

SIMPLICITY: CREATING SPACE FOR WHAT MATTERS MOST

SERIES: THINGS OF EARTH



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Various Scripture

I want to begin this morning by showing you the pictures of two men I'm sure most of you will recognize: Albert Einstein and Steve Jobs.

Both Albert Einstein and Steve Jobs were incredibly brilliant and successful men. Their impact on the world in their respective fields will be remembered forever. Beyond being brilliant and successful, they share something else in common, and it's something that comes through better in a picture than it does in words.

Albert Einstein is known for his mad scientist hair. It turns out that some physicians today think that Einstein had a medical condition called "uncombable hair syndrome" (apparently, that is actually a condition) that accounted for his disheveled hairstyle. Still, traditionally it has been said that Einstein simply didn't think that combing his hair was worth the time because he had so many more important things to do. So he just chose not to do it.

Similarly, Steve Jobs, while not known for his crazy hair, was known for wearing the same outfit every day—blue jeans with a black turtleneck. The reason that Jobs did this was to reduce decision fatigue—the mental energy that is spent on making even small decisions. By wearing the same thing every day, he had more mental capacity—and perhaps more actual time—to devote to other, more important things.

Albert Einstein and Steve Jobs both understood one fundamental truth: sometimes less is more. Sometimes we have to cut some things out of our lives in order to make space for other, more important things.

This is a truth that Jesus would agree with wholeheartedly. This is a truth that the church has clung to for two millennia. This is a truth that is more important for us in our current cultural moment than perhaps any other point in the history of the world. We live in one of the wealthiest places in the world at one of the wealthiest times in all of history. One of the results of this is that our lives are so full and complex that we often don't make space for the things that really matter most.

Does your life ever feel full? If you jumped on the Marie Kondo bandwagon a few years ago, chances are your life is full of stuff. After all, you don't need to pay so much attention to organizing your stuff if your home is not full of it.

How about your schedule? Between my wife Linzy and I, we have a combined seven Google calendars that we share with each other. Sometimes just opening my calendar is enough to make me reach for another cup of coffee. Does anyone else feel that way?

Living in Silicon Valley contributes to this. It is not in our culture to spend Saturdays sitting on the front porch or just relaxing with our neighbors. No. We have our kids in sports and music and robotics club. We have vacations planned for long weekends and holidays. We work long hours and pack our free time with all kinds of hobbies and activities. All of these things leave our schedules bursting at the seams.

It is not only our schedules and our houses that are full. Our budgets are full as well. Many of the things that we fill our homes and our schedules with cost money. Sometimes a lot of money. Then there are our ridiculously high rents or mortgages, car payments, medical expenses, grocery bills, and on and on and on.

Now, here we are in December, two weeks before Christmas. Add holiday gatherings, work parties, and year-end deadlines to our already busy schedules. Add Christmas shopping and hosting dinners, and a few more nights out with friends to our already expensive lives. Life gets so full so quickly.

Amid these busy schedules, the expenses, and the stuff that fills our lives, do you ever stop to ask yourself what it's all for? Why are you working so hard? Why are you running so fast? After you've spent all that time and money, what have you actually gained at the end of the day? Sometimes the answer to that question is scary. Sometimes we don't want to be honest with ourselves about that because if we did, we would have to acknowledge the truth that our lives are not giving us the results we seek.

Baked into our culture is the assumption that more is always better, that more stuff will make us happier, that more money will relieve our anxiety, and that busier schedules will keep us from feeling lonely.

Even a few moments of self-reflection will allow us to see that assumption is deeply flawed. More is not always better. In fact, most of the time, less is actually more.

This Advent season—these four weeks leading up to Christmas—we are teaching a series called “The Things of Earth.” In this series, we look at how the incarnation—Jesus taking on flesh and living a physical, earthly life—gives deep spiritual meaning to the earthly things in our lives. Last week, we looked at generosity—how giving the firstfruits of our labor both gives dignity to our stuff and frees us from slavery to it. Today, we will consider the idea of simplicity, the discipline of creating space in our lives for what really matters most. Simplicity, one of the classic spiritual disciplines, is the practice of creating space in our lives for what matters most. If last week was about giving generously, this week is about structuring our lives in such a way that we have the capacity to give generously. The key to this structure, the key to simplicity, is recognizing what Albert Einstein and Steve Jobs—and yes, of course, Jesus Christ—knew to be true: often, less is more.

