Week 7: Day 43-49

Loving God's People
(Nehemiah 5:14-19)

In his book spiritual disciplines fit the Christian life Donald Whitney makes a bold claim: "I will maintain that the only road to Christian maturity and godliness passes through the practice of the Spiritual Disciplines." And God intends for us to grow toward godliness; to pursue it; to practice the disciplines. He calls these disciplines:

- both personal and interpersonal - some are to be practiced alone, some are practiced with others.
- they are activities that we do. They are not character qualities
- Taught or modeled throughout the Bible and are sufficient for growing in Christlikeness.

Godliness Defined

Whitney defines godliness as both closeness to Christ and conformity to Christ, a conformity that's both inward and outward, a growing conformity to both the heart of Christ and the life of Christ.

Godliness comes through discipline.

The purpose of practicing the Disciplines is godliness. Thus we are told in 1 Timothy 4:7 to discipline ourselves. Why? "For the purpose of godliness" (NASB).

The Spiritual Discipline of Simplicity

(Simplicity Leading to Contentment)
Pursuit of Simplicity Leading To contentment

I want to start off our discussion of the Spiritual Discipline of Simplicity (Contentment) with a bold statement: We are not required to embrace the luddite lifestyle of banning technology altogether in order to practice the discipline of simplicity. You don't need to sell everything that you own. Simplicity is not about what you have (whether it be little or much). Simplicity is about what you want.

The central idea of the Discipline of simplicity is to be concerned above all else with God's kingdom and what God wants. Simplicity is what occupies our thoughts and minds and this controls our behavior. It is intentionally arranging our life around God. It is about focusing our hearts and minds on what is important to God and what is essential to living for Him. It is living in a wise and self-controlled manner; living in an upright and just way that shows we serve God. (Titus 2:12)

Give me Jesus, give me Jesus.
You can have all this world,
Just give me Jesus.

Thomas l. Baynham, Jr. And C. Michael Hawn

Jesus At the Center

Simplicity is to place Jesus at the center of our lives so that everything in life flows from Him. It is to: Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you (Matthew 6:33). What things? Jesus is talking about what you'll eat, what you'll drink, what you'll wear, what you drive, your career, your relationships — the material concerns of life.

Jesus is at the center of it all
For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him (16).

Jesus be the center of my life.
He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (17).

Jesus be the center of the church
And he is the head of the body, the church (18).

In practicing the discipline of simplicity we pray for everything in our lives to revolve around Jesus. It is through Jesus that all things were created; it is through Jesus that all things hold together, and it is for the glory of Jesus that everything exists. Jesus is the main character in Scripture. He is the center of the story. Everything revolves around Him.

Simplicity is an ongoing disciplining of our mind and heart that prevents us from getting caught up in the things of the world. It is an inward reality that presents itself in an outward life style - behaviors that reflect a devotion to God.

Jesus At the Center
Israel & New Breed

Jesus at the center of it all
From beginning to the end
It will always be
It's always been You Jesus

Nothing else matters,
Nothing in this world will do
Jesus You're the center
Everything revolves around You
Jesus You at the center of it all

2 Corinthians 5:15 NLT says ***"Jesus died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them."*** This is the normal Christian life — making Jesus' life and mission our top priority. No longer do we live for ourselves; we live for Christ. No longer do we live to just please ourselves; we live to please King Jesus.

THE PRACTICE OF SIMPLICITY

I place no value on anything I possess, except in relation to the Kingdom of God. —David Livingstone

Simplicity is about setting priorities that flow from God above all else; seeking first His kingdom and his righteousness. That comes before everything else.

Simplicity is pursuing one goal over all else, simplicity as a single focus for every aspect of our lives. That goal is to seek God's kingdom. Jesus says in Matthew 6:33, 'seek first his kingdom and his righteousness,' and that comes before everything else. It is a freedom from anxiety and worry.

Jesus is calling us to a freedom from the worry and anxiety about material things. He teaches us that freedom is not found in having and doing, but in keeping God and his will first in our heart. He teaches that it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35), that you cannot serve God and money (Luke 16:13), and that our life doesn't consist of an abundance of possessions (Luke 12:15). Simplicity brings balance so we don't gravitate towards either worshiping consumption or legalism.

