

SIMPLIFY

community + practices guide



AII SOULS
FELLOWSHIP

WELCOME

What if by focusing on one thing, we could gain everything that really mattered?

In the popular imagination, a phrase like “the simple life” conjures up images of a *kind of easy, hassle-free existence*. It’s an achievement usually won after a prolonged period of rushing to achieve and accumulate enough to finally rest. The thing is, we never quite feel ready - there’s always a little bit more that would make life just a little bit easier or richer or fuller. As a result we’re always chasing after that more, hoping it will deliver.

The practice of simplicity is designed to help us get off the treadmill of “more”. It is about setting priorities, ordering our affection and our attention, and putting the most important thing is at the center of our lives so we avoid the trap of chasing after everything. We know the familiar tension in our bodies that flows from a divided heart, and yet our desires remain unavoidably complicated and often contradictory. When pulled in multiple directions at once we inevitably suffer; the result is a people who are restless, dissatisfied, and chasing after the next thing. At heart, simplicity is about removing the obstacles that keep us from seeing clearly and, with restored vision, arranging our lives around what we see. As Jesus said, “seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33).

For many in the affluent West, possessions, status, reputation, or busyness have become identity markers by which we signal to ourselves and others that we matter. We live lives of excess. The fact that simplicity appeals to us is a sign of the privileged position in which we find ourselves. But privilege can also be a prison that chains us to a life that can’t bear the weight of its own promise. Within the hectic and increasingly cluttered world in which we find ourselves, simplicity is a path to freedom--an invitation to cultivate the habit of letting go of inordinate attachments. Each of those words is important: *inordinate* refers to things that may be important but have become mis-prioritized and, as a result, take up a disproportionate amount of space in our lives. *Attachment* describes the condition of the heart in which we cling to a thing for validation or meaning. For all of us, the invitation to simplicity means examining our hearts to find the things which occupy a central space and to bring them before the Lord so we may find freedom to pursue what Jesus called “life to the full” (John 10:10).

HOW TO USE THIS

Community + Practices Guide

This guide is designed with Community Groups in mind as a bridge between the sermon on Sunday, the conversation that takes place in your groups, and the practices you experience both in your groups and as individuals. The Sunday message serves as a teaching point for the week - if your group meets on Sunday, you may want to engage the content first and then discuss *after* you've worked through the guide.

Each week contains four sections. The goal of the first two is to introduce a pattern of discovery. Which words and phrases leap from the page? Which induce feelings or questions? Pay attention to patterns and nuance. The third section invites you to consider the appropriate course of action you hear God calling you toward because of what you've read and heard. The last step is a spiritual practice for the week. Prior to your gathering—each member of your group follows the four step process of:

1. **Reading** the week's scripture passage.
2. **Reflecting** upon the questions and putting in some thought ahead of time.
3. **Respond** by jotting down some notes. From week two onward, you will begin this section in your group by looking back on the previous week's practice. Which brings us to the last, but most important step...
4. **Jesus calls his disciples to remain** in him as he is in them (John 15:4). This last step is where we move from theory to practice as we take on a particular set of actions with our bodies. You'll be asked to describe your experience of the practice each week in the groups, so you may wish to spend some time reflecting on what you experienced throughout the week. Was it familiar or new? Strange or comforting (maybe both).

Lastly, at the end of this guide you'll find an index with supplementary materials and a reading list for further growth and reflection.

TIPS ON PRACTICE

There's no single way to start a spiritual practice and there is no one-size-fits-all approach toward engaging. Think of the weekly practices that follow as a kind of diagnostic tool. If the need to fill the silence with words is not an issue for you, the week four practice of speaking less and listening more may not be geared toward you. That said, when it comes to the spiritual life, we're all apprentices - which is to say that we all need practice. Here are a few tips to bear in mind from week to week:

1. **Start small:** Begin where you are, not where you think you should be. If committing to several different kinds of practices over a six-week period seems unrealistic, (which is very likely) then choose one or two.
2. **Do less, not more:** Formation isn't about adding one more thing to your over-busy life. The practice of simplicity helps us align our habits with our goals. Maybe it's one less episode of your favorite series or setting a timer on your social media so you don't exceed 20 minutes at a time. Formation requires us to slow down.

