

The Discipline of Simplicity

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[0:00] Do you ever feel yourself torn, or do you ever feel yourself tearing yourself in all different directions?

! God is the God of order and He created the Garden of Eden, everything perfectly symmetrical and beautiful. But my life sometimes is like a jungle out of control.

There's so many possibilities, and it's so hard to decide what to do. And maybe this is you. I feel flustered and unsure and confused about what I'm supposed to be doing.

I don't have the balance or the direction, and I'm torn. Sometimes it seems like even the Bible does that to us. Last week, Pastor John told us to use our money for eternal purposes, and I told you to buy clothes and go on dates with your wife.

And that seems contradictory. They're both God's Word. There is a center. But where is it? How do we make those things come together?

[1:17] How do we make our life come together in a focus point? And maybe that's you. You're wondering that. Well, today I have the beginning of an answer. It's just the beginning.

My modest beginning of an answer is called the discipline of simplicity. On lunch and Sundays, we've been talking about different aspects of spirituality.

These are ways that we walk with God, that we have communion and fellowship with God. We've talked about silence and solitude. We've talked about fasting.

We've talked about meditating. And today we're going to talk about the discipline of simplicity. And that's probably something you haven't heard a lot about, or it's not something that I think we talk a lot about here, at least under that heading.

But I think you'll find that it is familiar in some ways. I have three points, and each point is a little bit longer than the last one. And so the first point is the shortest. And it's a question.

[2:22] What am I talking about when I say simplicity? What am I talking about when I say simplicity? Well, simplicity is something that is inward.

It's inside that shows itself outwardly. So it's something inward that shows itself outwardly.

Simplicity is an all-controlling attitude of our hearts that leads us to a simple lifestyle.

So simplicity is the conscious effort to put Christ at the center of our lives in every aspect. It's the conscious effort to get rid of all competing loyalties.

And so you can think about it like this. It's forging our life into a spear. And you know how a warrior would use a spear. All the thrust, all the momentum, all the power is focused onto one point.

And that's what I mean by simplicity. It's bringing everything in our life under the control of one question. And that is, what does God think of this? What does God think of this?

[3:32] That's simplicity. Simplicity marked Jesus' own life, didn't it? He didn't have any competing loyalties fighting in his heart.

He wasn't ever torn. He wasn't ever off balance. He was never at a loss for what to be doing. He never said, should I do this or should I do that? No.

Isaiah called him a polished arrow. He was razor sharp. He was narrowed into a single focus. Jesus said in John 5, I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by Himself.

He can do only what He sees His Father doing, because whatever the Father does, the Son also does. So Jesus had one mind. He wanted to obey His Father.

And He only had one eye. He saw what His Father was doing, and He was going to do that. And so He was always asking the question, what does God think of this?

[4:34] And His life carried that out. See, Jesus didn't care what people thought of Him. He ate and drank with sinners. And the religious types hated Him for it.

Well, why? Well, why did He feel like He could do that? Because He wasn't concerned about what people were saying. He was only asking, what does God want me to do? What does my Father want?

And so simplicity, it begins in our heart, and it shows itself in our lives. It shows in a lifestyle that reflects God's priorities and His concerns.

And so, the Son, it's the controlling body in our solar system. All of the planets are made to swing around the Son. All of the planets swing under its control.

And simplicity is putting God at the center of our lives and making all the planets of our life dance to one tune, swing around in one orbit.

[5:41] It's always asking, what does God think of this? Well, and it shows in a lifestyle. It shows in a lifestyle of answering that one question.

It shows itself in the way that Paul lived. Paul lived a simple life. He had a simple heart. He said this, For me to live is Christ.

And he said this, But one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize. Paul's lifestyle was shaped.

It was edged. It was pointed. It was narrowed to one single thing. He was going to live for Christ.

And he was pressing on to win the prize. And so he was a spear flying in a single direction.

He wasn't scattered. He wasn't torn. He wasn't confused. And no one could say to Paul, say to Paul that he was a fickle man. Well, sometimes he wants comfort. And sometimes he wants to serve God.

[6:42] Sometimes he's living for the compliments of others. And sometimes he's living for God's smile. That wasn't Paul. He had one thing in mind, and he lived like it.

Everything was forced into that paradigm. He didn't care about accumulating things. Everything in his life danced to that single tune of what does God think of this?