Practicing the discipline of simplicity means to first focus on the purity of your heart and then live out a lifestyle of simplicity. Living in simplicity means living without fear and obsession of status.

Simplicity is not about what we have but what we want

Contentment with what we have is absolutely vital to our spiritual health. The Bible never condemns the rich for their abundance. God never calls money evil either. Contentment actually has nothing to do with circumstances and everything to do with attitude. The fundamental question is not ***what do you have but what do you want?***

Do we want bigger, better faster, more? Or do we want simplicity art Foster defines as "the discipline of freeing ourselves from unnecessary excess and self-gratifying luxury." We can't have both. We must be singularly focused on the Jesus in all we are. That is why Simplicity is a discipline because we are called to do something. Simplicity does not just happen. We must make conscious choices in regards to how we live our lives.

That is why Foster says ***"simplicity is the only thing that can sufficiently reorient our lives so that possessions can be genuinely enjoyed without destroying us."*** Jesus makes it clear what the focus of our lives should and must be as we follow Him —seeking the Kingdom of God (Matt. 6:25-33).

We practice the spiritual discipline of simplicity as we choose to seek after the kingdom of God. This is a difficult discipline to grasp as we live in a culture of self and want. Yet God calls His children of faith to "seek ye first the kingdom of God." Simplicity is about making sure that the stuff in our lives is oriented properly - for His glory and our good.

For the Haves and Have-nots

Notice that simplicity leading to contentment is for the haves and have-nots. It is entirely possible for the rich person to trust in his riches and for the poor person to be envious, greedy, and covetous for riches he does not have. The bible says, the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10). If you have it and depend on it, it can destroy you. If you don't have it and crave it, it can also destroy you. Hebrews 13:5 says be content with what you have, whether you have money, possessions, achievements, fame, or not. Because if you're not content with what you have, you'll never be content with what you don't have.

So for or those that are rich, he says, don't be arrogant or trust in their wealth*... Instruct them to do what is good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and willing to share,* (1 Timothy 6:17-19). And for the poor he says, *Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have (Hebrews 13:5–6).*

Bigger, better faster, more?

Practicing the discipline of simplicity means to first focus on the purity of your heart and then live out a lifestyle of simplicity. Living in simplicity means living without fear and obsession of status. But in our culture, we are told that the good life is found in bigger, better faster, more. We search for happiness that doesn't last. The practice of simplicity brings contentment to abide in the goodness of God, and to enjoy the fullness of life in the Kingdom of God.

A Version of Simplicity

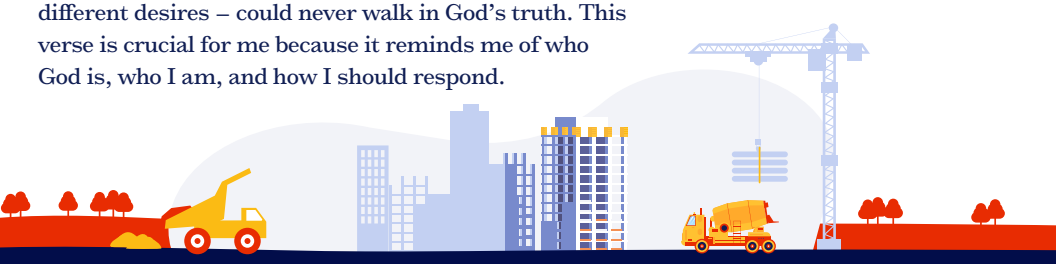
I will admit I am not naturally good at being practicing simplicity - at being content. I always try to be more, do more, achieve more, have more. And I can be envious of people who have more money, less body fat, prettier homes, and nicer cars. I want Jesus to be the enter of it all, but I want bigger, better. faster, more. So I practice a version of simplicity which is very American urban, middle class. I have a long way to go and a long ways to go in practicing this discipline of simplicity. That is why I have Psalm 86:11 as my life verse.