3. **Remember the J-curve:** Experts on formation tell us that whenever we begin a new practice, it tends to get harder before it gets easier. In an age of digital saturation, our attention span for sitting still has become imperiled, so it may take effort to build the habit. Don't be surprised if simplifying your life is difficult at first. Be patient.
4. **Formation is repetitive.** Much of our interior life is being shaped by the Spirit on levels beneath our conscious awareness. A lot of the time practices can feel dry and even boring, but then slowly, over time, we are different, and we don't know how we got there. There is a neurological reality to being shaped by a repetitive action in addition to the spiritual reality. The two work best in tandem, so don't measure whether it's working by how you feel at any given moment. Being shaped in the image of Jesus is a lifelong process.
5. **Formation is idiosyncratic.** If you find that God is doing something in you through one or more of the practices, don't feel the need to rush to the next one. Everyone is different and the goal is to find practices of scripture reading that meet you where you are at this point in your apprenticeship to Jesus.

NOTE TO COMMUNITY GROUP LEADERS

This (and any) community guide works best when group members work through the questions and practices *prior* to gathering. We've tried to make the questions accessible to a new participant, but preparation will only enrich your discussion. As a leader, the best preparation you can make in leading a conversation on prayer is to actively pray for each member of your group throughout the week.

As you begin the study, start each session with prayer and reading the scripture passage for the week. After you read, spend a few minutes in silence. Prayer and silence are companions - we live in a noisy world, where all kinds of things are competing for our attention. In the midst of all the chaos, it's hard at times to hear one another, let alone the voice of God. As we gather together in community, we want to hear what the Spirit is saying to and through each of us and respond in turn. A great way to do that is to begin with a moment of quiet. You may, at times, want to break the group into triads for the reflection questions. Sometimes, the quieter voices participate more easily in these smaller groupings.

COMMUNITY GROUP GUIDELINES

Because community is essential to sustaining any rhythm of spiritual practice, we will participate fully in this 6-week study and honor one another by:

- Arriving and ending on time.
- Receiving one another in a spirit of grace and humility.
- Encouraging one another.
- Practicing appropriate confidentiality.
- Committing to be present and open to knowing one another.
- Listening to one another.
- Considering one another's perspectives.

As we reflect on what God wants to teach us together through the practice of simplicity, we will engage and help one another to think more deeply and commit more fully to being with Jesus, being shaped in his likeness, and bearing his likeness in the world.

SCHEDULE

Week One	The Simple Life	September 17
Week Two	Simplify Desire	September 24
Week Three	Simplify Technology	October 1
Week Four	Simplify Speech	October 8
Week Five	Simplify Possessions	October 15
Week Six	Finding Contentment	October 22

WEEK ONE

The Simple Life

READ

Matthew 6:19-24 and spend a few moments in silence. As you prepare to engage God in the scriptures, write out (underline, highlight, etc.) the keywords and phrases from these passages. As you participate in the group, take a few moments to share what God revealed to you through those words and phrases.

Matthew 6:19-24

¹⁹ Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

²² The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. ²³ But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

²⁴ 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.

REFLECT

- If someone were to observe you for a month, what would they be able to deduce about how you spend your time, money, energy and imagination?
- Why do you think Jesus says that one's treasure reveals what's in one's heart (rather than the heart revealing one's treasure)? What's the difference?
- How does serving a single master simplify life? How would you describe the various "masters" vying to secure your allegiance?

RESPOND

- What are some of the events in your life (family history, teaching, particular circumstances like growing up in poverty or abundance) that established your patterns and habits in the area of money and wealth?
- Where do you believe Jesus is calling you to invest (either your time, energy, finances or in relationships)?
- When have you formed an emotional attachment to something you own?

REMAIN: Inventory of the Heart

As we approach the practice of simplicity, let's begin with some practical reflection in your community group. For most of us complexity comes in the form of our possessions and our calendars. Take a few moments to list out the possessions and activities with which you feel the most anxious attachment. If you're not sure, think through the things you have and do and ask yourself, "What if I got rid of _____?" Is my identity or sense of self somehow tied to this possession or this activity? You don't necessarily need to do anything with that, just sit with it for a while.