Everything served a singular purpose. And so, simply put, the discipline of simplicity is living and being controlled by what God thinks.

And so, it reflects itself in that lifestyle. We will choose things. We will buy things, not for their status, not for the praise of men, but for their utility, how we can serve God with them.

And so, simplicity transforms the way that we look at wealth and the way that we look at accumulating things. Accumulation of our possessions.

[7:48] And that brings us to our second point. And let's sharpen our focus here and ask, what does God think about wealth? What does God say about the accumulation of possessions?

What does God think about this? Well, turn in your Bibles to the Sermon on the Mount. chapter 6, Matthew chapter 6. And these aren't going to be extraordinarily new passages by any means.

But we want to ask, what does God think about our wealth and our accumulating possessions? Matthew chapter 6, verse 19. This is our Lord speaking.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven where moth and rust do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Jesus calls the accumulation of wealth, he thinks it's foolish.

[8:54] He tells us not to do it. Why? Well, because of all of our working, all of our working to get things is actually leading us to lose everything.

He says it's a foolish investment. At the end, if all you strive for is getting things, you will lose everything. Instead, Jesus tells us to store up treasures in heaven.

Now, he doesn't tell us how to do that in Matthew chapter 6, but he does tell us in Luke 12. And listen to what Jesus says. This is how you store up treasures in heaven.

Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out. A treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted.

So how do you store up treasures in heaven? You sell what you have and you give it to the poor. By selling what you possess and you give it to those who need it.

[9:55] So Jesus is saying, put your money to good use and a good use is not accumulating more things for yourselves. It is getting rid of things for the needy. So make it serve a worthwhile purpose.

So let me ask you, which is bigger? Your treasure in heaven or your treasure on the earth? If the amount you gave to the poor was the barometer, are you richer on earth than you will be in heaven?

That is what Jesus is teaching us. What does the Bible say about accumulating wealth? Back in Matthew 6, Jesus says, no one can serve two masters.

Either he will hate the one and love the other or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. You cannot love your things and want your things and love God.

You either love God or money. There isn't any middle ground. So Jesus calls us to simplicity of heart and life, to live for a narrow focus.

[11:15] God is first and that means my life will not be cluttered with unnecessary possessions, unnecessary stuff.

I won't be seeing my life and the things that I own, my status and the things I own, because God is my life and Christ is my status. And so I don't need things and I don't need to bring in things to find meaning or purpose.

So, you can run after the new TV, the bigger TV, the better TV, and you can run after a bigger savings account and you can go to the Verizon store and you can buy the latest Android phone or the next 4G phone and if your heart is in it, if you are living for it, how can you love God?

And I know that sounds blunt, but I didn't say it. The Apostle John said it. He said, Do not love the world or anything in the world.

If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world, the cravings of sinful man, the lust of the eyes, and the boasting of what he has and does comes not from the Father but from the world.

[12:38] So, what is the world like? It is possession oriented. The worldly man craves more. He lusts for more. And he boasts about what he already has.

And so, the world is possession oriented. And if you are possession oriented, then the love of the Father cannot be in you. It isn't in you. Brothers and sisters, I fear that too often, we are just too much.

Like the world. And that's why as soon as Jesus tells us to go sell our possessions and give to the poor, so many times we think of ten theological reasons why he isn't talking to us.

And talking about us. Why aren't we ever called to something radical? And could it be for all of our theological reasoning and self-justifications, the fact is that we love our things.

And we're what James called double-minded. We love God and we love our things still. And we pray to God but we ask for things so that we can spend what we gain on ourselves. And we love our comfort and we want that more than we want God.

[13:57] God. And we love our comfort and so we don't call it hoarding. We call it prudence. And we don't call it selfishness. We call it taking care of our families.

Doing the right thing. And we don't call it hating God. We call it fitting into the world so that we can witness to the world. And I don't know about your hearts.

I don't. But I know my own heart and I need more simplicity. Purity of heart that asks what does God think of this? What does God want?

Well, what else does the Bible say about our possessions and accumulating wealth? The Bible denies the absolute right to personal property.

It denies the absolute right of personal property. See, pure unbridled capitalism says that the individual has the absolute right to his own property to do what, with, and where he wants with it.

[15:04] And communism says the state owns all the property and the state gets to decide what happens with it. And the Bible says the earth is the Lord's and everything in it.

So according to the Bible, you don't have the absolute right to private property. Why not? Because you don't own it. God does. Everything you own is God's.