If we want to experience what Jesus calls abundant life, if we want to experience the love, joy, and peace that characterize the life of Jesus, we have to learn to cut some things out of our lives to create space for what matters most.

The heart of simplicity

In his book, *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster says this about simplicity:

Simplicity is freedom. Duplicity is bondage. Simplicity brings joy and balance. Duplicity brings anxiety and fear... The Christian Discipline of simplicity is an inward reality that results in an outward lifestyle.¹

I want to think about both aspects of simplicity: the inward reality and the outward lifestyle.

When we speak of simplicity as a spiritual discipline or a spiritual practice, we mean that, at the core, our lives are meant to be about one thing: Christ and his kingdom.

This is what Jesus says in **Matthew 6:33**:

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Jesus says this in the Sermon on the Mount, in the middle of his longest teaching on money. In this teaching, he acknowledges that there are many things that we are seeking, some of which we actually need: food, shelter, clothing—just the basics. Nowhere in this teaching does Jesus say that these are bad things. Nowhere in his teaching does Jesus say that we should not desire these things. In fact, when Jesus chose to become a human—to take on flesh, to inhabit a body—he gave dignity to these things. Food is important. Housing is important. Clothes are important. If we don’t acknowledge that, we invalidate the suffering of those who do not have access to these basic human needs.

Here is what Jesus says: If you make your life about seeking those things, you will be fractured. You will be duplicitous. Your attention, your love, and your desire will be divided. Don’t seek after these things in a way that makes them primary. Instead, seek first the kingdom of God.

This is the inward reality that Richard Foster was speaking of. Our lives, our internal worlds, are meant to be structured around one thing and one thing only: Jesus Christ and his kingdom. We are created to know God. We are created to be in relationship with God. We are created to love God and be loved by him. This is the one thing, the primary thing, that our lives are meant to be about. Seek first the kingdom of God.

If you look deep into your heart, into the center of your life, what do you find there? What is your primary motivation in life? What is your deepest desire? Is it to experience the most pleasure in life? Is it to have as much fun as possible? Is it to accumulate the most stuff—the biggest house, the fanciest car, the smartest home? Is it to amass the most power or exert the most influence? What is it that drives you?

Jesus says, “seek first the kingdom of God.” Make God and his kingdom the center of your life. Let that be the one thing that you are seeking after.

Notice, he doesn’t say, “and that is all you will get.” No, he says, “and all these things will be added to you.” In other words, if you seek God first, he will ensure you have everything else you need. Not everything that you want but everything that you need.

Do you see how this gives dignity to our humanity? To our physical needs? Stuff is important. But it is never meant to be sought after for its own sake. It is never meant to be desired above God.

Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things will be added to you.

That is the heart of simplicity. That is the inward reality that we are after.

But this inward reality must necessarily work itself out in an outward lifestyle. How do we know if we are seeking the kingdom of God first? We look at our lives. We look at our lifestyles. We look at the decisions that we are making, the way that we are living, and that reveals what is going on deep in our hearts.

But there is more to it than that. Our outward lifestyle does not only reveal what is going on inside of us. Our outward lifestyle actually has the ability to shape what is going on inside of us. This is why what we do with our bodies—and, as we will see, with our time and money—are so important to our spiritual formation.

So, as we think about the inward reality that we are after (seeking first the kingdom of God), I want us to think about the outward lifestyle that is most conducive to cultivating that inward reality. And here is where the discipline of simplicity comes in. If our inward reality is to be centered around seeking Christ and his kingdom, we have to create space in our outward lifestyle to seek after him. We have to cut some things out of our lives to leave space for what is most important.

There are two areas of our lives in which I want to encourage us to make space—to cut some things out: our time and our money. Our schedules and our budgets. Both of these things are very important to Jesus. Both of these show up repeatedly in the New Testament. And both of these things have incredible power to either help or hinder our whole-hearted pursuit of the kingdom of God.

Creating space in your schedule

The gospel of Luke includes a few stories that highlight the importance of how we use our time and money. Let's look first at a story about how we use our time. In this story, we see Jesus interacting with two of his very dear friends; two sisters named Mary and Martha.

