Wisdom in Simplicity

Third in the series “Wisdom for Life”

# Scripture: Matthew 6:19-34

# Key thought: Power in living comes through simplicity of focus.

# Intro:

Keeping it simple has fallen on hard times. And though we like the idea, we also like our choices. Jesus teaches us that freedom is not found in having and doing but in keeping God and his will first in our heart. "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… For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19 – 21). Jesus wants us to know that we don't need all the things or experiences we think we do. What we really need is to keep first things first – Jesus and his kingdom. Life becomes much more simple when one thing matters most.
Adele Ahlberg Calhoun in Spiritual Disciplines Handbook p. 75

Think about the state of the typical American garage. If it can hold a car at all, it probably only holds one car instead of the two it was designed for. Many people have long ago given up getting a car in their garage at all. The garage is used instead for storage of lawn and garden equipment, snow removal equipment, seasonal decorations, things we have because we might need them, things we collect, unfinished projects, a couple things we bought because they were a really good deal, some things on their way to the trash or donation bin but they are not there yet, and a few other items that are excess in the house right now but we really don’t want to get rid of them just yet. I think you know the picture.

It would not be so bad if the syndrome were confined to the garage, but it is not. Take a look at the schedule of most households. It will reveal a dizzying complexity of conflicting demands. For example, a couple generations ago, it was common for a household to have one job schedule to accommodate. Now it is common for a family to be juggling three or four or even more job schedules, especially if there are older teens or young adults also working while living at home. Just a generation ago, communication consisted of the mailbox and the telephone on the wall. Now there are multiple cell phones in the house, all with multiple social apps on them. Family sports schedules have become more intense. Increased travel opportunities and increased commuting times have added to this mix as well. We realize that we as people are not exactly thriving with all this complexity. But we are not sure what to do about it.

We look with a bit of envy at the Amish with their “simple life.” We wonder about the attraction of monastic communities. We don’t want to join, but we could learn from the value upon simplicity of such groups.

Classical writers about Christian disciplines explain a discipline of simplicity. I believe the Christian discipline of simplicity can be a wonderful healing balm for the malaise of our day.

The Christian discipline of simplicity is an inward reality that results in an outward lifestyle. Both the inward and outward aspects of simplicity are essential. We deceive ourselves if we believe we can possess the inward reality without it having a profound effect how we live. To attempt to arrange an outward lifestyle of simplicity without the inward reality leads to deadly legalism. Richard J Foster in Celebration of Discipline pages 69, 70.

# What is simplicity?

It turns out that one of the best places to begin in talking about simplicity is Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Consider Matt 6:22-23 from the King James Version.

The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness! Matt 6:22-23 KJV (ASV – single, NASU -clear, God’s Word – unclouded, NIV – healthy, William Barclay in DSB – generous )

The word translated “single” is the Greek word "haplotace.” It can mean single, it can mean generous or, when referring to sight it can imply seeing clearly which means the eyes are healthy, which is the slant most translations take. However, you can find all three of those meanings reflected in the various translations of that verse.

Look how the word is used in other places. Paul used this Greek word a couple times in writing to the Corinthians.

Our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward. 2 Cor. 1:12 KJV
(NIV integrity; NRSV frankness)

Paul is saying that his dealings with the Corinthians were straightforward. There was no guile or hiddenness. He wanted the Corinthians to also have an honest and simple faith. He wrote to them.

But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. 2 Cor 11:3 NIV

The word translated as “sincere” is the Greek “haplotace.” Paul wants them to have a simplicity of motivation. Applying Paul’s message to us, if we have divided hearts, if our mental picture becomes clouded, if the motivation is no longer straightforward, if there is vacillation as to our purpose, then our hearts can no longer be described as "haplotace." The sincere, childlike, and single-minded affection which described the early church is no longer present. Acts describes that early church using a
Greek synonym.

Continuing faithfully and with singleness of purpose to meet in the Temple courts daily, and breaking bread in their several homes, they shared their food in joy and simplicity of heart, praising God and having the respect of all the people. And day after day the Lord kept adding to them those who were being saved. Acts 2:46-47 CJB

In our modern world, unfortunately, the kind of unadulterated discipleship of the Acts 2 church has been spoiled by the distractions of life. There is no simplicity in our motivation. Jesus warned one church in Revelation. "You have left your first love!"

