

Stuff

by Mike Ford

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As spring begins each year in the northern hemisphere, true Christians begin cleaning their homes of any leavening in preparation for the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:6-8; I Corinthians 5:6-8). Many of us also use this time for an overall cleaning of our areas of responsibility, be it our office, bedroom, dorm room, car, or an entire house, and we call this effort “deleavening.” This brings up the question of the origins of “spring cleaning.” Is there any doubt that this tradition originates with the ancient Israelites removing leaven from their homes?

When my kids were younger, they had to deleaven their own rooms, as well as help clean other areas of the home, with adult supervision of course. We took advantage of this exercise to get rid of accumulated stuff that was no longer needed. We could always fill several large garbage bags from their rooms: school papers, broken toys, mismatched or outgrown clothing, and so on. It is amazing how much unneeded stuff a person can gather in a year.

A pile of stuff would be started in the middle of their bedroom floors and added to until it was ready to go into the garbage bags. But some people really like their stuff—*all* of their stuff. We could always count on our daughter, Kelly, to fight for everything that went into that pile. “But I love that doll with no arms or legs!” Just as an aside, the Hebrew word *kliy*, used 325 times in the Old Testament (Strong’s #3627), is frequently translated “stuff” in the King James Version. It seems to be pronounced “Kelly.”

Too Much Stuff

American comedian George Carlin did a routine in the 1980s about stuff:

Everybody’s got a little place for their stuff. This is my stuff, that’s your stuff, that’ll be his stuff over there. That’s all you need in life, a little place for your stuff. That’s all your house is: a place to keep your stuff. If you didn’t have so much stuff, you wouldn’t need a house. You could just walk around all the time. A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. You can see that when you’re taking off in an airplane. You look down, you can see everybody’s got a little pile of stuff. All the little piles of stuff. And when you leave your house, you gotta lock it up. Wouldn’t want somebody to come by and take some of your stuff. They always take the good stuff . . . That’s what your house is, a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get—more stuff!

A recent number-one nonfiction bestseller in the U.S. is *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, written by a 30-year-old Japanese woman, Marie Kondo. The book sold two million copies worldwide before it was even published in America. It is a “mystical manifesto” on letting go of the stuff we do not need. *Tidying Up* has quickly developed a cult-like following, according to *The Wall Street Journal*. Fans share photos of their underwear drawers. They have started clubs and Facebook groups. They use the author’s name as a verb, as in, “I just Kondooed my recipe books.”

Do we have too much stuff? A few television reality shows focus on the subject of hoarding. We may think we are all hoarders to some extent, or know someone who is, but I have witnessed this

affliction, for lack of a better word, up close. When my children were just starting school, my daughter, Tara, and a school friend would visit each other's homes after school. Tara told us a bit about her friend's house, but one day I had to pick her up and was invited inside her friend's home.

I had never seen anything like it in my life! A narrow path wound through every room, in between floor-to-ceiling stacks of newspapers, magazines, boxes, and trash—mounds and mounds of trash. It was as if some out-of-control monster was growing inside their home and slowly pushing them out.

The musician Don Henley had a great line in a song from 1989, "Gimme What You Got," where he sings, "You got stacks and stacks and stacks,/then Gabriel comes and taps you on the shoulder,/but you don't see no hearses with luggage racks." Perhaps he paraphrased I Timothy 6:6-8, where the apostle Paul tells the younger Timothy: "Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content."

So, do we have too much stuff? Probably. I cannot speak for anyone else, but I know I do. The problem is, I love my stuff! It is good stuff. Someone else's stuff might be trash, but my trash is stuff!

Can I live without it? Sure I can. Do I want to? Not really, but I like to think I can walk away from it when the time comes.

Think and Clean

Notice I write "when" the time comes, not "if" it comes. There will come a time in each of our lives when we will have to choose between the comfort of our current existence and following God into the unknown, just as so many in the Bible were required to do. The list is long: Noah, Abraham, Lot, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, etc. Each of these men, and often their wives and families as well, had settled lives, with homes full of stuff. Yet, God motivated them to leave it behind.

In Luke 17:20, the Pharisees asked Christ when the Kingdom of God would come. He gives them a short answer, then in verse 22, He begins a longer answer to the disciples. In verse 26, He mentions "as it was in the days of Noah" as an example. In verses 28-31, He provides another one:

Likewise, as it was also in the days of Lot: they ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they built [in other words, they accumulated stuff]; but on the day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. Even so will it be in the day when the Son of Man is revealed. In that day, he who is on the housetop, and his goods are in the house, let him not come down to take them away.

The King James Version (KJV) uses "stuff" instead of "goods." If we are outside our homes, and it is time to go, we are not to worry about our stuff.

How does this topic of "stuff" apply to the Days of Unleavened Bread? We already see the link to deleavening and spring cleaning, but there is another aspect that we might not think about. Reducing clutter as we deleaven, a kind of "simplifying of our lives," can be a useful tool in identifying aspects of the world that Satan uses to entrap us.

I Corinthians 5 is an entire chapter devoted to Paul chastising the early Corinthian church for accepting sexual immorality among them. They were proud of their tolerance; we could say that they gloried in their diversity. In the middle of this correction, Paul writes in I Corinthians 5:6-7:

Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.