Consider the following categories:

Clothes, Shoes, Fashion Accessories
Home Furnishings
Automobiles
Books
Sporting Equipment

Digital Media (Music, Movies, etc)
Video Games
Jewelry
Gadgets
Etc.

Another way to think of it is, what do you find yourself dreaming about owning as you browse the internet?

Relax. The point is not to experience guilt over something you own (or long to own) but instead to prayerfully bring the emotional attachment before the Lord and sit with it. As we begin this practice, the invitation is to explore whether there is a possession that possesses you and, if it does, to prayerfully consider what God might be calling you to do with that attachment. What is the longing behind the attachment?

Start small. Take note of how the process makes you feel. Follow that feeling through the proceeding practices.

Closing Discussion:

After spending some time with the inventory, work through the following questions in your community group.

- Can you already list the kinds of possessions (or time commitments) with which you feel a certain attachment?
- When you consider the idea of parting with something you think you want to keep, how do you feel? Why?

After the conversation, close in prayer.

WEEK TWO

Simplify Desire

READ

Luke 12:22-31. Write out the key words and phrases from this passage. Spend some time in your group discussing what those words and phrases mean.

Luke 12:22-31

²² Then Jesus said to his disciples: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. ²³ For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. ²⁴ Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! ²⁵ Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? ²⁶ Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?"

²⁷ Consider how the wildflowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ²⁸ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! ²⁹ And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. ³⁰ For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. ³¹ But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

REFLECT

As you think back on the previous week, begin by dividing into smaller groups of 3 or 4:

- How did the process of reflecting on your possessions and your calendar throughout the week produce a change in your life? Did you experience gratitude, sadness, something else?
- From what you've heard over the past couple weeks (on Sunday mornings, in your group conversation), how would you describe someone whose life is characterized by simplicity of heart?
- When or how has "the abundance of possessions" been a distraction for you?
- Did your family have values they lived by as you were growing up? Have you carried any of those values into your adult life?

Reflecting on Luke 12:22-31:

- Food, clothing, and shelter rank among the top three material needs we need to feel secure. How do Jesus's words acknowledge these needs while challenging our sense of worry regarding them?
- Among these, is there a particular area in which you feel a strong tendency to worry?
- What kinds of things most frequently distract you from experiencing the kind of life that flows out of a singular focus on the kingdom?

RESPOND

- How do you imagine your values impact what stays and what goes in your life?
- As you look forward, is there any one area you most look forward to simplifying or most want to simplify? Such as your schedule, your home, your priorities, your budget, the places you use your gifts, etc.

REMAIN: Simplify Your Values

As we reflect on Jesus' call to simplicity, we find ourselves confronted with the question: "How do I know what to keep and what to let go of?" Is there an organizing principle can we bring to the practice of intentionally simplifying our lives that is valid both for the things we own and the things that occupy our calendars? The short answer is, yes. We can take the time to clarify our values and then ask whether (or how) our values are reflected by how we spend our time and money.

Our practice this week is to spend some time prayerfully considering the values we live by - both operationally and aspirationally. Here are a few ideas on how to get started:

Bullet Point Your Values

Below is a sample list of values that may or may not resonate with you. They're just to get you thinking. Feel free to use them and add your own or scrap them and start from scratch.

Beauty	Learning
Honesty	Adventure
Compassion	Creation Care
Creativity	Solitude
Prayer	Hospitality
Scripture	Generosity
Athleticism	Sabbath

After writing your values out, ask the following questions:

- What keeps you from living in such a way that these values orient your life?
- How do these values draw their power from the life of the Kingdom?

Conduct a Liturgical Audit

This exercise will have you look at how your values are reflected in how you spend your time and money. Take some time to prayerfully go through your calendar and examine your daily, weekly, monthly, and annual routines. Take a few moments and evaluate the things that are on there. List out the things you do in a typical week. Since most of us don't put time for Netflix or Video Games on the calendar, go ahead and add those to your list. On a separate day, look through your bank and credit card statements (or any budgeting tool you might use) and review your spending habits. What does your spending tell you that you value most?

- What are the things you do that do something to you (get you fired up, make you sad or anxious, make you more compassionate)?
- How do you feel about the kinds of commitments that are there?

