

An increasing amount of people in this country are turning away from consumer-driven culture and are streamlining their lives through something called the tiny house movement. You may have watched or heard about the reality shows *Tiny House Hunters* or *Tiny House, Big Living*. You might even know someone who lives in a tiny house. These houses are defined as being anywhere from 100-600 square feet and are occasionally on shared property. The average American home is 2,600 square feet, for comparison. This is a significant value statement for these tiny house owners. They are declaring that their homes communicate a different set of values than the ones they were taught to believe were meaningful and necessary in order to be content.

People join this tiny house movement for any number of reasons. Some of these include environmental concerns, like reducing their carbon footprint, or financial concerns, like reducing their housing expenses. Most Americans spend $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ of their income on housing each month; whether they are paying rent or their mortgage makes no difference.¹ And 76% of Americans live paycheck to paycheck, regardless of their income level, according to a survey by Bankrate.² Tiny house owners spend $\frac{1}{4}$ of their income on housing each month and average higher savings in the bank accounts than their counterparts.

More and more people are worn out from trying to keep up each month, trying to look like everything is fine on the outside, trying to maintain or gain the lifestyle that dominant culture tells them is the ultimate goal. Implicit in these message is the idea that whatever money we earn is ours to keep. “We deserve it,” we tell ourselves, myself included. You can fill in the blank with whatever it is, whether it’s a new wardrobe, an expensive dinner out, a new car, a

¹ <https://www.livingbiginatinyhouse.com/tiny-house/>

² <https://money.cnn.com/2013/06/24/pf/emergency-savings/index.html>

house. These tiny house owners have taken it to the other extreme--walking away from the social markers of success and turning away from consumerism that does not encourage us to think before we buy something. Instead, they talk about something else--the freedom and the simplicity that they find in their lives. Tiny house living does not solve the inner drive to consume. It also isn't realistic for many of people, either, based on the commitments they've made with their lives. *But I believe there is still something in the simplicity that the tiny house movement hits at--its the connection between simplicity and generosity.*

Another example of this simplicity movement is the story of two men named Joshua Milburn and Ryan Nicodemus. They are former corporate leaders that have dubbed themselves The Minimalists. Both are originally from Dayton, Ohio, and grew up in financially insecure families. They bought in to the capitalist American Dream --they climbed the corporate ladder, had successful careers, and all the gadgets and trappings of a successful lifestyle. A lifestyle they were told would fill the hole that they felt in their hearts. Instead, they felt dissatisfied. They realized that the dissatisfaction they felt would never go away because of the stuff or the titles that they accumulated. So, these two friends and business leaders quite their six figure jobs, and started living a minimalist lifestyle. They got rid of most of their belongings. They have written some books, have a podcast, and have filmed a documentary. They claim part of their freedom from stuff is due to keeping their belongings under 300 total items.³ A book reviewer describes them as “Henry David Thoreau with wifi.”⁴

Rather than say goodbye to the business techniques that they learned in the corporate world, they are using them now to enhance the common good. They are fundraising to start a

³ <https://www.theminimalists.com/about/#jfm>

⁴ <https://www.theminimalists.com/books/>

grocery in their hometown of Dayton, one of the largest food deserts in the country. They have built orphanages, an elementary school, provided disaster relief, and supported entrepreneurs to start a coffee company in St. Petersburg, Florida. They claim that their definition, “Minimalism is a tool to rid yourself of life’s excess in favor of focusing on what’s important—so you can find happiness, fulfillment, and freedom,” is the foundation of everything that they do.⁵ And while all of the things that they are doing for the common good are helpful, by standard definition, I want to know what they are really transforming. I want to know if it’s simply trading one type of consumption for another. How are people’s hearts and minds being changed through their work?

The freedom and simplicity that tiny house owners and The Minimalists describe feeling are reminiscent of the ways that Paul describes generosity in his second letter to the Corinthian church. But, it’s not entirely the same. Paul does not tell the Corinthians that giving away their stuff will make them happy, fulfilled, people. Instead, he unpacks the relationship that generosity and simplicity have through his invitation to the church in Corinth. Paul talks about giving, not out of compulsion or coercion, but out of a desire to share what God has already shared.

What makes this invitation even more meaningful is Paul’s contentious relationship with the church in Corinth. His communications with this community of faith were hot and cold, full of accolades for their behavior as well as admonitions for their habits and blind spots. Rather than turn this part of the letter into a fire-y tirade against their lack of follow through or hypocrisy, Paul does something else. He reminds them of their financial commitment-- the one they had made to the faithful in financial need in Jerusalem.

⁵ <https://www.theminimalists.com/minimalism/>

At first read, Paul’s letter might sound like it’s full of guilt or manipulation. I initially found myself frustrated that he was asking this group of people to send money somewhere else when there were people in their community in need of financial support. What about the inequalities in their community? The very community that used to turn communion into a drunken party? The community that didn’t practice common sharing among their wealthier and financially insecure members. Paul doesn’t bring any of this up to them. Instead, he paints a picture of generosity that isn’t about the haves and the have nots. He doesn’t set a dollar amount to their pledge, shame them about how short they are to their original commitment. He tells them of the freedom that comes with giving. You see, the money he asks for wasn’t something he only invited the Christians in Corinth to send. Rather, they were part of a greater cloud of witnesses, one that shared an offering that stretched from the the churches in Corinth, Rome, and Galatia. He even sent other people ahead of him to collect the financial gifts to communicate the importance of this offering. He wanted this community to know that their contributions mattered, but that wasn’t the main point. The major issue was the state of their hearts while in the act of giving.

I want to zero in on the phrasing Paul uses to describe the giving that they are doing. Paul cares more about the attitude that they have while they are giving--the root of their generosity matters more than the amount they give to the community in Jerusalem. He tells them, ‘each of you must give as you have made up your mind.’ Giving is a decision. It is not to be a compulsive decision based on keeping up with the other givers around you. It is meant to display a belief in this reality, as Paul says in verse 8: “God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every

good work.” Their giving isn’t competitive, compulsive, or coerced. *They give because they find freedom in it.* Paul invites them to give because they can demonstrate that they already believe that they have enough. *This is the kind of freedom that God asks us to imitate, too.*

Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity by Adam Hamilton

Five steps to simplifying your life:

1. Live below your means by reducing consumption
2. Before you buy something, ask, “do I really need this?”
3. Use something up before buying something new.
4. Plan low cost entertainment.
5. Ask yourself are there major changes that would allow me to simplify my life?⁶

When we truly boil it down generosity is not something that we do transactionally. It is not something that we do out of guilt. It is not something we do out of compulsion. We are meant to give out of the freedom that we know through God’s generosity towards us. Like the sower in Paul’s illustration, we are meant to freely give in the same way that God gives to us. Sometimes, we need to simplify our lives to make more space for generosity. That means careful assessments of the ways we live--the ways we spend our time, the ways we spend our money, and the ways we are worried. I don’t claim to believe that we need to follow this list 100% in order to live a fulfilled life. And some of us cannot follow this list--some of us do not have the financial stability in order to do that. What would happen if we sat with the final question? What if we asked ourselves what gives us freedom? What if generosity makes us free?

⁶ Hamilton, Adam, *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity*, (Nashville: Abington Press, 2009).