

## Simplicity

**Big Idea:** Less is more

**Purpose:** To motivate people to live simply in their hearts by loving God and loving their neighbors

**Passage:** Mark 10:17-22

**Verse:** Mark 10:21

I've been reading this biography on Mother Teresa lately. It's a big expose—let me tell you, she's no saint; just joking. She literally *is* a saint in the most formal sense of the word.



Mother Teresa was born Agnes Bojaxhiu in Eastern Europe. At a young age, she felt called to a life committed completely to God. When she was 18, she left her family, many of whom she would never see again, to become a missionary nun, and also to become “Mother Teresa”, eventually making her way to Calcutta, India. As a nun, she took a vow of poverty, which was a serious commitment to make, but she decided that it wasn't enough. After some time as a nun, she took an additional vow of poverty to live the life of the poorest of the poor in order to serve the destitute in Calcutta. That's when she formed the Missionaries of Charity, a

religious congregation dedicated to serving the poorest of the poor.

When she started out in Calcutta, she had a bench, a box that served as a table, a chair, a small cabinet that served as her altar, and she was eventually gifted a bed. She often went hungry and would rely on others for food. She apparently had two identical outfits, washing one each day to wear the next day. In fact, that's how all of the Sisters of the Missionaries of Charity lived.

I don't know about you—maybe you live a really simple life—but for me, I don't live a life like Mother Teresa. For most of us, we live really complex lives, and a big part of the complexity of our lives is what we possess. It's in our material goods.

I mean, there's...our **homes**, which require **upkeep**, and of course there's always **maintenance** and we need bigger homes to store our **stuff** but it's not enough so we have **storage units**; and what is all this stuff?

Well there are...

**Toys**      **furniture**      **TVs**      **video games**      **nick knacks**

We have **collections** of things:

**Books**      **stuffed animals**      **model cars, planes, trains**      **clocks**      **sports memorabilia**

There's **technology**:

**Phones**      **tablets**      **computers**      **watches**      **speakers**      **monitors**

and Apple just revealed all their new products.

We have **boxes** filled with who knows what. There's **décor**:

**Pillows**      **plants**      **vases**      **paintings**      and lots and lots of **holiday ornaments**.

And then there are our adult toys – no, not that kind! I'm talking about:

**RVs**      **ATVs**      **SUVs**      **jet skis**      **snow skis**      **boats**      **floats**      **coats**.

We live with so much!

I'm not trying to make you feel bad. Trust me, I'm right there with you. I'm not here to bash on owning things. I'm not going to tell you to give everything away. I don't expect that any of us is going to live like Mother Teresa. **But I also don't think that we should ignore the role that our possessions play in our lives and in our hearts.** To do so would cause us to miss out on the reality that **less is more; that there's something bigger and better than our possessions.**

My guess is that most of you wouldn't disagree with that sentiment, but for all of us—**for all of us**—*our comforts and our possessions infringe on the sacred space that God wants to inhabit in our lives.* Possessions aren't bad; in fact, we should see them as good gifts from God; but they are limited in good, and when they become entangled with our hearts, they actually bring harm and chaos into our lives.

As if we don't already have enough chaos in the world right now! We're in this series called "The WAY Forward: Following Jesus in a Chaotic World". Our *world* is chaotic, and also *our world* is chaotic. We can't always do something about what's happening out there, but we can do things to simplify the chaos in our own lives. And that's our topic for today—**simplicity.**

Richard Foster, in his book, *Freedom of Simplicity*, says, "*Simplicity is an inward reality that can be seen in an outward lifestyle. We must have both; to neglect either end of this tension is disastrous.*" That's what we'll see today—simplicity is **both** inward and outward; it's not just one or the other.

Our passage today comes from the book of Mark, chapter 10, verses 17-22. Laura is our reader today. I encourage you to prepare your heart to hear the word of God. Take a few breaths. Prepare to hear what is said; to take it in and let the Holy Spirit form it in your heart.