The fact that this word "haplotace" was also used by the Greek world to mean "generous" (2 Cor. 9:11) actually makes a great deal of sense. Think about what happens when you are about to make a significant financial gift to your church or to a local charity. As long as your mind remains focused on the desire to give, on the need before you, and on the blessings that God has given you with which you can bless someone else, then the process of giving your gifts remains relatively uncomplicated in your mind. As long as your focus is simple, making the gift is easy. But as soon as you begin to also think about that new pair of jeans that you've been wanting, the window in your house that needs to be replaced, or the doctor bill you haven't paid yet, then the process of giving a simple gift, is no longer simple. Your mind is torn, and you end up agonizing over how much to give, if indeed you can give it all.

Now I’m not recommending neglecting our responsibilities, and simplicity does not demand that. I’m just pointing out that the fewer complications there are in our emotions, the easier it is for us to make decisions. This need for motivational simplicity affects our ability to be a disciple of Jesus, it affects our service to others, it impacts our time for personal devotion, and it is crucially related to our financial giving.

# How can I grow in simplicity?

So how can we grow in simplicity? How can we have greater focus in our motivation? I cannot help but think of the advice of the Apostle Peter in 1 Peter 3:15.

## “In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord!”

Peter is simply reflecting the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Matt 6:33 NIV

The central point for the discipline of simplicity is to seek the kingdom of God and the righteousness of his kingdom first – and then everything necessary will come in its proper order. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of Jesus insight at this point. Everything hinges upon maintaining the "first" thing as first. Nothing must come before the kingdom of God, including the desire for a simple lifestyle…Nothing else can be central. The desire to get out of the rat race cannot be central, the redistribution of the world's wealth cannot be central, the concern for ecology cannot be central. The only thing that can be central in the spiritual discipline of simplicity is to seek first God's kingdom and the righteousness, both personal and social, of that kingdom.  Richard J Foster in Celebration of Discipline pages 75, 76

I think also of a short passage from Psalm 119.

Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain.
Turn my eyes away from worthless things;
preserve my life according to your word. Ps 119:36-37 NIV

Even in OT times, the Psalmist realized that focusing his heart on God’s ways was ultimately the way of wisdom, and the way to preserve his life.

Think about the Macedonians of whom Paul wrote in his second letter to Corinth. Paul writes about how in a time of poverty, they gave generously;

They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.
 2 Cor 8:5 NIV

When one thinks about simplicity, one calls to mind groups in colonial America that lived very simply. The Quakers were among them. John Woolman was a Quaker in colonial America, living from 1720 to 1772. Here is an excerpt from The Journal of John Woolman

First, my dear friends, dwell in humility and take heed that no views of outward gain get too deep hold of you, that so your eyes being single to the Lord, you may be preserved in the way of safety.

Where people let loose their minds after the love of outward things and are more engaged in pursuing the profits and seeking the friendships of this world than to be inwardly acquainted with the way of true peace, such walk in a vain shadow while the true comfort of life is wanting. Their examples are often hurtful to others, and their treasures thus collected do many times prove dangerous snares to their children.

But where people are sincerely devoted to follow Christ and dwell under the influence of his Holy Spirit, their stability and firmness through a divine blessing is at times like dew on the tender plants around about them, and the weightiness of their spirits secretly works on the minds of others.
Devotional Classics edited Richard J Foster & James Bryan Smith p. 231

Woolman brings up the point that when we are focused on Jesus, it greatly increases our influence for Jesus. Whereas, when our lives are spent for a multiplicity of priorities, then our spiritual influence is diluted. I’m not talking about everyone becoming a vocational minister, though God calls some to that high calling. I’m talking about having a sense in our daily lives that we are serving God. Like Brother Lawrence in the classic “The Practice of the Presence of God,” it’s about allowing our spiritual values gained from Jesus to help us focus everyday decisions, to help us prioritize our time and money, and to guide us in our conversations with friends.

