



We don't need most of the things  
our culture tries to push off on us.

# The Non-Essentials of Life

## Scene 1: Summer 1951

*(It was our second date. Ralph and I were sitting on the grass close to the Rose Bowl, getting acquainted. We had first met just two weeks before.)*

"I want you to know I'm a rather, radical person," Ralph told me. "My mother has often despaired of me. At one point I even refused to wear dress clothes to church."

I waited for an explanation. He seemed to be dressed like everyone else — sport shirt and slacks. Nothing elaborate, but nothing weird.

"Some of my friends and I had been reading about various saints, and we just couldn't see why God would not expect as much of us as of them. Take neckties, for example. It didn't seem right to buy neckties when people elsewhere were starving. I figure Americans own \$500 million worth of neckties."

"But you wear them now, don't you?" I asked.

"Yes, but not for the usual reasons," he



Roberta Winter

answered. "I wear them to avoid scaring away the natives." He laughed as he motioned to some people sitting nearby.

At the time I didn't fully understand what he was saying. But gradually I realized that our convictions on how God wants us to live must be balanced by their effects on others. Does my lifestyle lead others to Christ, or is it a barrier keeping them from Him? As I came to understand, I was more able to enunciate what, for Ralph and me, has become a basic principle of life:

**PRINCIPLE ONE:** Our lifestyle must please the Lord. Yet in small matters, it shouldn't be so shockingly different from people around us that it makes our message unintelligible.

As we talked that day, I knew it would be exciting and challenging to marry this man. He told me of little economies here and there. But mostly he talked of his dreams, his ideals, his goals derived from a close walk with the Lord.

I was fascinated with those dreams. Some were just dreams. Others were becoming realities. Because of his efforts as a seminary student, a group of Christians were in "closed" Afghanistan teaching English and starting an engineering school.

He was excited about his doctoral studies in linguistics, because he wanted to make the biblical languages more useful to the average pastor and missionary. Already he had a card file of the Greek lexicon which he hoped to arrange in order of the biblical text. In his head were the ideas behind the recently-published *Word Study Concordance* and the *Word Study New Testament*.

I caught a glimpse that day of the excitement he felt in doing something creative for the Lord, something that would make a difference in spreading the Gospel. Any excitement I might have ever felt for new clothes and a beautiful home paled in comparison to his.

Much later, I learned that John Wesley had been caught up in this same kind of excitement. He called it "the expulsive power of a new affection." Wesley could have become wealthy, but he was so excited accomplishing things for the Lord that he

couldn't be bothered. When he died, he owned only two silver spoons, but he was known and loved in the smallest towns of England because of the light he had brought.

During our first few years of marriage, our problem was not whether we should live simply. Once we chose the dreams, we had no alternative. Ralph was in graduate school. And though I could have earned a good salary as a registered nurse, I preferred to become part of those dreams by working with him in his graduate studies. I would nurse for a while to build up a reserve, then do research for him until the reserve was gone. We repeated the cycle as often as necessary.

After Ralph finished his dissertation, our first two children were born. Then I could neither nurse nor do library research. When Ralph returned to seminary, we had to make ends meet on what he earned as a student pastor and part-time engineer. Our income was so meager that when we became missionaries, it tripled.

## Scene 2: June 1957

*(We had just arrived at our post in the mountains of Guatemala. Our assignment was to work with a dozen congregations among the Mam Indians, one of the poorest groups of people in this hemisphere.)*