Luke 10:38-40a:

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. 39 And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. 40 But Martha was distracted with much serving.

Here we have Mary and Martha in their home. Their good friend, Jesus, comes to visit them, and Martha, the responsible one, begins jumping into the typical hosting duties. She's putting on the coffee, pulling the sourdough out of the oven, and doing whatever she can to ensure that Jesus is comfortable.

Mary, on the other hand, sits down at Jesus' feet. She could have jumped in to help her sister. She could have asked, "What else needs to be done?" But instead, she just sat and listened to Jesus. She focused on him while Martha, we are told, was distracted by many other things.

Look at what happens next.

Luke 10:40b-42:

And she [that is, Martha] went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." 41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, 42 but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."

Even though Martha is hard at work serving Jesus, Jesus rebukes her and says that Mary has chosen the better path.

Now, often when we talk about this story, Martha gets a bad rap. "Be a Mary, not a Martha." But let me say that many of us would be doing great if we were a Martha. Like Martha, we are anxious and troubled by many things, but it's not serving! We are distracted by work, Amazon, Instagram, and by Netflix. If only we were distracted by too much serving!

But we aren't meant to be Marthas, either. In her service to Jesus, even Martha neglected what was most important. She had put serving Jesus above actually being with Jesus. She had failed to make space in her schedule to enjoy Jesus and build a relationship with him. Building relationships take time. It takes margin and requires open space in our schedules.

I have a confession. When I go get gas at Costco, I pop the gas tank as I pull up to the pump. I pull my Costco card out of my wallet as I get out of the car. I insert it into the machine. Then, as the machine processes my card, I grab the nozzle and put it in my gas tank. As my credit card is processing, I select the grade of gas that I want. For two seconds, I wait impatiently as the machine processes my card, and then I start filling up. I always have my phone in my pocket so I can pull it out and spend the next two minutes checking email, reading an article, or scrolling Instagram. When the tank is full, I put the nozzle back, jump in my car, turn it on, and my podcast resumes playing at 1.5 speed. Anyone else?

This is how we live our lives—many of us, at least. Being bored has become the ultimate disaster. So we don't leave any margin. Maybe it's because we are trying to be efficient. Maybe it is because of the demands of our jobs or family life. Or maybe, it's because we waste so much time on YouTube and Reddit. But we don't leave any space just to be. To be present, to be with God.

I have a rule—or call it more of a guideline—that I don't touch my phone for the first hour after I wake up or the last hour before I go to bed. Sometimes I even make myself leave my phone in the car while I get gas. I do this to help myself create space for me to be with God, talk to God, and hear from God.

Creating space in our schedules requires a great degree of intentionality. Sometimes it requires saying no to something good. But if we don't start saying no to some good things, we won't have any time left for the most important ones: spending time with God, pursuing God with other people, and serving in ministry.

So how are you doing with your schedule? Is it full? Too full? Do you have margin—white space built in so you can rest and respond to whatever God might bring up at the moment?

We need to intentionally cut things out of our schedules—small things and big things—if we are truly going to leave space for what is most important. Mary understood this. For Martha, it was more of a struggle.

Creating space in your budget

Even if we get this right, creating space in our schedules doesn't take us quite far enough. We also need to learn to create space in our budgets.

There are so many gospel stories that we could look at in which Jesus talks about money, but let's look briefly at the story of the Rich Young Ruler. Luke records this story later in chapter 18. There, we see that this young man of considerable wealth and power comes to Jesus, asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus lists off several of the Ten Commandments. *Yes, I've done all that*, the man says.

Luke 18:22-23:

When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” 23 But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.

Jesus knew. He knew this was a good man, and he had good morals. He loved his family. He contributed to society. Jesus knew that this man had one thing his inner world was centered around. One thing that he was seeking above everything else. And it wasn't God and his kingdom. It was his money. So Jesus said, Give it away, and then you will know what abundant life is really all about.

The man couldn't do it. It was too hard. Was it the security that money provided for him? Was it the opportunity that it secured for his children? Was it the power that comes with wealth? We're not told, but we are told that this man went away sad. Then we read these sobering words.

