindly; but in fact behind the guise of charity he is acting with extreme malice. He is trading on the calamities of others; he is drawing profit from their distress; he is demanding a material reward for an act of charity, and so turning charity into robbery.

A theory I accept is that usury used to mean lending money at *any* amount of interest, but in modern times it is defined as lending money at *excessive* interest. Who gets to define what is excessive? Those lending the money! The Old Testament describes lending at interest as an abomination, the same term used to denounce sodomy, which perhaps is why Dante put moneylenders and sodomites in the same level of hell.

*Lends at interest, and takes profit; shall he then live? He shall not live. He has done all these abominations; he shall surely die; his blood shall be upon himself. —Ezekiel 18:13*

*You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent for interest. —Deuteronomy 23:19*

Modern capitalism is a form of state-sponsored usury. We currently live in a system that is most amenable to increasing the wealth of usurers, whoever they happen to be.

## **The prosperity gospel is a false gospel**

We who are disciples of Christ claim that our purpose on earth is to lay up treasures in heaven. But our actions often belie our words. Many Christians build for themselves fine houses, lay out splendid gardens, construct bathhouses, and buy fields. It is small wonder, then, that many pagans refuse to believe what we say. “If their eyes are set on mansions in heaven,” they ask, “why are they building mansions on earth? If they put their words into practice, they would give away their riches and live in simple huts.”

## **Leisure is a temptation**

...just imagine what perpetual leisure actually means. In your mind let me give you a large house in which to live, filled with comfortable furniture. In this house you only need to nod at a servant, and you will be brought dish upon dish of the most delicious food. Outside there is a garden filled with trees and shrubs, which bear sweet-smelling flowers. For a few hours, for a few days perhaps, you

would enjoy being in such a place. But soon you would feel bored and restless. Your bones would become still for lack of exercise. Your stomach would swell with all that food. Your head would ache for lack of anything to stimulate the mind. Your mansion in which work was impossible would seem like a prison. God has designed us to labor for our bread; only in toil can our minds and bodies find contentment.

It took me over a decade of worldly living to learn that you will adapt to leisure and tire of it. All those years of striving and ambition for material gain were vanity of vanities. Relaxation, fun, and decadence are meaningless to the soul. No new hobby or pleasure will ever be enough.

### **Being a literal slave is no obstacle to salvation**

To be a slave, to be in the legal possession of another human being, does not in any way impede spiritual salvation. On the contrary, by performing his duties with a humble spirit, a slave may advance the progress of his soul. Even if the tasks he performs are useless in themselves, the attitude with which he undertakes those tasks is profoundly important.

### **Do not envy the gifts of others**

Those who are gifted in some way should not despise those less gifted. On the contrary, God has distributed gifts and blessings in such a way that every person has a particular place and purpose within a society—and thus everyone is equally necessary for a society to function well. So do not resent the fact that someone is more intelligent or stronger than you are. Instead give thanks for their intelligence and strength, from which you benefit. And then ask yourself: “What is my gift, and thence what is my place in society?” When you have answered this question, and you act according to your answer, all contempt and all resentment will melt away.

I was given the gift of writing. I’m fortunate that people want to read what I have to say. They regularly compliment me on my ability to inspire them, but I really wish I could sing. I wish I was more athletic and not so fragile in bodily constitution. I wish I was a better speaker. And yet there is a great singer or athlete out there who wishes they could write effectively. I am blessed with the abilities that I have as given to me by God and must fight the urge to desire more.

### **Redistribution of wealth is wrong**

Should we look to kings and princes to put right the inequalities between rich and poor? Should we require soldiers to come and seize the rich person’s gold and distribute it among his destitute neighbors? Should we beg the emperor to impose a tax on the rich so great that it reduces them to the level of the poor and then to share the proceeds of that tax among everyone? Equality imposed by force would achieve nothing, and do much harm... Worse still, the rich whose gold was taken away would feel bitter and resentful; while the poor who received the gold from the hands of soldiers would feel no gratitude, because no generosity would have prompted the gift. Far from

bringing moral benefit to society, it would actually do moral harm. Material justice cannot be accomplished by compulsion, a change of heart will not follow. The only way to achieve true justice is to change people's hearts first—and then they will joyfully share their wealth.