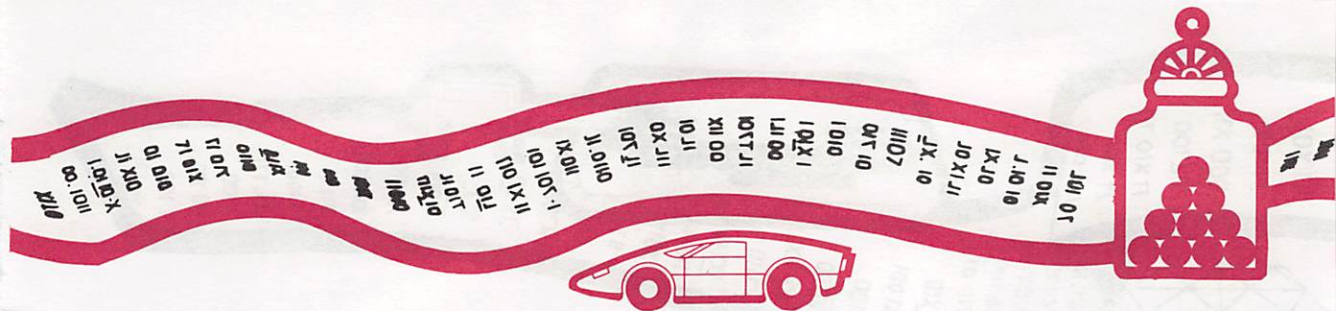
I was embarrassed. The truck carrying our belongings arrived dust-covered from the trip over the narrow dirt road. We collected our barrels and mattresses and gas-powered wringer washer — something we considered a "must" with our three small children. A crowd of curious onlookers surrounded us — and all our stuff!

*Why do they stare?* I wondered with a twinge of irritation. And then, sure enough, a young man asked the question I had been dreading:

"How much did that cost?"

Barefoot, wearing clothes on which even the patches were patched, he pointed to a mattress. He had seen mattresses before, but of a different sort — bags stuffed with





we were home only temporarily. We weren't tempted to keep up with friends in the States. Back on the field, we would neither want nor need a stereo, television, or the latest fad in kitchen appliances.

We never hesitated to buy something which would simplify our lives, giving us more time to spend on important things. But we determined what we wanted. We, not television ads or social pressure, decided what would help us. And we tried to teach our daughters what to us had become a principle of life:

PRINCIPLE THREE: We don't *need* most of the things our culture tries to push off on us. Once we learn to resist social pressure, it is far easier to determine what we really want and need.

## Scene 4: Winter 1968

*(After our second furlough, we remained in the States because of pressing circumstances. Ralph became a professor in the recently-established School of World Mission, and we suddenly found ourselves in a different world. Ralph had to attend important functions and entertain visiting dignitaries.*

*Because they no longer needed a large home, my parents-in-law moved into an apartment, giving us their home and all its furniture. One day my sister came to see me.)*

"Roberta, you're probably going to be in the States for a while," she began. "Why don't you buy some new furniture? This heavy Spanish look is really out-of-date."

It caught me off-guard. The furniture looked much better than any we had ever owned. True, the sofa needed recovered and the table refinished. But I liked the style. Why spend money on something my sister would choose?

Ralph and I discussed her suggestion that night.

"Does the furniture look that bad?" I asked. "Or do you think we no longer notice

what looks good?"

"Don't worry, Roberta," he said. "We decided a long time ago not to let others dictate our lifestyle. We have enough money to buy new furniture if we want, but that does

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not *force* us to buy it. Why can't we continue living as if we were still missionaries on furlough?"

Let me state this idea a different way:

PRINCIPLE FOUR: There shouldn't be any connection between what is earned and what needs to be spent. You don't buy things just because you have the money.

With this principle, money inevitably accumulates. We followed this principle while missionaries; so when it seemed necessary to start a publishing house specializing in missions books, we were able to do it. That in turn encouraged us in a much greater venture — the U.S. Center for World Mission.

For years, a group of 120 people in Minneapolis have lived on only a portion of their group income, using the rest to support dozens of their members as missionaries. What would happen to this world if more evangelical Christians realized that God blessed them with money to make them a blessing, not to pamper them?

What an immense amount of money would be released for highly strategic causes! How much easier it would be to understand that Christ didn't ask us to be "successes," but servants (Mark 10:44).