- Which things are necessary, and which are optional? Of the optional things, which are producing the life with God that you desire?
- What kind of media do you consume (TV, News, Movies, Magazines, Books, Internet Video)? What kind of vision of “the good life” do these media sources you want to pursue? What kind of affect do they have on you?
- How about social media? What kind of person do the accounts you follow encourage you to become?

After working through these questions, close in prayer.

WEEK THREE

Simplify Technology

READ

Philippians 4:4-9. Write out the key words and phrases from this passage. Spend some time in your group discussing which stood out and had particular meaning.

Philippians 4:4-9

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

REFLECT

As you come into your group:

- How did the exercise of identifying and naming your values go for you? What new insight (if any) did you gain in the process?
- Were you able to begin simplifying your life around these values? If so, what has that looked like? If not, what obstacles have arisen?
- Does crafting a digital Rule of Life strike you as necessary and freeing? Challenging and unrealistic? Some combination of the two?

Reflecting on Philippians 4:4-9:

- How would you characterize Paul's tone in these final words to the church? Where is he and what are his circumstances at the time of his writing?
- How does he describe the relationship between formation and what we set our minds on?
- He closes by asking his readers to emulate the practices he puts in place. When it comes to people with strong mental fortitude (or simply people who seem to think about the right things) who comes to mind? Is there anything you want to emulate about them?

RESPOND

- Think through the technological outlets that most demand your time and attention. To what extent do they direct your mind and index your heart toward what is: true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy?
- Looking back at your values from last week, how might technology support you in living out those values? How might it detract?

REMAIN: Crafting a Digital Rule of Life

It's hard to resist the pull screens they have on us. So often we turn them on, hoping to relax, but instead find ourselves enthralled by what researcher Felicia Wu Song calls, "restless devices." The steady feed of new information, photos, updates, headlines, likes, comments, and outrage have so dulled our once hungry attention spans that many of us—whether we realize it or not—have difficulty sustaining the attention necessary to endure a meal or a movie or a conversation or any kind of social interaction without our bodies feeling the need to tap and scroll.

This is not to say that digital technology is bad. To the contrary, its incredible usefulness has led to vast improvements in so many areas of our lives. The trouble is this; the very devices useful for efficient communication, navigating an unfamiliar city, and enjoying art can also be used to anesthetize us, enrage us, damage relationships, and draw us into patterns of habitual sin. As the Catholic spiritual writer Ronald Rolheiser worried, we are in danger of "distracting ourselves into spiritual oblivion."

One of the ways we can practice resistance and simplify our lives is by crafting a digital rule of life. That is, having an intentional process of determining which aspects of technology actually support the values and desires we have as apprentices of Jesus, and which work against it. From there, develop some guidelines that help maximize the good uses and mitigate or eliminate the bad. Be as specific as possible. "Spend less time on Facebook" is less helpful than "Spend 30 minutes or fewer per day connecting with loved ones on Facebook who live outside of driving distance." The latter gives a specific time-frame and, by limiting who you'll be connecting with, cuts down on the possibility for distraction. For a reach practice, consider a 30-Day Digital Detox (see Appendix A).

Here are a few ideas:

- Create a recurring schedule for when your phone will be powered down and put away.
- Minimize the number of apps on your devices to those you use daily and/or weekly.
- Take a weekly sabbath away from devices and/or screens.
- Establish limits and parameters for particular devices, apps, or media.
- Establish "no device" zones, like the dinner table, the car, or while out with friends.
- Parents, develop best practices and guidelines for your children and family. Consider how *your own* digital habits will affect your children's relationship with devices.

Questions for Reflection:

- Do you think the people who know you best would say you spend a lot of time on your phone, on social media, watching TV shows, in front of screens?
- If you use an iPhone, go to Settings > Screen Time and note how much time you spend each day and week on your phone and doing what. How do you feel about what you find?

WEEK FOUR

Simplify Speech

READ

Ephesians 4:22-29. Write out the key words and phrases from this passage. Which are familiar, which do you hear differently? Spend some time in your group discussing what those words and phrases mean.