The symbolic act of taking leaven from our houses is expanded to include ridding leaven from our minds and attitudes. Many messages have been preached about the process of deleavening, emphasizing that, as we clean, we think about the symbolism of leaven and sin.

We should try to strike a balance in our deleavening activities, knowing that cleaning every nook and cranny of crumbs does not sweep us into the Kingdom of God. God does not tell us to clean the attic if no one eating crackers has been up there the entire year. Still, it is useful to do if one has the time and ability. A more thorough cleaning however, should not take away from spiritual preparation, such as prayer, Bible study, and fasting.

Leaving Our Stuff Behind

The untidiness in our lives can be equated with a certain messiness in our minds. We need to ask ourselves what hooks this year have caught us that bind us to the world? Have we formed any attachments to our stuff that could cloud our judgment? Can any of our stuff be given to charity or to others in need, or simply disposed of in some other way in order to simplify our lives?

Our stuff is not evil, in and of itself. Certainly, my stuff is not! But we must have a clear notion of what is truly important in life—and it is not our cars, big-screen TVs, or cellphones! If the house were on fire, and once we made it outside, we looked around on the lawn and saw that all our family was safe, would there be any reason to run back into that burning home? Is any of our stuff worth our lives?

We hear a lot about leaven and sin as spring approaches, as well we should. We eat unleavened bread during the seven days of the Feast as a sign, a memorial to God's law and His deliverance of His people from Egypt. As Moses tells the Israelites in Exodus 13:3, "Remember this day in which you went out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand the Lord brought you out of this place. No leavened bread shall be eaten."

Verse 6 tells us to eat unleavened bread seven days, and all leavening must be out of our homes and living spaces during that time. The reason appears in verses 8-9:

And you shall tell your son in that day, saying, "This is done because of what the Lord did for me when I came up from Egypt." It shall be as a sign to you on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the Lord's law may be in your mouth; for with a strong hand the Lord has brought you out of Egypt.

God brought His people out of a land full of pagan gods and sins of all sorts. He took them into a wilderness to teach them His laws and to build their faith. Egypt represented the world, and the Israelites walked away from it.

Notice a couple of things. In Genesis 45:16-20, when the king of Egypt finds that Joseph, his vizier, has family back in Canaan, he tells Joseph to bring them all to Egypt. The Pharaoh says in verse 20, “Also do not be concerned about your goods [*kli*y, stuff], for the best of all the land of Egypt is yours.” In effect, he says, “Hop on the wagons and leave your stuff. I’ll give you everything you need. Don’t worry about it.” They probably brought some personal keepsakes, portable memories of one type or another, but whatever homes they had, full of stuff, they walked away from.

A few centuries later, they do it again. Even though they became slaves in Egypt, they lived in homes, which held the contents of their lives. The Israelites walked away from those as well, but instead of seventy people leaving Canaan, a couple of million left Egypt. They took their wages in the form of jewelry, an easy way to carry wealth. Again, they likely grabbed some items from their homes that carried special memories for them, but mostly, they walked away from the bulk of their stuff.

An interesting aside here: When they “spoiled” the Egyptians—as in Exodus 11:2, “Speak now in the hearing of the people, and let every man ask from his neighbor and every woman from her neighbor, articles of silver and articles of gold”—the word “articles” (“jewels,” KJV) is Hebrew *kli*y, “stuff.”

They left behind what had previously meant a lot to them and God provided. Is that not what Christ is saying in Luke 17:31? “In that day, he who is on the housetop, and his goods [stuff, KJV] are in the house, let him not come down to take them away. And likewise the one who is in the field, let him not turn back.”

Then in verse 32 appears the ominous warning, “Remember Lot’s wife.” In that story, angels literally pull Lot and some of his family out of Sodom before it is destroyed. It is the evildest of places, the world in all its “glory,” as it were, and Lot’s wife wants to return to it, just as some of the Israelites later wanted to return to Egypt, to the world.

Is our stuff bad? Only if we put the wrong priority on it. If we are puffed up and vain about our car, home, clothing, phone, or whatever, then yes, it can be wrong. If God were to say to us, “Come here,” and we responded, “Hang on a sec, let me grab my phone,” then I would say, “Remember Lot’s wife.”

Proper Emphasis

Earlier in our church history, perhaps we attached too much importance to delevaning. We probably put too much emphasis on the physical act of cleaning. We would clean the house top to bottom. In our house, we started cleaning in the attic and finished in the basement. I told my mom that I was pretty sure none of us had eaten a sandwich up in the attic, but we had to search and clean it nonetheless.

My son, Cody, remembers cleaning the garage with me prior to the spring holy days when he was young. He recalls how I had him remove every paint can from the bottom shelf of the workbench and clean the can and the shelf. He, too, wondered if anyone had eaten a sandwich curled up under the workbench. It was the same reasoning I had used a generation earlier, and it was probably used by countless other children for thousands of years.

Looking back on this with a certain amount of maturity now, I see nothing wrong with thoroughly cleaning one’s home or personal space. This physical act, however—or any other physical act, for

that matter—will not gain us entrance into the Kingdom of God. But, if done with an attitude of superiority and pride, it will actually separate us from God!

So, if we choose to combine delevaning with a thorough cleaning of the house or office or dorm room, a spring cleaning, that is a good thing. While we are doing this, we should not only ponder how leaven symbolizes sin, but also consider our stuff, and make sure it does not mean the world to us. After all, we will someday have to leave it all behind.