*As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

*"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.'"*

*"Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."*

*Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."*

*At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.*  
(Mark 10:17-22)

In the story, there's a man who *runs* up to Jesus and *falls down on his knees* before Jesus—this is a guy who is serious. He's not testing Jesus, he's not trying to get into a discussion with him, he's not a troll. He comes running to Jesus and falls down in front of him. He's looking for answers; he knows he needs more than what he has.

He's not testing Jesus, but Jesus tests him—"*You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother'*". This is all how you relate to other people well according to God. And the man says, *I've done all of those things.*

*“Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” (Mark 10:21)*

That’s a big ask. That’s nothing small. And the man realized how big it was. It says that,  
*At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.*  
(Mark 10:17-22)

A couple of translation notes here:

That his *“face fell”* may not capture the sense of what happened; it’s probably more like he was *shocked and appalled*. Here’s this man that comes running to Jesus, bowing down before Him. *“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Sell everything and give to the poor.”* What? You must be kidding! Could I use my wealth to help you? Nope, sell it and give it. He was shocked and appalled!

Second, it says *“he had great wealth,”* which is undoubtedly true, but the words here literally are, *“he had many possessions”*. He had lots of stuff. Like I do. Like most of us do. When it came down to the moment of decision for this man, what stood between him and eternal life was his stuff. **It was his stuff that kept him from what he actually wanted.**

Remember, simplicity is both inward and outward. If we look at this in just an outward way, we would be focusing on the thing that he needed to do. But it wasn’t just about the man giving his stuff away. If it were just about that, we would all have the same command. *Every follower of Jesus in the last 2000 years should have given up his or her possessions to the poor.* But that’s not a complete view of what the Bible says about our possessions. For example, Paul writes in Philippians, *“I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want,”* (Philippians 4:12).

I think the problem is internal for the man—**it’s about his perception and it’s about his heart.**

A couple of weeks ago—before all the smoke rolled in—my oldest daughter came outside with me to take out the garbage late in the evening. As I was putting the garbage in the bin, Ruby looked up and she said, “Wow!!” And as I’m holding the garbage, I looked up and saw the clear night sky—but nothing remarkable—and I looked back at Ruby with her head craned upward, and said, “What?” She said, “Look at all the stars!!” And I looked back up, and I thought, “Oh, daughter, that’s not that impressive.”

It wasn’t that impressive because we live in Milwaukie—we live in a metropolitan area.

Now I love being outside in my backyard on a stary night, but I also like to go camping and backpacking or just be in more rural areas. And if you’ve ever been in a remote area and looked up at the sky, you know it is something different and special compared to looking at the sky in the Portland Metro area. The light from all of the homes, and businesses, streets, cars, hinders our ability to see the fullness of the night sky.



Similarly, *our perception of what is real, what is important, what is good and beautiful is affected by all of the less important things that take up space in our lives.*

The man in the story struggled to perceive—to see—that the kingdom of God was bigger, more beautiful, more important, more real than what he possessed.

And just like with him, **our possessions have a serious potential to hinder our ability to see the fullness of God and His kingdom.** That's a hard truth, but I think it's the truth.

We have some vision of who God is—enough to run to Him and bow down to Him, but do we have enough of a vision to actually let go of the things we possess?

**Less is more because it increases the potential of seeing more of God.**

Jesus says to the man, *“You're missing something; you're lacking something. And in order to gain the thing that you lack, you must give up all that you have.”* Don't you just love it when Jesus says things like this?

How about this quote from Mother Teresa? She's no more gentle about it; it has some harsh language in it, just to warn you: *“Today, once more, when Jesus comes among his own, his own don't know him! He comes in the rotten bodies of our poor: he comes even in the rich choked by their own riches. He comes in the loneliness of their hearts, and when there is no one to love them. Jesus comes to you and me and often, very, very often, we pass him by.”*

I missed Him; I didn't see Him; I didn't recognize Him —there were too many other things clouding my vision.

I think the problem for the man in the story is that, even though he was looking for eternal life, he couldn't see how much greater eternal life was than what he already had.

This is connected to the other internal aspect of simplifying—remember it's about our perception and it's about our heart—and, of course, the two are connected.