## Choose practical ways to reduce diversions, distractions and disruptions

So, once our hearts are centered in Jesus, how does the Christian discipline of simplicity affect the rest of our lives? That is a great question. In my study, I found lists by Richard Foster and Adele Ahlberg Calhoun suggesting practical ways that we increase simplicity in our lives. If we try these without having a heart for it, they will prove fake and probably very temporary. But if our hearts are centered on Jesus first, then practices such as these with help prevent distraction and prove very beneficial.

### Outward expressions of simplicity – A combined list from Adele Ahlberg Calhoun (p. 76) and Richard Foster (pp. 78-82) with comment of my own as well.

1. Cautious buying. Buy things for their usefulness rather than their status. Refuse to be propagandized by the custodians of modern gadgetry. Look with a healthy skepticism at all "by now, pay later" schemes. They are traps and serve to deepen your bondage. Postpone purchases we are not sure about. These kinds of attitudes toward purchasing help guard us against collecting more things.
2. Reject anything that is producing an addiction in you. For example, are you becoming addicted to Facebook or another social media app? Try signing off every Sat. night for a 24 hr. media Sabbath. Go back on at the same time on Sunday evening. Anything that becomes the center of our attention prevents us from making Jesus the axis of our heart.
3. Develop a habit of giving things away. If someone admires something of yours, give it away. Find out just how attached you are to your things. Generosity is like a breath of fresh air.
4. De-accumulate. Uncomplicate your life by choosing a few areas in which you wish to practice "letting go." Clean out the garage, basement, closet or attic. Masses of things that are not needed complicate life. Lent is a great season for this discipline. Last year my wife and I both set goals for the number of items we wanted to de-accumulate during Lent. I plan to do the same this year. Most of us could get rid of half of our possessions without any serious sacrifice.
5. Intentionally limit your choices. Do you need six different kinds of breakfast cereal, hundreds of TV channels or four tennis racket? How many social media apps can you use for reasons that accord with your overall purpose? How many sports and activities can a child participate in before it becomes counter-productive to their lives and the life of their family? We as a culture have a very difficult time choosing and narrowing down our focus. Yet we know that those who truly excel do just that – they narrow their focus to excel at one thing. I remember hearing John Maxwell say, “You’ve got to give up to go up.” Advancing requires focus.
6. Learn to enjoy things without owning them. Owning things is an obsession in our culture. If we own it, we feel we can control it; and if we can control it, we feel it will give us more pleasure. The idea is an illusion. Many things in life can be enjoyed without possessing or controlling them. Share things. Enjoy the beach without feeling you have to buy a piece of it. Enjoy public parks and libraries. Some items it is wiser to rent rather than to own.
7. Develop a deeper appreciation for the creation. Walk whenever you can. Listen to the birds – they are God's messengers. Enjoy the texture of grass and leaves. Marvel in the rich colors everywhere. Simplicity means to discover once again that "The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof" (Psalm 24:1).
8. Obey Jesus instructions about plain, honest speech. "Let what you say be simply 'yes' or 'no'; anything more than this comes from evil” (Matthew 5:37). If you consent to do a task, do it. Avoid flattery and half-truths. Make honesty and integrity the distinguishing characteristics of your speech. Reject jargon and abstract speculation whose purpose is to obscure and impress rather than to illuminate and inform.

# Conclusion

Richard J. Foster wrote in Celebration of Discipline;

Simplicity is freedom. Duplicity is bondage. Simplicity brings joy and balance. Duplicity brings anxiety and fear. The preacher of Ecclesiastes observed that "God made man simple; man's complex problems are of his own devising" (Ecclesiastes 2:29, Jerusalem Bible". Because many of us are experiencing the liberation God brings through simplicity we are once again singing an old Shaker hymn:

It's a gift to be simple,
It's a gift to be free,
It's a gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we see ourselves in a way that's right,
We live in the Valley of love and delight!

The beginning of this experience of simplicity is a heart fixed on Jesus as Peter said,

 “In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord!” 1 Peter 3:15 NIV

And having our eyes on Jesus is also the only way to keep on track – not allowing the attractions and distractions of this age to clutter our minds and our lives so that we become ineffective as disciples of Jesus. We live in busy times. We can’t help that. But we can, with God’s help, abide in Christ, remain in the vine (John 15:1-6), and continue in his Word (John 8:31) if we focus, if we fix our thoughts on Jesus (Heb. 3:1).