Teach me Your way, LORD; I will walk in Your truth;
Unite my heart to fear Your name.

This verse is a prayer that says, Lord teach me what you want me to do and I will obey you faithfully. The prayer is to walk out (live out) God's truth with a united heart.

We can only walk in God's truth with a united heart. A divided heart - divided among different loyalties and different desires – could never walk in God's truth. This verse is crucial for me because it reminds me of who God is, who I am, and how I should respond.

> *Contentment is not simply about settling for what we have, but trusting what God has said.*



Foster says that the Spiritual Discipline of Simplicity is God's answer to selfish humanity. It is His demand of us who choose to live for Him and for His glory. Foster further defines simplicity as "the discipline of freeing ourselves from unnecessary excess and self-gratifying luxury." Simplicity doesn't necessarily mean we live in want... it means we learn to be satisfied and fulfilled by a simpler life.

WHAT SIMPLICITY IS NOT

In his article Practicing The Discipline Of Simplicity by Gregory Brown, he says when Christ calls believers to not store up treasures on earth, he clearly is not saying:

- **Do not own property.** Christ is not saying it is wrong to own property. In the Ten Commandments, we are commanded to not steal, this implies that we can own property
- **Do not despise material wealth.** Christ is not teaching that we should despise material wealth. 1 Timothy 6:17 says God "richly provides us with all things for our enjoyment."
- **Christ is not teaching that we should neglect saving for future needs.** Proverbs 6:6-8 tells us to consider the ant who stores in the summer. 1 Timothy 5:8 also says whoever doesn't provide for his family is worse than an infidel. We must provide for our families g=by saving for the future

God gives us wealth to provide for our daily bread, to help others, and to spread his kingdom. We should not hoard our wealth, as though it is for our needs alone. God has called us to be channels of his blessings and not reservoirs. As with Abraham, God blesses us, so we can bless others (Gen 12:2).

Differences in asceticism and simplicity

Throughout 1 Timothy 4 we see Paul is dealing with teachers who encourage a practice known as asceticism. This is the rejection of worldly comforts in an effort to become more spiritual. In Paul's day, groups such as the Gnostics taught that sexuality and food were physical, and therefore corrupt. But Paul explains, everything God created can be more than just good. It can actually be holy, when used as God intended. Asceticism and simplicity are mutually incompatible.

Asceticism renounces possessions	Simplicity sets possessions in proper perspective.
Asceticism finds no place for a "land flowing with milk and honey."	Simplicity rejoices in this gracious provision from the hand of God.
Asceticism finds contentment only when it is abased.	Simplicity knows contentment in both abasement and abounding (Phil. 4:12)

Overview: Nehemiah 5:1-19

Loving God & Loving His People

Chapter 5 is filled with great internal conflict. In (1-5) we see the complaints of the people against the nobles and officials. They were exploiting their own people. Things were made worse by a famine, so those who owned property were forced to mortgage their fields, vineyards, and houses in order to get food. Others had to borrow and some were even forced to sell their children into slavery to their fellow Jews to pay their taxes

And we see that when Nehemiah heard their outcry and these charges, he was very angry (5:6). And in 5:7, "After seriously considering the matter, he confronted those guilty of mistreating the poor saying, You are forcing your own people to pay interest on the money you loan them. You must stop doing that!

He called a great assembly and spelled out the problem. He rebuked the leaders (5:8) by pointing out their wrongs. They could not find a word to answer. Notice that he said their behavior would cause their enemies to mock them for their mistreatment of their own people (5:9).
He points out to them that over the 12 year period he was governor, he did not take advantage of his position and power. He feared God and cared about the people. He did not want to impose any more burden on the people.

Something surprising happens after Nehemiah confronts the nobles and officials - they agreed to give back the money and do as Nehemiah had requested!! He made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. (12) And in dramatic fashion he called God to bear witness to this oath they had made.

He concludes with a prayer asking God to remember his good deeds; to remember his love for God and his love for God's people.

