Haplous – single, sound, sincere, good, liberal, healthy or what?

(Iver Larsen - Revised in October 2026)

The Greek word haplous (ἁπλοῦς) is not an easy word to understand and various translators have suggested different renderings in different places where it occurs in the New Testament.

What can we do to get a better understanding of the meaning? I don't think we get it by looking at current English translations. Rather, we can look at the standard dictionaries as well as the actual usage of the word, especially in the LXX and the NT.

Unfortunately, the adjective ἁπλοῦς is very rare. It only occurs in Mat 6:22 and the parallel in Luke 11:34, plus an obscure passage in Prov 11:25. This is not enough data to make any conclusions from.

The adverb ἁπλῶς is also very rare. It only occurs in James 1:5 and 3 times in the LXX (Prov 10:9, Wis 16:27, 2 Macc 6:6).

However, we are much better off with the noun ἁπλότης. It occurs 8 times in the NT and 7 times in the LXX.

Looking first at the Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint (Lust, et al.), I find: "simplicity, sincerity, integrity, frankness 1 Chr 29,17; simplicity, innocence 2 Sam 15,11." I am sceptical about the frankness, but certainly the idea of sincerity and integrity is there. Other possible translations are: innocence, in good faith, without a hidden agenda, with pure motives, undivided devotion to God.

The Classical Greek dictionary LSJ suggests:
I. singleness, τῆς φωνῆς Arist.Aud.801a19.
II. Simplicity
2. of persons, simplicity, frankness, sincerity, … ἡ εἰς τὸν Χριστὸν ἁ. 2Ep.Cor.11.3.
3. open-heartedness: hence, liberality, ib.8.2, 9.11, cf. IG14.1517.
4. ignorance, back-wardness

It is the same basic idea of sincerity. They do suggest "liberality" but that is disputed.

The NT Greek dictionary BDAG suggests:
In our lit. esp. of personal integrity expressed in word or action … simplicity, sincerity, uprightness, frankness ἐν ἁ. τῆς καρδίας ὑπακούειν obey w. a sincere heart (as vs. 6 indicates, not with an outward show that conceals improper motivation) Eph 6:5; cp. Col 3:22 (Diod S 5, 66, 4, ἁπλότης τῆς ψυχῆς =inmost sincerity; 1 Ch 29:17; Wsd 1:1; TestReub 4:1; TestSim 4:5; TestLevi 13:1); w. εἰλικρίνεια 2 Cor 1:12; cp. the Syr. rendering of 1 Cl 60:2 (text: ὁσιότης). ἐν ἁ. λέγειν speak simply, plainly, i.e., without ambiguity B 8:2 (cp. Dionys. Hal., Ars Rhet. 9, 14). ἐν ἁ. δηλῶσαι 17:1. ἐν ἁ. εὑρίσκεσθαι be found sincere Hm 2:7. ἡ ἁ. ἡ εἰς Χριστόν sincere devotion to Christ 2 Cor 11:3 (WWood, Exp. 9th ser., 2, 1925, 450–53).—Of simple goodness, which gives itself without reserve, 'without strings attached', 'without hidden agendas' (Jos., Bell. 5, 319, Ant. 7, 332; TestIss 3:8) ingenuousness Ro 12:8; 2 Cor 8:2; 9:11, 13. Hermas is esp. fond of this mng.: w. ἀκακία (Philo, Op. M. 170) Hv 1, 2, 4; 3, 9, 1; w. ἐγκράτεια Hv 2, 3, 2; w. νηπιότης Hs 9, 24, 3;

ἐμμένειν τῇ ἁ. continue in your sincerity Hv 3, 1, 9. For this ἁ. ἔχειν m 2:1. Personif. w. other Christian virtues Hv 3, 8, 5 and 7; Hs 9, 15, 2.

BDAG notes that another and quite different sense has been suggested, but they also say that this sense is disputed and probably incorrect:
"The interpretation generosity, liberality has frequently been proposed for Ro 12:8; 2 Cor 8:2; 9:11, *13 (w. support sought in TestIss 3:8 [s. RCharles, Test12Patr, 1908, on TestIss 3:1, 2, 8]; Kaibel 716, 5=IG XIV, 1517 [s. L-S-J-M s.v. II, 3]), but this sense (adopted by NRSV et al.) is in dispute, and it is prob. that mng. 1 in the sense of sincere concern, simple goodness is sufficient for all these pass."

When I look at all these passages, it seems to me that "with pure motives", "without a hidden agenda" and with "pure and sincere devotion to God" fit very well in all the Biblical passages.

The idea of liberality was apparently introduced into English translations in the first of these disputed passages by the RSV and in the other three already by KJV.

Rom 12:8:
KJV: he that giveth, [let him do it] with simplicity
RSV: he who contributes, in liberality
NET: if it is contributing, he must do so with sincerity

Here the idea of "without a hidden agenda", "with pure motives", "with undivided devotion and obedience to Christ" fits well. The point can hardly be that you must give generously, but rather that whatever you give, be it much or little, is to be given without ulterior motives, with a sincere heart.

2 Cor 8:2
KJV: unto the riches of their liberality.
NIV: in rich generosity.

Here the liberality notion was already present in the KJV and that is why it has crept into English translations in contradiction to the normal meaning of the word. Paul is describing the churches in Macedonia, their joy in the midst of persecutions and extreme poverty. That great joy and deep poverty overflowed into a wealth of pure, undivided and sincere devotion in action. Verse 3 continues by saying that it was from this pure devotion to Christ (and his body) that they gave not only to their ability (which was very small) but they gave beyond. Verse 4 describes how they were so devoted to Christ that they begged to be involved in giving to their needy fellow Christians. I see no linguistic or contextual reason to introduce the idea of liberality in verse 2. They were generous in their giving, but that is expressed in v. 4 by other words rather than ἁπλότης. A generous gift may well result from a wholehearted attitude and sincere devotion to God, but generosity is hardly within the meaning of ἁπλότης.

2 Cor 9:11 is quite similar to the preceding case, and the idea of "full devotion to Christ without selfish motives" fits the context well enough so that I don't see a need to introduce the liberality notion into the word. In Paul's writings it is a great virtue to give with a sincere heart and devotion to God. It is not crucial how much you give, since people have different resources, but your attitude and motives in giving are important. Think of the poor widow that Jesus commended.

2 Cor 9:13 is again similar. Paul commends them “because of your obedience to your confession in the gospel of Christ” (NET) and their sincere and pure devotion to Christ which led them to share what they had with fellow Christians in need. As BDAG suggests there is no good reason to introduce a sense 2 for ἁπλότης when the basic and normal sense 1 works fine in all these contexts.

For the rest of the passages in the NT and all of the LXX ones, no one has suggested that liberality or generosity is part of the meaning.

In the single occurrence of ἁπλῶς in James 1:5 the idea of liberality has also crept in where it probably does not belong. Here it is God who gives wisdom to the person who lacks it and asks for it. He does this with pure motives, no strings attached, no hidden agenda and without reproach.

Now let me return to the adjective haplous (ἁπλοῦς) as it appears in Matt 6:22: If your eye is haplous... Based on the corresponding noun, the expected meaning would be ”sincere, devoted (to God)” but this is not how it has been understood and translated in most translations. This verse has a number of other challenges, so I shall look at that in a separate article which can be found here (**The eye is the lamp of the body - Matt 6:22-23 and Luke 11:34-36**)