In the story, the man—after Jesus told him to sell everything—went away sad; he went away grieving. His heart was torn in that moment; here's all that I possess...and here's eternal life. Which do I choose?

Now when I say it like that, it kind of sounds stupid. Like when you're watching a movie and you see the main character making all the wrong choices, and you think, “Come on!”

But that choice is pretty hard for us as well. I think the things that we own, each one, pulls a little bit at our hearts; **each thing takes a little space in our hearts.** It becomes important to us in some way. It's another thing for us to hang on to.

Have you ever seen a child who has too many toys around them, and they're trying to pick all of them up, and as they pick one up, they drop another, and they cry and get frustrated? They can't hold all that they want. It's like the rich man in the story; he wants to hold on to both his possessions *and* eternal life, but he's dropping one—he can't hold on to both; he's not able to. **His possessions have taken up too much space in his heart.** And that's exactly why Jesus tells him this is the thing that he is lacking. *He's lacking the ability to have a single-hearted devotion to God and his kingdom.*

Are you willing to let go of it all? Do you have enough space in your heart for the kingdom of God? Because you can't hold on to both in the same way.

Jesus said to His disciples, *“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money,”* (Matthew 6:24). Well, I guess you can't have money or possessions! Not true. But you can't let money and possessions take up space in your heart that God wants for Himself.

**Less is more because it allows more space for God in our hearts.**

This is the tension that we have to navigate here. Unless we're going to dedicate our lives to be like Mother Teresa, we're going to own things; we're going to have possessions. We can enjoy those things as a gift from God. But they will naturally start to creep into our hearts, taking space from God and preventing us from being obedient to Him. And that's why simplicity—less is more—is important, because it limits those things that will naturally start to take space in our hearts.

For me personally, I can see where this happens. Like many of us, I've just accumulated more over the years, especially as my family has grown. But it wasn't always that way. When I first became a follower of Jesus in my mid-twenties, I gave away pretty much everything I had. I went from a fully furnished two-bedroom house to renting a single room, and it was wonderful. Later, I moved to a smaller room and gave away even more stuff. Now I have a home full of stuff again. And my confession to you is that I know it would be harder to give it all up *now* that it was for me before.

Jesus said to His disciples, right after the man went away grieving, "*How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!*" (Mark 10:23). How hard it is to give up that space in our hearts for the kingdom. And, yet, that is what is good for us.

Richard Foster says about this passage, "*This was the burden that bore down upon the rich young ruler. Not only did he have great possessions, but more significantly, the great possessions had him. Of all oppressions, his was the most spiritually debilitating.*"

That's a lot for us to consider about *our* hearts and *our* possessions.

So, remember, we said that simplicity is both inward and outward. So far, we've talked about the *inward* aspects; the ways that our possessions affect our perceptions and take up space in our hearts. Let's talk a little bit about the *outward*.

And once again there's a tension here, as with just about anything in our lives. What happens inwardly for us should reflect outwardly. So, *the more I'm single-hearted toward God, the less I'll be looking toward material possessions to fill up the voids in my heart.* At the same time, I can change some outward, behavioral things in my life in order to begin influencing my heart, and directing it more toward God.

Maybe you're in that space right now. *I need some outward things, some practices, to help affect my heart.* Good luck figuring that out! Just kidding. Here are some suggestions.

### **Prioritize the most important things**

We generally have a lot of things that we don't need, we're busy with a lot of activities, and there are a lot of things that complicate our lives. And so often, we fill up our lives, our time, our physical space with possessions, with things that are *appealing* but maybe aren't all that *important*. But, being human, we have a limited capacity for things. We have a limited capacity physically, mentally, emotionally; we have a limited capacity in our time and in our resources.

So, when we fill up on the things that are less important; there's no longer room for the things that are more important—the big rocks in our lives. Picture a jar as your whole life and all of its capacities; or you can view it as your heart, and what has claim over your heart; you can view it as any aspect of your life. When your jar—your heart—is full of small rocks—the many attachments to the things we possess—there's little room left for the 'big rocks'—like God.