A THOUGHT TO CONSIDER

Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it. - Proverbs 15:16 ESV

Nehemiah could have demanded a food allowance as his predecessors had done by taxing the people with force. The governor had a right to such an allowance. (remember he had 150 people at his table daily). But Nehemiah acted differently, because he honored God (18). Because of his fear and reverence to God he set aside his right to the governor allowance and bore these costs out of his own pocket.

He devoted himself to the work God called him to. *"…I worked on this wall. All my men were on the job to do the work. We didn't have time to line our own pockets." - Nehemiah 5:16 (MSG)*

NEHEMIAH GOT ANGRY 🤯😲😱

It may be shocking to see the faithful leader Nehemiah getting angry. But anger in the face of injustice, exploitation and oppression is righteous – it's the right response. Nehemiah got very angry! But look at what Nehemiah does with his anger? In v. 7 we see he seriously considered the matter. He pondered what he should do and then he acted. In the end he tempered his anger the goal of repentance and redemption.

TREASURES IN HEAVEN

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

MATTHEW 6:19-21

In these verses known as the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is talking about material things and how we should regard those things as His disciples. If we want to be His disciples we must the following attitude towards material things.

- We must value heavenly treasure more than earthly treasure
- We must recognize that our heart and our treasure go together. You can't give God your heart without also giving Him your treasure
- We cannot serve both God and material things. When Jesus said that "no one can serve two masters," he did not mean that it was unwise to serve two masters, but that it was impossible. If our treasure is in our bank account, or an educational diploma, or any other earthly thing, our mind will not be on God.

Do Not To Store Up Earthly Treasure

Christ commands us "do not store up treasures" not because treasures in themselves are evil but because our hearts are evil. We tend to trust our wealth to take care of us. We focus on accumulating stuff instead of trusting God. We also tend to believe that treasures will satisfy our hearts, and the world continually tells us so. This new phone, laptop, house, or car will satisfy you, the world declares. However, temporary things can never satisfy the eternal longings in our hearts. They will always leave us dry. In Matthew 13:22, Christ called this the "seductiveness of wealth." Many are deceived by wealth to their spiritual detriment. So Christ calls us to not accumulate riches if we are to be His disciples.

Store Up Heavenly Treasure

Our whole mind will be fixed around our treasure for better of worse. We do not have to lay up treasure on earth because the provision has already been made. God provides for us according to our needs, just as he does for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. While we work to provide for our families, we work in faith without fear and anxiety over tomorrow that prompt us to work, but in obedience to the gracious gift of God.

Replace Worry With Kingdom Seeking
- Matthew 6:25-34

Notice that in this passage Jesus not only tells us to stop worrying, He tells us to replace our worry with a concern for the kingdom of God. Its not enough to just stop worrying, Jesus calls us to replace our worry with a dedicated pursuit of the kingdom of God. And can replace your worry with concern for God's kingdom. Why? Because He says in verse 33, all these things shall be added to you. If you put God's kingdom first and if you think that your life is more than what you eat and drink and the clothes you put on your back then God says I will take care of you.

Jesus says do not worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. So do not worry about anything in the past for you can do nothing about it. Do not worry about anything in the future what good is that? Jesus tells us: do not to live in the past, do not to live in the future but to live in the present day and to trust God today and to be freed from the torment of worry. Trust God about what concerns you today.

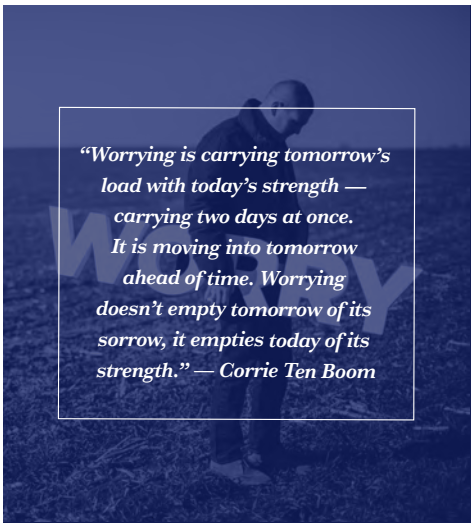
3 Reasons Not To Worry

Starting at verse 26, Jesus gives us three reasons not to worry:

1. **Understand your Father in Heaven cares about you and He'll care for you.** (26)
   Jesus says look at the birds of the air your heavenly Father feeds them. Jesus says if God gives the birds enough to eat wont't He do so for you.

