

Simplicity

Let's start out with a few sayings of Jesus that, if we're honest, most of us disagree with or at least dislike.

Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.¹

Or how about this one?

Sell your possessions and give to the poor.²

Wait, what about saving for retirement? Don't you know about the social security crisis? Medicare? This sounds irresponsible.

Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?...Seek first [God's] kingdom.³

Okay, you lost me; that's *exactly* what I worry about. Money to pay the bills. Do you have any idea what rent is in my city? Not to mention my student loans. Are you expecting me to just sit around and pray all day long?

The worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.⁴

You're saying that wealth is by nature "deceitful"? A personified con artist? That it has a suffocating effect on the soil of my heart, choking out the life of the kingdom?

Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.⁵

You're saying wealth makes it *harder* to experience the life of God's reign? Not easier? That does not compute. The more money I have, the better my life seems.

Confused?

If these sayings of Jesus sound crazy to you, well, you're not alone. They do to most of us in the West. When I first started to take Jesus seriously as a teacher (not just as a savior), it was his vision of the role of wealth in the good life that was most jarring to me. Honestly, it took me years to even agree with him.

If you're not on board with Jesus' view of money, it could be that you, like many Christians in the West (myself included until quite recently and with frequent relapses), don't actually believe the gospel of the kingdom—the good news that the life you've always wanted is fully available to you right where you are through Jesus. Through him you have access to the Father's loving presence. Nothing—not your income level or stage of life or health or relational status—*nothing* is standing between you and the “life that is truly life.”⁶

It could be that you believe *another* gospel. Another vision of what the good life is and how you obtain it.

Let's call it “the gospel of America.”

(For those of you outside America, I apologize; just roll with it.)

This gospel makes the exact opposite claim. In a nutshell: the more you have, the happier you will be.

Get that new dress or pair of shoes or golf club or geometric potted cactus, and naturally you'll be happier.

Trade your car in for the new model; it has LED lights around the logo.

Nab the bigger, better home or condo or apartment, and make sure you furnish it with the latest design trend, preferably from Sweden or Australia.

Work your way up the ladder, throw an elbow if you have to, but get the promotion, the raise, the bonus.

If and when you do, you'll be happier. Duh. Everybody knows that. Happiness is out there; it's just one PayPal click or outfit or gadget or car payment or mortgage away. Out of reach, yes. But barely. I'm *almost* there. I can feel it.

But let me say what you all know: the carrot dangling in front of our noses is attached to a stick.

The French sociologist Jean Baudrillard has made the point that in the Western world, materialism has become the new, dominant system of meaning.⁷ He argues atheism hasn't replaced cultural Christianity; shopping has.

We now get our meaning in life from what we consume.

We even get our identity from the things we buy (or sell). Most of us would never admit it, but a lot of us believe the saying “I am what I buy.” Or more realistically, “I am what I wear.” Or the brand of my phone. Or the car I drive or the neighborhood I live in or the gadget I flaunt.

For a lot of people, things aren't just *things*; they are identities.

Shopping is now the number one leisure activity in America, usurping the place previously held by religion. [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) is the new temple. The Visa statement is the new altar. Double-clicking is the new liturgy. Lifestyle bloggers are the priests and priestesses. Money is the new god.

There's a reason the only other god Jesus ever called out by name was Mammon—the god of money.⁸ Because it's a bad god and a lousy religion.

The rise of a lie

It hasn't always been this way, even in America. Yes, our nation is a social experiment built around the pursuit of happiness. But it wasn't until quite recently that we redefined happiness as making lots of money and owning lots of stuff.

Only a century ago (a blip on the history time line), 90 percent of Americans were farmers. Life was hard, yes, but simpler too. We mostly lived off the land and traded with our neighbors for anything else we needed. Money was rarely even used. And most of the things we owned fell into the category of needs, not wants.

Today only 2 percent of Americans work in agriculture. The last century has radically reshaped the American economy. It started with urbanization and its twin, industrialization. People moved to cities by the droves for jobs, where goods were produced in mass. The two world wars in turn created what President Eisenhower later dubbed "the military-industrial complex," and once the tumult of war calmed down, the power brokers of the day had to find a way to keep all those factories open and people employed. Tank factories were repurposed to make T-shirts.

I'm not much of a conspiracy theorist, but it's an open secret that after the war, the tycoons of big business, the shadow politicians of DC, and the "mad men" of New York City conspired to remake the American economy. Their agenda? To create an entire economy (and, with it, culture) out of consumerism. To get the children of a bunch of simple farmers to spend their time and money buying up the latest thing, hot off the assembly line. It was the "thingification" of American society.

One Wall Street banker said this:

We must shift America from a needs to a desires culture.... People must be trained to desire, to want new things, even before the old have been entirely consumed. We must shape a new mentality. Man's desires must overshadow his needs.⁹

Sound like an evil genius from an Orwellian sci-fi movie? Nah. That was Paul Mazur of Lehman Brothers.

E. S. Cowdrick, a pioneer of "industrial relations," called it "the new economic gospel of consumption." Note his language: "gospel."

And tragically, their evil plan worked. Perfectly.

In 1927 one journalist observed this about America:

A change has come over our democracy. It is called consumptionism. The American citizen's first importance to his country is now no longer that of citizen but that of consumer.¹⁰

Fast-forward to today: our "consumer" economy is now built around people spending money they don't have on things they don't need. And we've all heard how our apartments and homes are twice the size they were in the '50s, while our families are half the size.¹¹

One of my most vivid memories is 9/11. I still remember that morning, hearing the news. On West Coast time it was pretty early, and I spent most of the day in shock.

But I also remember President Bush's speech to the nation a few weeks later. You remember what the leader of the free world encouraged us to do to get our nation back on track?