In other sections of the book, it may appear that St. John, through his teaching on altruism and loving your neighbor, is promoting a socialistic or even communistic organization to society. You may even occasionally hear lukewarm Christians say that “Jesus Christ was a socialist.” This is a gross distortion, maybe even a blasphemy, as the passage above shows. St. John teaches you to give to please God and save your soul, and that all that you own, especially if you're rich, is given to you by God to help the poor. Communism, on the other hand, is state-enforced theft mandated by a minority of power-hungry, violent maniacs, who then use the proceeds from that theft to enrich themselves and their useful idiots in order to maintain a tight grip on society while living in luxury. With God, you have the free will choice to be altruistic or not, and if you choose to give, you will be rewarded by Him in heaven, and if you choose not to give, you have the remainder of your lifetime to repent of your greed and make right, but with communists, if you do not follow their stern dictates to create a heaven on earth (for them, not you), you will be immediately exiled, imprisoned, or impoverished with no mercy. If you're lucky, you won't be tortured before your untimely death.

### **Are you bearing fruit for God?**

Look at the trees of the forest. See how sturdy and beautiful they are, how tall they grow, and how smooth is their bark. Yet when we plant a garden, we prefer other kinds of trees, such as pomegranate and olive trees. This is because we want trees that bear fruit. We are the trees which God has planted in his garden. He is not concerned at how sturdy and beautiful we are, at how tall we grow, or at how smooth our skin is. As trees in his garden, he is concerned only that we bear fruit. And the fruit which he wants us to bear is spiritual: peace and love, faith and gentleness, patience and self-control, generosity and loyalty.

If the only fruit you bear benefits your material self, you are not bearing fruit for God. The closer someone is to the true faith, the more spiritual fruit you will see them bear, but if someone professes Christianity, and their tree lacks fruit, he has made a mistake in his Christian beliefs somewhere along the line.

### **Fear is not of God**

The sea is surging and the waves are high: but we have nothing to fear because we stand on a rock—the rock of faith. Let the sea surge with all the power at its command, and let the waves rise as high as mountains; the rock on which we stand will remain firm and unshaken. Do I fear death? No, because on the rock of faith I know that death is the gateway to eternal life. Do I fear exile? No, because on the rock of faith I know that I am never alone; Christ is always beside me, my friend

and my brother. Do I fear slander and lies? No, because on the rock of faith I know that I am always protected by the truth—Christ, who is the truth, in my protector. Do I fear poverty? No, because on the rock of faith God also provides for my needs. Do I fear ridicule? No, because however low I may sink in the esteem of those without faith, on the rock of faith all are treated with respect. Far from fearing the surge of the sea, I enjoy it, because it assures me that the rock on which I stand is immovable.

### **Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves**

What does it mean to be as wise as a serpent? When a serpent is attacked, it is willing to have much of its body severed, as long as it saves its head. So to be as wise as a serpent means to be willing to lose everything—your wealth, your reputation, your friends—as long as you save your faith. Your faith is your head, by which you learn all truth; and by that truth your soul is set free. We should, however, recognize that the wisdom of the serpent is not enough; we must be as honest and innocent as doves. Indeed it is the combination of wisdom and innocence that creates virtue. The person who is wise as a serpent can sustain the most terrible attacks and still continue to flourish as a disciple of Christ. The person who is innocent refuses to retaliate against those who make the attacks. To be as innocent as a dove means never to take revenge on those who wrong you or undermine you. Unless wisdom is tempered by innocence, one attack provokes another, and conflict continues without end. Unless innocence is tempered by wisdom, a person is so vulnerable that he will not even survive a single attack. Rest assured that no one can ever take away your faith; your wisdom guards against that. But be careful never to bear a grudge against anyone who does you wrong.

A clear manifestation of demonic influence—or even possession—is a vengeful wrath, because it negates the existence of God by making you a god who judges and enacts punishments. If you encounter someone who is quick to punish others for misdeeds, I would expect that person to not even declare a belief in God.

### **Judging the sins of others**

When we see a person who has committed vicious sins and crimes escaping with impunity, we react with indignation. We want to see that person called to account and punished, and feel angry that this has not happened. But at such moment we should reflect on our own actions; indeed we should turn that sense of indignation inward against ourselves. Each of us should ask: “How many sins have I committed against others, when I have escaped with impunity?” There are, no doubt, many examples in all our cases. Recognizing this fact will cause our anger against others to melt away. More importantly, it will make us turn to God and ask forgiveness of these sins. Yet there is perhaps a difference between our own sins and the sins which we notice in others. Our own sins are probably quite subtle and inconspicuous, whereas the sins of other are obvious and gross. Should we, therefore, regard our own sins as less important or dire? On the contrary, we should

realize that subtle sins are frequently the most harmful. Obvious sins, such as robbery and violence, are easily recognized, and so can often be guarded against by physical means. The more subtle sins, such as lying and slander and power-mongering, are frequently hard to spot, and so difficult to prevent.