2. **Worry is useless** (27)
   You're not going to add to your life by worrying. Worrying accomplishes nothing so give it up.

3. **Prioritize seeking Me and my kingdom and I will relieve you of the worry** (28-34)
   God takes care of the grass and the flowers, and He will take care of us.



FOUR PARADOXES OF CHRISTIAN SIMPLICITY

By Richard Foster

1. Simplicity is both a grace and a discipline.
It is a grace because it is given to us by God. There is no way that we can build up our willpower or contort our natural tendencies to attain it. It is a gift to be graciously given and received. At the same time, simplicity is also a discipline because it is something we are called to do. Spiritual disciplines (prayer, meditation, etc.) do not give us simplicity, but they do put us in the place where we can receive it.

2. Christian simplicity is both easy and difficult.
It is easy in the same way in which all other Christian graces are easy once they have ingrained into the habit structure of our lives. It is difficult because there are times of struggle and effort, times when we despair and feel that the complexities of this life are about to do us in.

3. The balance between the inner and outer dimensions of simplicity.
An outer expression of true simplicity must necessarily flow from the inner resources. Without an inner simplicity, all external efforts are in vain. At the same time, we delude ourselves if we think we can possess the inner reality of simplicity without it having a profound effect upon the way we live.

4. Both the goodness and the limitation of material things.
To deny the goodness is to be ascetic. To deny the limitation is to be materialistic. So often the biblical teaching on provision has been taken and twisted into a doctrine of gluttonous prosperity.

Christian simplicity does not yield to simplistic answers. It is the ability to be single-hearted and at the same time sensitive to the tough, complex issues of life. It is a strange combination and quite difficult to explain, though quite easy to recognize.

Richard Foster's Path to Simplicity

1. Buy things for their usefulness, rather than their status, for utility, not their prestige.
2. Reject anything that is can be an addiction in you.
3. Refuse to give in to the modern notion that the newer is better.
4. Learn to enjoy things without owning them.
5. Develop a deeper appreciation for the creation; to discover once again that "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it (Ps. 24:1).
6. Look with a healthy skepticism at "buy now, pay later" schemes. They are a trap to deepen your bondage.
7. Reject anything that will breed the oppression of others.
8. Shun whatever would distract you from your main goal. – to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness.

WEEK 7 CHALLENGE

Challenge #1 Daily Scripture Readings by Richard Foster

Monday: *Simplicity as singleness of heart – Matthew 6:19*
Tuesday: *Simplicity as Trust – Matthew 6:25–34*
Wednesday: *Simplicity as Obedience – Genesis 15*
Thursday: *The Generosity of Simplicity – Leviticus 25:8–12*
Friday: *Simplicity in Speech – Matthew 5:33–37, James 5:12*
Saturday: *Simplicity and Justice – Luke 4:16–21*
Sunday: *Freedom from covetousness – Luke 12:13–34*

Simplicity, contrary to the suggestion of its name, is not a particularly simple or easy way.
RICHARD FOSTER

Challenge #2 Examine Yourself

Examine your budget

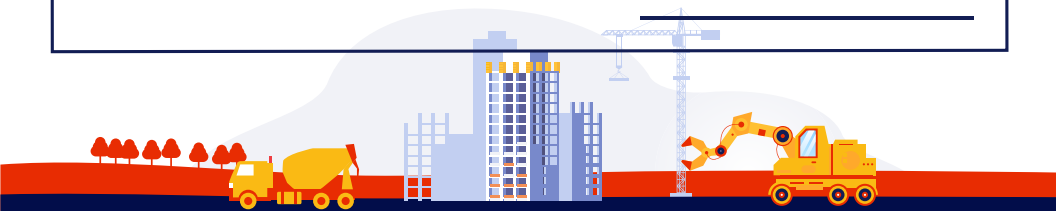
Take a look at your spending in your banking app or any budgeting tool you might use, such as Mint. What does your spending tell you that you value most? Examples might be charitable giving, travel, convenience (eating out, Uber, etc.), high quality food, or something entirely different.

