First Slide.
The Discipline of Simplicity
Matthew 6 19-34

Please open your Bible to Matthew 6. The verses will not appear on the screen today, so it may be helpful to have your Bible open.

In the interest of simplicity, let’s keep this introduction simple. We’ve already looked at the Spiritual Disciplines of Giving, Prayer, Fasting, Study, Submission, and Meditation. Have you grown in these disciplines? Has the exercise of these disciplines increased your commitment to God?

Next slide. Today, we’re going to look at the Discipline of Simplicity. What do I mean by simplicity? Simplicity is the ability to live without a lot of stuff. That ability isn’t developed easily. Admiral Richard E. Byrd recorded this in his journal after months alone in the barren Arctic: “I am learning that a man can live profoundly without masses of things.” That’s what Admiral Byrd said. Let’s read what Jesus said, beginning in Matthew 6:19.

Mat 6:19 "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal,
Mat 6:20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.
Mat 6:21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
Mat 6:22 "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light,
Mat 6:23 but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!
Mat 6:24 "No one can serve two masters, for 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 God and money.
Mat 6:25 "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?
Mat 6:26  Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?
Mat 6:27  And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?
Mat 6:28  And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin,
Mat 6:29  yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.
Mat 6:30  But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?
Mat 6:31  Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'
Mat 6:32  For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.
Mat 6:33  But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.
Mat 6:34  "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

Jesus mentions treasure, money, food, and clothes as things that than can complicate life and keep us from simplicity. We could modernize the list by adding cars, boats, video games, cell phones, flat panel TVs, and mutual funds. These things have the potential to make our lives overly complicated.

If God gives these things to us, it's a blessing to possess these things. If we obsessively seek these things, it's a curse because these things will possess us. The seeking of things destroys simplicity with the hammer of complexity.

Jesus said it this way in verse 33 that we just read. "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." This morning I'm going to come down hard on possessing things. When I do, I'm talking about seeking things first and giving the leftovers to God. The intense seeking of things compromises the simplicity of life and robs us of the time and energy to seek God first.

There is nothing wrong with seeking God first and receiving many things from him. God blesses different people at different levels. If God blesses you with little, be
content. If God blesses you with much, be content. Accepting God’s blessings without
lusting for more stuff, allows us to retain the simplicity that God desires for us.

Simplicity is the ability to live without a lot of stuff. Simplicity is freedom. Simplicity
brings joy and balance. Our culture lacks the inward attitude and the outward lifestyle
of simplicity. Much of society has accumulated stuff at the expense of simplicity.

Why do some people sacrifice simplicity for stuff? Why do some people have an
attachment to things? Why do some people crave things they don’t need? Why do some
people buy things they don’t want to impress people they don’t like?

Some people give up simplicity for stuff because their attachment to God is
weak. If their attachment to God is weak, their need for security will lead them to an at-
tachment to things. If their attachment to God is weak, the mass media will convince
them that they need one of everything and the latest update to anything. Attachment to
stuff snuffs out the blessing of simplicity.

Our society does not understand the blessing of simplicity. Society’s modern he-
ro is the poor person who purposefully became rich for his own sake rather than the rich
person who voluntarily became poor for God’s sake. Covetousness we call ambition.
Greed we call industry. A lust for stuff we call increasing our net worth. A lust for stuff
prevents simplicity.

A lust for status and position has the same effect as a lust for stuff. A lust for sta-
tus and position prevents simplicity. God-provided status and position are a blessing.
Self-attained status and position complicate life without providing the fulfillment they
promise.

Let me give a sad example to you from the pages of my life. Several years ago, I
attended my first conference of the National Association for Court Management. I
learned that they had an esteemed national board of directors.

Although I was an unknown in that organization, I decided that being a member
of their board would look good on my resume. I set my sights on board membership and
the election that would take place the next summer. As I continue this sad tale, notice
how my lust for status and position robbed my simplicity and complicated my life.

I took the time to get to know the movers and shakers. I networked with a broad
section of the membership. I attended their meetings to show interest. I hung out with
the in-crowd. I learned the intricacies of their plans for the future. I determined who would be on the nominating committee that would interview perspective board members. I asked people to write letters to the nominating committee. I orchestrated a complicated, time-consuming, simplicity-robbed path to success.

The next summer, I prepared for the required interview. I interviewed with the nominating committee. I received their nomination, and my name went to the membership for the vote. My network connections paid off, and I was elected by the membership to the National Association for Court Management Board of Directors.

It was a personal victory, but along the way, I forfeited a large slice of my life’s simplicity in order to manage the complicated process of satisfying my lust for status and position. A few hours after the election, I went to my hotel room. I had captured my prize. I had celebrated briefly in my mind, but now, the thrill of victory was gone. There was no lasting fulfillment from my worldly attainment.

To make matters worse, the aftermath of complexity had just begun. There were board meetings that required travel and time away from work. There were overtime hours that were necessary to catch up when I returned to work. There was added responsibility. There were committee assignments and work group projects.

I traded a slice of life’s simplicity for the complexity of board of directors’ membership. It was a trade that I regretted for the next two years. I could hardly wait to shed the thing I had longed to accumulate. I worked hard to obtain something I no longer wanted. I came to despise what I had craved.

Now, don’t look at me like that. You’ve done it too. You’ve worked hard to accumulate stuff, status, and position that you no longer want. You have responsibilities you’d like to shed. Your garage is full. Your house is cluttered. Your closets are stuffed. Your attic is overflowing. Good news: The upcoming youth group garage sale is an opportunity to get rid of some stuff and gain a little simplicity.