How many sins has God forgiven me for? Thousands? Tens of thousands? Not only did I commit innumerable sins, but I helped many other men do the same. Therefore, if I see my neighbor displaying greed or anger, or committing an act of fornication, how can I judge him? Do I not forget my wretched past, which was not that long ago? Do I not forget the sins I have committed on this very day? So we must pray for the sinners, that God has mercy on them, and forgive them for their sins, as He forgives us for ours.

### **God's way to our heart**

God waits for our hearts to open to his grace; he waits for an opportunity to reveal to each of us his truth. Then, when we are ready, he ensures that we hear about Christ and about his Gospel; and we find ourselves faced with a choice, which will affect the entire course of life and death—whether to embrace the words of Jesus Christ or to reject them. If we deliberately reject the Gospel, even when we fully understand it, then we condemn ourselves; if we embrace it, we shall ourselves be embraced by God in heaven.

This echoes the teachings of Father Seraphim Rose in [God's Revelation to the Human Heart](#). When God called me in 2019, I answered. He may have called me before that, but I was deaf to His voice, and did not answer, and I thank God He kept calling me, because now that I have answered, I can navigate this fallen world with Lord Jesus Christ and turn away from the sins and passions of my past.

### **Marriage or celibacy?**

If a man and a woman marry to satisfy their sexual appetites, or to further the material aims of themselves or their families, then the union is unlikely to bring blessings. But if a man and a woman marry in order to be companions on the journey through earth to heaven, then their union will bring great joy to themselves and to others. Some people need a close companion, and for these people God has ordained marriage. Some do not need a close companion, and for these people God has ordained celibacy.

If I can make it to 42 years of age without a wife, perhaps God has ordained celibacy for me. I wait to discover if that is the case.

### **A good spouse**

The obedient wife does not wait for orders. Rather, she tries to discern her husband's needs and

feelings, and responds in love. When she sees her husband is weary, she encourages him to rest; when she sees him agitated, she soothes him; when he is ill, she nurses and comforts him; when he is happy and elated, she shares his joy. Yet such obedience should not be confined to the wife; the husband should be obedient in the same way. When she is weary, he should relieve her of her work; when she is sad, he should cherish her, holding her gently in his arms; when she is filled with good cheer, he should also share her good cheer. Thus a good marriage is not a matter of one partner obeying the other, but of both partners obeying each other.

In secular “red pill” teachings on marriage, the husband is essentially portrayed as the dominant alpha slave master and the woman as the slave who has no will of her own. She must shut her mouth and do all the housework while providing the husband with his favorite food or drink where every day is a feast day. It’s no surprise that those who were far from God, including myself at the time, would approve of such a cartoonish approach to marriage. In the Christian ideal, marriage is about equal sacrifices to God to create a “little church” that ushers both souls—along with any children—into Paradise, not a game where psychological manipulation and fear are used to exert your will over someone else.

## **Why fast?**

There are two reasons to fast. The first is to break our attachment to material things, of which food is the most central, and so compel us to depend on spiritual things. When we are eating regularly, food not only sustains our bodies, but provides pleasure and satisfaction. In itself there is nothing wrong with such pleasure. But when we do without food, we are reminded that the only true and lasting source of joy is spiritual. The second is to express solidarity with those whose poverty forces them to go hungry. We may fast from time to time as a discipline; but many people fast continually because they have no money to buy food. If we are truly to show compassion to the poor, we must experience within our own bodies the consequences of poverty.

I’ve noticed two levels of fasting. The first is the dietary restriction, of not eating meat and dairy on fasting days. This is difficult but not impossible for Orthodox Christians of average faith. The second level is portion control. From what I’ve learned, we’re supposed to eat *less* of the restricted foods on fasting days. This isn’t impossible on normal weeks where I fast on Wednesday and Friday, but for the prolonged fasts, at my current level of faith, portion control is a challenge.

Overall, I strongly recommend [On Living Simply](#). While it comes across as Orthodox in nature simply because it is so old, it provides actionable advice for all Christians living in modern times. It is so far my favorite compilation of St John’s writings.

**Learn More:** [\*\*\*On Living Simply by St John Chrysostom\*\*\*](#)

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