Ephesians 4:22-29

²² *You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires;* ²³ *to be made new in the attitude of your minds;* ²⁴ *and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*

²⁵ *Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.* ²⁶ *“In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry,* ²⁷ *and do not give the devil a foothold.* ²⁸ *Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.*

²⁹ *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.*

REFLECT

As you come into your group:

- Describe the process of crafting a digital rule of life.
- In what ways does technology support your deepest values, in what ways does it detract?

Reflecting on Ephesians 4:22-29:

- Paul describes the life of faith as putting off old behaviors, attitudes, habits of the heart and mind, and taking on new ones.
- What kinds of speech does Paul list as examples?
- What role does your speech play in this process of transformation?
- What sort of speech practices might you need to take off or put on?
- What reasons does Paul give for attending to our speech in the context of community? How have you experienced that?

RESPOND

- Ruth Haley Barton writes: “I don’t know about you, but sometimes I can literally feel – deep in my bones – that if I do not shut my mouth for a while, I will get myself in trouble, because my words will be completely disconnected from the reality of God in my life.”
 - When was the last time you regretted what you said or said too much?
 - Do you tend to have more regret over what you say or what is left unsaid?
 - How do you want others to describe your speech and/or the words you use?
- Which do you think will be a greater challenge for you: speaking less often, or using your speech to bless and/or build up others? Why do you think that is?

REMAIN: Practice Speaking Less and Listening More

One way to practice the discipline of simplicity is to simply speak less. In most professional settings this will be a greater shift for men than it will be for women, for white persons than non-white persons. In his well-known prayer, St. Francis included the line, “seek more to understand than to be understood.” It’s a good heart posture for followers of Jesus to ask questions and simply listen. Be aware of those impulses within you that would try to win approval or rush to your own defense and simply be present to another.

When moments of silence emerge in the course of conversation, allow them to happen. Practice empathy, maintain eye-contact and see the person you’re with as a unique bearer of God’s image. Resist the urge to fill silences—it is often in these moments you offer the greatest assurance by simply being there.

In meetings or in situations you are accustomed to leading, do your best to encourage the contributions of others and consider whether your opinion is needful. If you are frequently seen as an “opinion leader” in your role, consider whether you can allow others to be the first to offer solutions or whether you need to have the last word. When you do speak, consider how you can use words to lift others up and champion them.

WEEK FIVE

Simplify Possessions

READ

1 Timothy 6:6-19. Write out the key words and phrases from this passage. Spend some time in your group discussing what these words and phrases mean.

1 Timothy 6:6-19

⁶But godliness with contentment is great gain. ⁷For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. ⁸But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. ⁹Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For 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 many griefs.

¹¹But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. ¹³In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you ¹⁴to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵which God will bring about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, ¹⁶who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen.

¹⁷Command 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. ¹⁸Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. ¹⁹In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

REFLECT

As you come into your group:

- Did you try last week's practice, choosing to be silent instead of speaking? How did it go?
- To what extent does desire for wealth and comfort shape your vision of "the good life"?
- When have you seen (either personally or observationally) when putting "hope in wealth" led to disappointment?

Reflecting on 1 Timothy 6:6-19:

- How do Paul's words challenge some of the fundamental assumptions of our culture?
- Paul is often misquoted as teaching that "money is the root of all evil" - what he actually said is much more nuanced. The development of currency was designed to make the exchange of goods easier and more flexible. In and of itself, money is part of the creativity and ingenuity inherent to those who image God. What Paul warns against is "the love of money." In doing so he is naming the reality that if our loves are first ordered by the pursuit of money, it will necessarily lead us toward dehumanizing and idolatrous behavior.
 - Why is that difference important?
 - How can that difference be used as a justification for greed?
- Paul describes a life of generosity and service as the path toward "the life that is truly life" (6:19) When have you experienced that to be true?

RESPOND

- Has the idea that "more is better" been part of your life or upbringing? How has that idea impacted you, if at all?
- Have you noticed any correlation in your own life between how much you own and how content you are? How did one impact the other?
- When in life have you been most content? Did contentment take intentionality, or come naturally?
- Is generosity part of your current financial practice? How does giving money away affect you?

REMAIN: Decluttering and Giving Generously

(adapted from Casey McDonald and Gavin Bennett – from Bridgetown Church)

There are two interrelated parts to this week's practice, based on two steps: limiting how much we own, and practicing generosity.