Trading simplicity for stuff hinders our ability to commit to God. Stuff monopolizes our time and attention. We worry about our stuff. We must protect, clean, dust, maintain, and repair our stuff. Before we buy the stuff, the stuff fails to reveal to us that once we own it, we will serve it. Jesus said, “It’s impossible to serve both God and stuff.”
The more time we spend to serve stuff the less energy we have to serve God. We desperately need the discipline of simplicity. At the risk of stepping on everyone’s toes, let me list some things that can rob our simplicity. These are things that have the potential to make us serve them and to reduce our time and energy to serve God. OK, take out something to throw at me, so we can get started. Remember, I’m talking about seeking things to the point that they add burdensome complexity to life. Here are some simplicity killers.

A boat or Jet Ski to maintain. Last week I talked to a man who had just sold his beautiful boat. He told me that it took him decades to be able to buy that boat. Once he made the purchase, the thrill was gone, and it became a maintenance nightmare to keep in like-new condition.

Here are some other potential simplicity killers. An abundance of plants to water. A TV show that you must watch. A trendy wardrobe that must be kept in fashion. An additional pet to take care of. A hairdo that takes more time to style. A fetish for the latest technology. Additional household decorations to dust. A desire to have the nicest lawn in the neighborhood. Another electronic gadget that requires you to change its clock twice a year. An indulgent diet that makes health more complex. An obsession with a spotless car or house. A consuming sport or hobby. A fixation with rebates. Did I miss anyone’s toes? I can keep going. I stepped on my toes more than once.

Let’s meddle a minute with the way we can harm simplicity by the way we choose to do church. Do you know that a complex performance for a church service can rob the simplicity of worship? Do you know that having church programs, that God did not ask us to have, harms our simplicity? Do you know that making a God-ordained program more complex than God wants it to be, hurts our simplicity? Do you know that trying to make everything at church perfect is a detriment to our simplicity? Do you know that human efforts to create a church plan rather than seek and follow God’s plan, can kill simplicity?

Next slide. So, what should we do about the complexity that can come from masses of things? We must have an inner attitude of simplicity. There are three parts to this inner attitude of simplicity.
First, we must consider what we have to be a gift from God. We work, but the job comes from God. We purchase, but God is the provider.

Second, we must know that it’s God’s business to take care of what we have. God is able to protect what we possess. We can trust him with the stuff we have.

Third, we must be willing to make our goods available to others. We don’t need to cling to our possessions, because we know that God will provide again. We aren’t anxious about tomorrow, because God is faithful.

If what we have we consider a gift from God, and if what we have is to be cared for by God, and if what we have is available to others, then we will have an inner attitude of simplicity. An inner attitude of simplicity prevents the complexity that can come from masses of things.

The spiritual discipline of simplicity provides the needed perspective. Simplicity sets us free to receive the provision of God as a gift that is not ours to keep and can be freely shared with others.

What else should we do about the complexity that can come from masses of things? **We must have an outward expression of simplicity.**

Here are several ideas to help you put some simplicity back into your life.

1. Buy things for their usefulness rather than their status. Impress people with your life not your stuff.
2. Reject anything that produces an addiction in you. That could include soft drinks, chocolate, TV, video games, the Internet, shoes, or sports equipment.
3. Develop a habit of giving things away. If you become attached to something, consider giving it away. De-accumulate. Masses of things must be sorted, stored, and dusted.
4. Refuse to buy every new gadget. Gadgets are made to break down and wear out. Instead of being time savers, often the gadgets are complications to life.
5. Learn to enjoy things without owning them. Share things with friends. Rent a boat or Jet Ski a few times a year.
6. Be skeptical of all buy-now-pay-later schemes. They are a trap that deepens bondage to stuff.
7. Reject anything that distracts you from seeking God first. It’s easy to lose focus on God in the pursuit of too many things, even too many good things.
Next slide. Congregation! God wants us to exercise the discipline of simplicity. This is The Doctrine of Simplicity: “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” This doctrine of simplicity allows us to live out the discipline of simplicity. When we follow the doctrine of seeking God first, life becomes simpler.

Seek God first, and accept the things that God provides. This discipline simplifies life. The lust for stuff is gone, because we no longer need stuff. The lust for status and position is gone, because we no longer need status and position. This inner attitude of simplicity liberates us outwardly. Simplicity frees us from the bondage to things. Simplicity frees us to seek God first.

Next slide. Possessions can be idols. The attachment to stuff can be idolatry. The Bible deals decisively with the inner spirit of slavery that an idolatrous attachment to stuff brings. Listen to these verses, beginning with two verses we read a few minutes ago.

Matthew 6:19 – Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth.
Matthew 6:25 - Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear.
Psalm 62:10 – Though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them.
Proverbs 11:28 - Whoever trusts in his riches will fall.
1 Timothy 3:3 – An elder is not a lover of money.
1 Timothy 3:8 – Deacons do not pursue dishonest gain.
Hebrews 13:5 – Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”
1 Timothy 6:9 – People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with much grief.
James 4:1-2 – What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something, but you don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want.
1 Timothy 6:17 – Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

Luke 12:15 - Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.

The central point of the discipline of simplicity is to seek God and a righteous life first, and then, everything necessary will come in its proper order. Everything hinges on keeping the first thing first. We must make sure that nothing comes before seeking God, including seeking a simple lifestyle. Simplicity itself becomes idolatry when it takes precedence over seeking God.

Will you make your life all about God? Will you seek God first? May God grant us the courage, wisdom, and strength to always hold the kingdom of God as the number-one priority of our lives. To do so is to live in simplicity.