So do you buy something that you want just because you want it? For how much you like, when you like? Do you do whatever you want with what you have until you decide to upgrade, to sell, to throw it away?

Never asking, what does God want me to do with these things? Then you are acting like you have the absolute right to your property. When in fact, we are stewards.

God owns our things. He puts them under our control, under our possession, so that we would do what he wants with them. And so we don't have the right to treat God's things like they are our things.

[16:17] So the steward asked the master, should I buy this? Should I keep this? How should I use this? Should I sell this to give money to your cause? See, the Bible calls us to simplicity.

And simplicity is simply recognizing the fact that my car and my house and my clothes and everything I own, all my money, all my computers, my furniture, my property, my cash, it all belongs to God.

And that God demands and expects me to use those things for His purposes, to serve His priorities. And simplicity is simply understanding the fact that I can't do whatever I want with my things, when I want and how I want.

And so simplicity doesn't ask, is this lawful for me to buy? Is this lawful for me to have? That isn't a high enough question. Simplicity asks, does this match God's priorities?

Does this fulfill what He wants? Does this fit in with what the Bible says about my possessions and about where my heart should be? And so that is simplicity.

[17:26] The Bible expects it. The Bible teaches it. That's how Jesus lived. That's how Paul lived. Well, the third point and the longest is a map towards simplicity.

If you are going to my house, but you've never been there, you need a map. And so this is a map to get where you are, which we're all over the place, I recognize that, to where God expects us to be. A map from where we are to where simplicity says that we should be. And it's going to work itself out differently. Like I said, this is just a beginning.

I was telling Stephanie, I think we could make a whole Sunday school series about going through all the different aspects of our lives and asking, what does God expect here? About my relationships, about how I use my tongue, about what I do with my time.

All these things could fit under that question. But we're talking about our things primarily. So it's going to work itself out differently, is what I'm saying.

[18:35] It's not going to be the same for every one of us. So I have five directions to help you grow in the discipline of simplicity. Direction one is practice communion with God.

Practice communion with God. If you're going to ask God, what do you think about this? Then you have to know what God thinks about things. And you also have to be spending time with Him.

See, simplicity isn't something that we do just one time at the beginning of the day. Or we do at set times. It's something that we do all the time. It is an entire lifestyle of living before God and asking God, what does He think about what I'm doing?

And so we have to practice communion with God. I'm talking about living in the consciousness that I am with God and that God is with me even here, now.

And so that's what Paul meant when he said, pray without ceasing. That meant regular times of prayer and it also meant there should be an ongoing conversation between you and God all the time. And that's how Jesus lived.

[19:42] Remember, I see what my Father does and I do it. It's always there. This relationship is always there. He was always thinking about His Father. And if we are going to hone our lives down to a single God-glorifying point, if we're going to make our lives into a spear for God, then we have to be with God.

We have to be aware of what God expects. And that awareness will sharpen our lives. And so as we interact with this person or that person, we're always thinking about God.

There's never two people in a conversation. There's always a third. There's always God there. And so when we're in the store, as we're walking and we're looking at the things that we see to buy or not to buy, we're talking to God about it.

He is with us there. So communion with God, it begins with having your devotions in the morning and it's carrying that communion, that awareness of God throughout your whole day.

And so let me ask you, how much of your day are you consciously aware of God? We're probably all far, doing far worse than we'd like to admit.

[20:58] But ask yourself seriously, what percentage of the day am I thinking about God? Am I actually aware of living in the presence of God? Write that percent down somewhere.

Pray and ask, by God's grace, to do better the next day. That's the first step towards simplicity because remember, simplicity is an inner reality and then it shows itself on the outside.

So practice communion with God. Direction two, plan your spending. Generally, no one plans on wasting their money.

No one sits down and says, I'm going to spend all my money and act like all my things are my things and I'm going to treat God as secondary and myself as primary. We don't plan on that, it just happens.

And so you go through Walmart and, or you're going to Walmart and you decide that you're going to have your oil changed. And so while you're waiting for them to work on your car, you start moseying through the store.

[22:00] Have you ever been here? So you walk into the exercise department and you look down at your stomach and you look up on the exercise DVDs and you say, wait a minute, you know, cardio blast dance death is what I need to get in shape.

And never mind the fact that you have four exercise DVDs at home that you don't use, you buy that one and you put it in your basket. So you keep walking and when you're finally done, there you are, you come back to the back and you have your cart.