First, to limit how much we own, we'll plan to minimize our possessions. A few rules of thumb as you get started:

- Before you begin, decide how much you can handle. You may wish to start with one room (or one drawer) before deciding to take on a garage or your whole house.
- Hold each item and ask a few basic questions: Do I need this? Is it useful or beautiful? Does this lead me toward my values or the vision of flourishing God has given me or does it lead me away from those things?
- If it is an item you love, but haven't used in a long time – ask deeper questions: When is the last time I used this? Is it reasonable, given my season of life, that I will use this again? If I don't believe I'll use this again, but still feel pulled toward keeping it, what longing is this giving rise to within me and how can I invite God into this?

Sort items into five categories:

- **Giveaway:** items to give away to a friend, a neighbor, (or through a digital group like Facebook marketplace) or to Goodwill.
- **Sell:** items in good condition you'd like to sell.

- **Throwaway or recycle:** items beyond repair or further use.
- **Wait:** this pile is key. For sentimental items or things we think we “might need” in the future, put them away in a box or bag in a closet and put it out of sight for a set period of time, perhaps 3–6 months. If at any point you want something, go get it out! Revisit the box when time is up, and you may discover the items are easier to give away.
- **Keep:** what is useful, beautiful, and has a purpose in your life as a follower of Jesus.

Practicing Generosity

Again, for many of us, this is an invitation to start small. To paraphrase John Chapman, “give as you can, not as you can’t.” If you’re out of work right now, or in debt, just start where you are.

Give first. Or in the language of biblical theology, give the “first fruits.” Ancient agrarian followers of Jesus would give the first fruits of their harvest to God as an act of gratitude for the rain and the sun, and an act of trust in God’s provision in the weeks to come, rather than wait until the end of harvest, see if they have anything left, and give out of that. For those of us in a technological society, it means prioritizing our giving and setting it as a parameter or limitation by which we frame our relationship to money.

Divert one specific expense to generosity. It can be big, like selling a car to eliminate a monthly payment, or small, like cancelling a streaming service. Or anything in-between.

Give to a person or cause you care about. The New Testament gives special attention to the poor and to the needs within the church. Consider our partners Peace Prep Academy, Focused Community Strategies, and Friends of Refugees. All Souls gives 12 percent of our income directly toward mission.

If you can, tithe. While the New Testament avoids giving specificity about how much or certain percentages, the Old Testament regularly describes setting aside a tenth of one’s income to bless others. If giving is a new practice for you, start wherever you can. If you already tithe, consider a graduated tithe (allowing the percentage of your giving to increase as your income increases).

Watch what happens in your heart over time. Bear in mind that giving may be painful at first. See if over time you experience more freedom, happiness, and contentment in the inner life of God. If so, let that spur you on to even greater generosity.

WEEK SIX

Finding Contentment

READ

Philippians 4:10-13. Write out the key words and phrases from this passage. Spend some time in your group discussing what these words and phrases mean.

Philippians 4:10-13

¹⁰I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹²I 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. ¹³I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

REFLECT

As you come back into your group:

- Have you begun the process of decluttering and simplifying your stuff? If so, how did it go?
- If you've begun simplifying your possessions, have you noticed any changes in your routine, mental capacity, or anything else?
- What, if anything, have you noticed about your buying and spending habits since we started the practice of simplicity?

Reflecting on Philippians 4:10-13

- Roman prisons didn't provide food for prisoners. Friends and family would fill in the gap. How does Paul express his gratitude?
- How do his words speak to a culture of discontent and cynicism?
- What is the "all this" that Paul is speaking about in verse 13?

RESPOND

As our study draws to a close:

- Reflecting on the last six weeks, what have you determined is necessary for contentment?
- What was hard, what will lead to some lifestyle adjustments?

- In what ways do Paul's closing words to the Philippians challenge your ingrained patterns and habits of thought?
- How would you summarize your thoughts on the practice of simplicity?

REMAIN:

Spend some time reflecting on what kinds of permanent shifts you want to make to reflect a life of simplicity.