Examine your schedule

How we spend our time is a major indicator of what we value. Look back in your calendar or memory (or, keep track for a few days!) and consider where you are investing your time. That will point to what you are placing value on.

As you work through this Practice, you may discover a gap between what you say or think you really value most, and what your money or time demonstrates you value most. Where do you see the biggest discrepancy? (Example: " want to value family time with dinners at home, but my schedule tells me I value work most.")

Based on what you've discovered, make up a list of 5 or so core values you aspire to. Some may be currently supported by your lifestyle, and some may be "in progress." That's okay! Our goal is to get some clarity around what our "center" is, so we can keep coming back to it. As you review your list, spend some time in prayer before God, asking what He might add or subtract.



Challenge #3: ADORE

Simple Ideas for the Spiritual Practice of Simplicity *by Jean Wise*

Simplicity often makes the bottom of my list of the favorite, most, appealing, and "wow I need to do this" desirable disciplines for me. I feel bad admitting my reaction, but I neglect and put off this practice.

We live in a complicated world, overflowing with noise, expectations, and loaded calendars, but there is voice inside me whispering "keep it simple, silly."
- All we have is a gift from God and not from our work.
- God will protect what we possess and we can trust him to do so.
- Share our gifts with others. Living simple gives us the power to share what we have.

Foster writes the central point is to seek God first, then everything else will fall into proper order. A single undivided focus on God. Simplicity begins with God. Centered on God. And is a gift from God.

Steps for Simplicity – ADORE

God first. We start with God in all our spiritual practices. To help remind me to live more simply, I compiled ideas to form the acronym of ADORE. My eyes and heart focused on God and I adore him by following Him and living my life for Him.

A **Awareness and assessment of all we have accumulated.** Awareness of how complicated life has become, fatigue from decision making and maintenance of schedules, and possessions, and being mindful of the amount of stuff I've accumulated.

D **Decide to declutter and downsize.** Ask God to show you where to begin, what needs to be managed different and to give you new eyes to see fresh possibilities and the wisdom and courage to implement these changes. How can you better order your space, time, thinking? Be creative. Be open. Be willing.

O **Ordering, then omitting the objects that obstruct you.** Think about what takes you away from God. What draws you nearer to him? What preoccupies your heart and mind? Eliminate activities, commitments, objects, habits that distract you from seeking God.

R **Release/Refuse/ Reject.** What can you right now release? From now on to only buy things for their usefulness, not their status. Refuse the latest gadgets and the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) that drives us. Refuse the comparison game of what others possess. Reject what feeds addictive behaviors within our minds, confusing our wants with our needs?

E **Evaluate and Enjoy.** Living in simplicity will be a lifelong journey. So we must objectively gauge how we are doing, and dare to ask the questions (not making excuses of ignorance or neglect. How am I spending my time, my money, my life? Am I enjoying simple pleasures and foods? Am I using something up before buying something new? How am I enjoying God's creation? Am I confusing my wants with our needs?

Challenge #4 Journaling

"May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. - Psalm 19:14

Journaling can provide the opportunity for us to express our thoughts and feelings to God. As we pay attention to our thoughts and feelings, we hold them up to the truth and light of God's Word in order to experience renewal and healing. In a journal written for this purpose, there are as many references to God and his Words as there are to our thoughts and feelings. Use the prompts below to guide and inspire in practicing the spiritual discipline of simplicity.

Journaling Prompts:

In what areas do you have unnecessary excess in your life?

If you had more space or time, what would you fill it with?

Brainstorm and write down ideas of how you could practice simplicity this week. Be realistic and think of ways that would be manageable

Coming Next Week:
Week 8: Day 50 & Beyond (Nehemiah 6:1-14)
Learn more about the spiritual disciplines and weekly challenges @
connectchurch.com/letsbuild