I mean, you ran out of room halfway through your shopping experience and you had to move up from a basket to a cart. And so there you are, you have all your things in your cart and you have new clothes and you have new sandals and you have bird seed and you have a box of Cheez-Oak crackers and one of those foot and a half long pepperoni sticks and your exercise DVD.

What happened? Well, one, you probably weren't thinking about God, were you? Two, you didn't have a plan.

We didn't plan our spending and so then we moan that we don't have enough to give. And so we are God's stewards. And I was really struck by this.

[23:22] Would any good steward not plan on how he was going to spend his master's money? Would he not budget how he was going to use his master's things?

Any good steward wouldn't. It's inconceivable that he wouldn't. And if you're going to live simply, then you're going to have to do a budget of some kind.

You're going to have to plan something. You're going to have to ask, you're going to have to sit down with your spouse and with God and ask, what does God want us to do with our money?

Where does God want us to go and use these things? And until you start planning how you're going to spend your money under God's eye, asking the question, what does God want?

Then you'll never grow in simplicity. And your life will be wasted and scattered over a thousand different things when God is calling us to one thing. Direction three.

[24:27] Unplug from the consumer-driven culture. Unplug from the consumer-driven culture. I'm not saying unplug from culture. I mean, we can't do that.

We'd have to leave the world. And I'm not saying become an Amish person or something. That's not the point. But unplug from the parts of our culture that are constantly asking us and tempting us and telling us and yelling and screaming at us to spend and to consume.

See, the world, remember, is possession-oriented. It boasts in what it has. And so the world says there is happiness in having things. And so commercials say, buy, and you will be happy.

And so what I'm saying is turn off your TV. Not because the TV shows are so bad. They are. But because the commercials are so bad. The commercials have one purpose.

And that is to make you buy things that you don't need. And you know that. TV is not for your good. It's for the good of the companies who buy the advertisement time.

[25:39] It's for their good. They don't care what happens to your life and to your family as long as you spend your money on their things. So don't, you can't say either that, you know, don't worry about it.

I see through all the gimmicks of it and the foolishness of it. They're not fooling me. And brothers and sisters, they know they're not fooling you. They don't need to fool you on that level.

They know you see through all the gimmickiness of their commercials. They just want you to desire. They just want you to buy their thing and they don't need to fool you on that level to get you to want. If they put a Big Mac on the TV enough times, you will start wanting it. Your stomach will do the rest. And the bottom line is, it is a false religion.

They're part of the world and they're saying things are going to make you happy and God says, no, they're not. The lust of the eyes and the pride of life is everything and God disagrees. So turn it off.

[26:46] And I can't command you. I'm not making this some soul-chilling rule. It's not a new legal rule. I'm just saying, would you go to a mosque and listen to a mom speak?

Then why would you sit under the false teaching of the advertisement people? If you do watch, at least talk to your kids about it. Show them the lies and show them the truth.

Until we unplug from the consumer-driven culture, until we get out of that in some way and stop listening to the lies, we will never grow into a simple heart, a heart like Jesus.

We'll be double-minded. We'll want God and we'll see all those things and we'll want those things and we'll have no idea how to spend our money because we'll be torn and confused.

We have to say no to one or the other. Direction four, make it a goal to give as much as you can. Make it a goal to give as much as you can.

[27:50] The tithe is the basement. It is not the attic of our giving. So as a young man, John Wesley, calculated. He sat down and he thought. He said, you know what?

If I do all the calculations, I can live on 28 pounds a year. And I don't know how much that is in our own day with all the currency change. It wasn't a lot of money.

But he said, I can live on this and I will give away the rest. And so, while he was young, he only made, you know, about 30 pounds a year and so he wasn't giving a lot.

But as he grew older and as he wrote books and his books became bestsellers and things like that, he started to make a lot of money. He'd make 1,400 pounds a year. Now, what our culture tells you to do is to increase your spending.

As your income goes up, so your expenses should go up in the way your lifestyle should be. But that's not what he did. He gave away, he lived on 28 pounds and he gave away 1,372, I think.

[28:59] He gave it all away. He gave it to poor pastors. He gave it to missionaries. He gave it to orphans and widows. And he gave everything he could.

At the end of his life he wrote in his journal. He said, I didn't leave any money in my will to anyone because I didn't have any. Now, John Wesley knew where to invest his money.