APPENDIX 01

Digital Declutter

Adapted from Cal Newport: *Digital Minimalism*

Georgetown University Computer Scientist, Cal Newport, describes an approach toward technology he calls “digital minimalism.” At heart, this is a philosophy of use in which one a) focuses his or her time on a small number of carefully selected and optimized activities that are in alignment with one’s values and then b) removes digital solutions that are not in alignment with one’s values (for a process on how to determine one’s values, refer to week two of this community guide). Think of it as an implicit cost-benefit analysis to using digital devices. This doesn’t require you to become a functional luddite, (Newport is a professor of computer science, after all) but the question at the heart of this approach is to ask whether digital technology is the best means to achieve a stated value in any given area? For example, if you place a high value on remaining in regular contact with a friend who lives hundreds of miles away, FaceTime may well be a better means of living that value than racking up frequent flyer miles. But if that same value is to remain in regular contact with a friend who lives across town, then meeting for coffee or going on a walk will likely embody that value better than maintaining a lengthy gif-filled text thread.

We’re so used to technological solutions that it’s difficult to see when technology has become an obstacle instead of an aid to our values. Similar to those who’ve tried an elimination diet to determine whether certain foods produce an allergic reaction, Newport recommends an intentional “digital declutter” to help provide clarity. The process is as follows.

1. Set aside a 30-day period during which you will take a break from optional technologies in your life. *Optional* is the key word here—I’m typing these words on a device with a screen. Most of us interface with technology in capacities we can’t avoid. Focus on the areas where you can (i.e. social media, streaming a show out of habit rather than desire).
2. During the 30-day break, explore or rediscover non-digital activities and behaviors that you find satisfying and meaningful (analog photography anyone)?
3. At the end of the declutter, slowly re-introduce optional technologies back into your life. For each technology you re-introduce, determine what value it serves and how you wish to use it to maximize this value.

APPENDIX 02

Experiments with Frugality

Adapted from Jan Johnson: *Abundant Simplicity*

Limiting purchases is a key aspect of the practice of simplicity. Often we purchase things not for the thing in and of itself, but for the feeling or experience it promises to deliver. Many times, what we're really after doesn't require more than we readily have. What follows are a few experiments by which you might apply the brake to the impulse for acquisition.

- Avoid using credit for a week. Use cash or debit for all purchases and see how it affects your spending (and your monthly statement).
- Drive in silence or listen to music on an ad-free playlist. See what difference an advertisement free environment makes.
- Use something old, but still functional and see if it does the task or function you need it to do.
- If you need a new item, see if you can buy it "gently used."
- Toss catalogs and mailers as they come to your home (unsubscribe from retail promotional e-mails) and take note of how you feel about the things you already have.
- Keep a journal of the things you buy impulsively.
- Take note of how you feel about your purchase at the time of its newness. After a week or so, see if you still feel the same way. Did the cost produce the feeling or experience you'd hoped?
- Talk to a friend about the purchase. Was it worth the cost?

APPENDIX 03

Solidarity with the Poor through Simplicity of Diet

According to United Nations World Food Program, 828 million people (10%) of the world's population regularly go to bed hungry. Economic shocks, extreme weather events, conflicts like the war in Ukraine contribute to the shortage, but food waste in the world's wealthiest countries is another major factor. The WFP estimates that in high income countries, up to 40% of food is wasted because we buy more than we use. As an experiment in simplicity, try the following:

- Swapping out one of your regular meals for rice and beans (the staple diet for 2/3 of the world) once a month or once a week.
- Take the extra money from a reduced grocery bill and consider donating to a relief organization like World Vision or Tear Fund.

APPENDIX 04

For Further Reading

My Tech-Wise Life: Growing Up and Making Choices in a World of Devices

by Amy Crouch and Andy Crouch

The Freedom of Simplicity: Finding Harmony in a Complex World

by Richard Foster

Abundant Simplicity: Discovering the Unhurried Rhythms of Grace

by Jan Johnson

7: An Experimental Mutiny Against Excess

by Jen Hatmaker

Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World

by Cal Newport

Simplicity: The Freedom of Letting Go

by Richard Rohr

Restless Devices: Rediscovering Personhood, Presence, and Place in the Digital Age

by Felicia Wu Song



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