But when you prioritize the most important things—when you put your 'big rocks' in first—you still have room for some of those other things; but you've ensured that the most important ones are in there.

What are your 'big rocks'? What's most important to you? Evaluate those things in your life; write them down, make a list; identify them specifically. What are you going to give your limited capacity to?

I think many of us this week had an exercise in evaluating what is most important to us. When I have to evacuate my home because of the threat of wildfire, I can't take everything. This last week forced many of us to think about what we can lose. What are the things that we need to take with us, and what can we lose? Thankfully, Stef and I didn't have to evacuate, but we still talked about it: What will we take if we have to go? Definitely my collection of Beanie Babies! Again, just kidding. I don't own a single one.

If any of you actually lost your home and your possessions in the fires, I don't want to be insensitive to that. That's a devastating loss, and if you need help, contact us; we're here for you. For most of us, though, this last week had the potential to make us realize what was really most important. What are the big rocks in our lives? This last week has the potential to change the way that we view those things going forward, not just in a crisis, but in a day-to-day life of simplicity that focuses on what's most important.

Jesus said to his disciples, "*Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well,*" (Matthew 6:33).

What Jesus says here, and what we see in the story of the rich younger ruler, is that **the biggest rock is the kingdom of God**. The biggest rock is following Jesus, and being obedient to Him. Don't let the other things keep you from that; don't let them distract you; don't let them cloud your vision.

Develop a habit of asking "**What itch does this scratch?**"

The second practical thing to do is a little more simple; I won't take a lot of time on it. It's to get into the habit of, every time you're about to buy something, saying, "*What itch does this scratch?*" Why am I buying that thing? *You may even want to enact a 24-hour delay before making any purchases.* So, when you're about to buy something, you pause and commit to waiting 24 hours to think about "What itch does this scratch?" How does this help me to love God and love other people? That's the filter of simplicity in our lives. Because we are a part of the kingdom of God, following Jesus first and foremost; because everything that I have and am belongs to Him—how is this purchase a part of that?

Understand, this is not a rigid rule. Because otherwise, you'll find yourself constantly saying, "I feel like I kinda need this, but I don't know how it fits into that grid." I think God wants your needs met, and I think He wants you to enjoy things in life too, but this grid is just a way for us to slow down and weed out some of those things that will be an incumbrance in our hearts.

Psalm 62 says, *Though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them,* (Psalm 62:10). You can still accumulate things; just make sure your heart's not attached to them.

So those are a couple of long-term, broad things that you can do to activate some simplifying in your life. But every week in this series, we're passing along a specific practice for you to participate in as you seek to follow the way of Jesus. Last week, it was a prayer that John provided and a challenge to stop twice a day to unplug to pray that prayer. If you download our app (text **newhopepdx app** to 77977), you'll also receive some additional practices for each week that can help shape your life of following Jesus.

This week's practice is to **Give something away**. Or maybe *give some things away*. It can be anything, but if you want it to work for you toward simplifying, it probably shouldn't be something that you were already going to give away. Maybe it should be something that is taking up some valuable space in your heart, some space where God wants to enter in.

Maybe it's something that is just cluttering up your home, so that simplifying your physical space would just bring a little less chaos in your life.

I had a friend once who gave away things for 30 days: 1 item on day one, 2 items on day two, 3 items on day three, and so on until on the thirtieth day, he gave away 30 things—that's a lot of stuff! He said it completely changed the way he viewed his possessions. The simple act of releasing the things that we have can have a profound effect on us.

Richard Foster says, "*This biblical instruction [of simplicity] is not meant to destroy us, but to set us free. It is the glad trumpet call of liberation to all who are oppressed by reputation, wealth, and power.*"

In the story of the rich young ruler, it says that Jesus, "*looked at him and loved him.*" It was in love that Jesus identified the constraints of his heart. **It's in love that He comes to you and me with an invitation to turn and follow Him each and every day.**

It's a good offer. It's worth letting go of some of the things we possess—and that maybe possess us.