He's a good model for us. When John Wesley died, he didn't lose very much, but he gained a whole lot. And is it going to be the opposite for us?

Or are we going to take him as a model? So look at your income. How much can you live on? When all your God-given responsibilities, God-given responsibilities, responsibilities, not human-enforced responsibilities or culturally expected responsibilities, when your God-given responsibilities are met, then how much can you give away?

How much can you store in heaven? Every day in the world, every day in the world, 30,000 children die of starvation and preventable diseases.

[30:20] And that's a big number, but think about it like this. Every day, 100 airplanes full of children crash and die. Is it right for us to keep accumulating things when that is going on?

Is it really what God wants? Is it God's will for us to keep accumulating things when there are over 2,000 people groups in our world who don't have a single word of the Bible in their language?

And if they die, they will go to hell? Is it right for us to go on our merry own way and importing more and more comfort into our lives when the world is perishing?

Jesus gave all. He left heaven and he became a poor man. And he gave up the comfort of heaven and he suffered.

And for, he was rich, but for your sakes he became poor. And so are you generous like Jesus? Is your life a gospel-like life?

[31:29] Direction five. Enjoy God's good gifts. Enjoy God's gifts. After it's all said and done, there is still a responsibility for us to enjoy the things that God has given us for our needs.

How he's met our needs. We are to enjoy those things. So Ecclesiastes tells us frequently, and this is kind of where we can bring Ecclesiastes and understand how all these things that are apparently contradictory come together.

Ecclesiastes tells us to enjoy our work and our food and our wife and our wine and enjoy all these things because these are all the ways that God meets our needs. And so he's saying, when God meets your needs, enjoy them, thank them.

Thank him for them. And so Cole Leth, the author of Ecclesiastes, isn't telling us to live in excess. He isn't telling us to keep comfort into our lives and to enjoy it while we can and get as much as we can.

He's saying live for the glory of God even when it's meeting your provisions. And food and drink and a wife and your work, that is not excessive living.

[32:37] Those are the simple things that have God meets your needs. So bring God's provision for you. Your food, and your work, and your drink, and your clothes, and your wife, and your job, to the question of what does God think of these?

And Ecclesiastes tells us what he thinks of these. These are good. He's accepted them, and so we should enjoy them. He says, eat and drink and live joyfully under the grace of God. And if you do, it glorifies him.

So there's no paradox, there's no contradiction between Cole Leth and Jesus. us. They come to one single point under this idea of simplicity.

When we live simply, when we live with one mind, and we're not double minded, and we're asking, what does God want me to do, and how does he want me to live, we are stopped.

The thousand directions that our life can splinter into and shatter into gets pulled into one. And so living simply is sharpening our lives down into a single point.

[33:48] It's bringing our whole life, and especially today, our possessions, and bringing them into line with what God's priorities are, and what God's vision is, what God's mission is.

It's living Christ-like. See, when Jesus was on the earth, when he was at the banquet, and he was eating and drinking and enjoying life and enjoying people and seeking the lost, as much as when he was on the cross, he was asking the one question of, I want to obey.

How do I obey? And we must learn to do the same. We must stop being torn and find that focus of what does God want us to do?

Well, may God bless us with the Holy Spirit to teach us, not only here, but as we walk through our lives for his glory. Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we do pray that you would forgive us.

We have been too double-minded too often, and we ask that you would be patient with us.

[35:08] Thank you that you are slow to anger and that you have given us the Holy Spirit to teach us, to lead us into all truth, and I pray that we would be led into all truth in every aspect of our lives.

And so the way we spend our money and we use our time and that we use our tongue and that we use all the good gifts you've given to us, as we enjoy your provision to us, I pray that in all those things we would seek to glorify you.

We would ask, what do you want in this? Father, I pray that you would do that for the Grace Fellowship Church, that we would be beautiful for you, that we would shine for you, that our lives would be different because of the gospel.

Help us to see that these aren't rules, but this is living like Jesus lived. This is living in a way that honors him for what he's done for us.

Thank you that every grace that we need to say no to ourselves is in Jesus Christ and that we can have hope and expectation of change even when it hurts because you have promised to be with us.

[36:17] Thank you that you take the light in all those who put their trust in you. I pray that you would delight in us as we let go of our things. And embrace only you.

And I thank you for Jesus and it's in his name I pray. Amen.