Luke 18:24-27:

Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, “How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! 25 For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” 26 Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” 27 But he said, “What is impossible with man is possible with God.”

Wealth creates great danger for those who hold it. This danger presents itself on multiple fronts. There is a danger that we would come to trust our money rather than God. There is a danger that we would use our money for evil rather than good. There is another more subtle danger that comes with money. That danger is that we would fall prey to consumerism.

Our culture is a culture of consumerism. It is the backbone of America. It drives industry, politics, and, sadly, sometimes even our spiritual lives.

Consumerism is different from wealth. In the book, *Being Consumed*, William Cavanaugh points out that consumerism comes not from valuing our stuff too much but from valuing our stuff too little. Here is how he puts it:

What really characterizes consumer culture is not attachment to things but detachment. People do not hoard money; they spend it. People do not cling to things; they discard them and buy other things.”²

Cavanaugh goes on to say that this is why consumerism is much more about buying things than owning things. It is more about spending money than having money. When we buy something new, we get a temporary high. It feels exciting for a while, but then that high fades. The thing we bought loses its glamour, and then we turn to buy something new so we can get that high again.³

The rich young ruler may have been more of a hoarder. He had his money and didn't want to let go of it, so Jesus called him out on it. In our consumeristic culture, we tend to be spenders more than hoarders. So, perhaps, if Jesus were here, his instruction to us might not be to sell all that we have and give it to the poor. Perhaps Jesus would say, Don't buy that new iPhone. Don't take that fancy vacation. Don't buy so many clothes that you need to Marie Kondo them all. Buy less stuff. Spend less money, and give the money to the poor. Or invest it and let it grow so that you can be ridiculously generous in ten, twenty, or forty years.

I had a friend tell me the other day that he got a letter from the IRS that said he had been giving away an unusually high percentage of his income and that they wanted to see receipts. Yes! Let's get more of those letters! But if we are going to give away an unusually high percentage of our money, we need to stop buying so many things that take up space in our already crowded houses.

Learning to say no (or at least not yet)

To seek first the kingdom of God, we must make space in our lives. We have to cut some things out of our schedules. We have to cut some things out of our budget. We might even have to start selling or giving away our stuff to make physical space in our lives. Otherwise, these

things will take all of our time, money, and attention, and we won't have anything left to give to God.

Let me end with an example of how these ideas have been personal to me recently.

I enjoy running, and I really enjoy trail running. Being out in nature, in the woods, working hard, doing it with friends—I love it. About a year ago, I had the thought: If I like trail running, I bet I would love mountain biking. You get all of the same benefits with a ridiculous adrenaline rush. I've got three boys. They are too young to mountain bike now, but I am picturing us ten years from now, throwing our bikes in the truck and shredding down the mountain together. That sounds awesome!

Then I started considering the cost. Mountain bikes are expensive. I could afford one—at least a used one—but it will still cost me some change. I don't have a lot of extra room in my budget. Then it's going to take up space. I've got to keep it in the garage. But we have our laundry machines in the garage, storage shelves, and tools, and there is not a lot of extra space in the garage. Then there is the fact that I don't know how to ride a mountain bike. So I have to learn, and that is going to take time. If I am going to get good, that will take a lot of time. I certainly don't have a lot of extra time lying around. Time. Money. Space. All of those things are costly.

I am not in any way saying that it is bad to buy a mountain bike or to spend your weekends shredding down the mountain on one. If you come back to me in five years, I might be wicked good on a mountain bike. But at least for now, as I have talked with the Lord about this and considered what impact this would have on my life, and thought about the other things that I could do with my time and money, I have felt the call to simplicity—to leave some margin, to create space for what really matters most.

Christmas is here. Holidays parties are already planned. Gifts are already bought. Many of us feel that life is very full. And yet, even in the next two weeks, there are some decisions that you could make that would help create margin.

Next, we are into the new year. The new year is a great time to take an inventory of your life—your home, your schedule, your budget—and ask the Lord where you need to create some space. What do you need to say no to so you can say yes to him? “Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things will be added to you.”

Endnotes

1. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: UK, Hodder & Stoughton, 2008), 79.
2. William T Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economic and Human Desire* (Grand Rapids: MI, Erdmans Publishing, 2008), Chapter 2).
3. Cavanaugh, Chapter 2.