Go shopping.

That's a bit cynical of an interpretation, but at one point in the speech, he warned against terrorists "frightening our nation to the point where...people don't shop."¹²

God forbid that a tragedy like 9/11 keep us from hitting up the mall for a new pair of Nikes.

Even as a teenager that sounded bizarre to me.

But the crazy thing is, that's exactly what we did. In fact, we bought so much stuff and borrowed so much money to do it that our entire economy crashed only a few years later. (Yes, that's an oversimplification, but not by a lot.) I say this not to dishonor a president for a slip of the tongue, but to situate it in a larger cultural trend.

Because we grew up in a cultural milieu where this was normal and we're educated to believe we're rational, autonomous selves, it's easy to forget that most advertising is a form of propaganda, one that plays not to our pre-frontal cortex but to a deeper, less logical part of us. Prior to World War II, advertising was nothing like it is today. All it really did was tell you why one product was better than another. The messages from advertising were about quality, longevity, necessity.

Here are a few examples from a couple of centuries ago:

Simplicity. Durability. Speed. Visible Writing. Franklin Typewriter.

Dr. Warner's Celebrated Coraline Corsets. They are boned with Coraline, which is the only material used for Corsets that can be guaranteed not to wrinkle nor break.

Tired? Then drink Coca-Cola. It relieves exhaustion.¹³

Notice: absolutely nothing about how a product will make you happy.

But the war changed everything.

Advertising as we now know it started not on Madison Avenue but in another city: Berlin. With another group of power brokers: the Nazis. They took the ideas of an Austrian psychotherapist named Freud, then unknown in America, and used them to manipulate the masses. Freud was one of the first modern thinkers to point out that human beings aren't nearly as rational or autonomous as we like to think. We constantly make irrational decisions based on what he called our "unconscious drives" (similar to what the New Testament calls "the flesh"). We are far more emotionally tricked and desire driven than we care to admit.

The Nazis picked up Freud's ideas (which was ironic, seeing as he was Jewish) and used them to shape their propaganda machine. They appealed not to reason but to Germany's "unconscious drives." Hitler was a master of fanning the two most basic human emotions: I want, and I fear.

After the war, it was actually Freud's nephew, Edward Bernays, who first used Freud's ideas in America. An intelligence officer during the war, he found himself in need of a job. His theory was that if the Nazis could manipulate people in wartime, then surely business owners and politicians could manipulate people in peacetime. He called his new idea "public relations" and became the so-called "father of American advertising."¹⁴

Never heard of him? Most haven't. He predicted as much in his book *Propaganda*:

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute *an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.*

We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of.... In almost every act of our daily lives...*we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons...who pull the wires which control the public mind.*¹⁵

My point with this little history jaunt is to remind us: advertising *is* propaganda. It might not be trying to get you to kill Jews, Gypsies, and LGBTQ people, but it is a multibillion-dollar industry that is intentionally designed to lie to you—to get you to believe that if you will only buy this or that product, *then* you will be happy. Or at least *happier*.

To do this it has to bend over backward to make us think our wants are actually needs. Those four thousand ads we see a day have been intentionally designed to stoke the fire of desire in our bellies.¹⁶

Before any of this even started, Mark Twain perceptively noted, “Civilization is the limitless multiplication of unnecessary necessities.”¹⁷ Nail on the head, as always. As Western wealth and technology continue to rise, many psychologists point out that our happiness is not increasing at pace. In fact, some studies indicate that as a nation’s wealth goes up, its happiness goes down. Or at least levels off. Something about the human psyche quickly adapts to a new normal. Things we categorize as “needs”—a car, a telephone, a daily multivitamin, electricity, running water—didn’t even exist until recently, and yet many people were quite happy without them.

The journalist Gregg Easterbrook, in his book *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*, noted this:

Adjusting for population growth, ten times as many people in the Western nations today suffer from “unipolar” depression, or unremitting bad feelings without a specific cause, than did half a century ago. Americans and Europeans have ever more of everything except happiness.¹⁸

So what to do? Go back to a hole in the backyard as our toilet? Give up running water? Burn our debit cards? No, that wouldn’t fix the problem. Because the problem isn’t stuff. It’s that (1) we put no limit on stuff due to our insatiable human desire for *more*. And (2) we think we need all sorts of things to be happy when, in actuality, we need very few.

Jesus and the writers of the New Testament put the number of our material needs at a whopping two things: food and clothing.

If we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.¹⁹

Now, Jesus and his friends lived in and around the Mediterranean Sea, where it’s warm and dry. I live in the Pacific Northwest, where it’s cold and wet half the year, so I would add one more to the list: shelter.

But even the thought of living by that expanded list—food, clothing, and shelter—sounds *crazy* to most of us.

What if the only material things we need to live rich and satisfying lives are food to eat, clothing on our backs, and a place to live? If you doubt your ability to live that simply and thrive, you’re not alone.

The propaganda machine is working like a charm. Most of us believe the lie: more money and more stuff equal more happiness.

And like all the most dangerous lies, it’s a half-truth. More money does make you happier—if you’re *poor*. I hate the way some idealistic Christians (who aren’t poor) glamorize poverty. It’s horrible. Lifting people out of poverty will make them happier, but only up to a point.

And we now know exactly what that point is: \$75,000.

The truth about lies

In a landmark study out of Princeton University, two great minds collaborated on a nationwide research project. Dr. Daniel Kahneman, a Nobel Prize-winning psychologist, and Dr. Angus Deaton, a well-respected economist, spent months poring over the data from 450,000 Gallup surveys and concluded that your overall well-being does rise with your income, but only to a point. After that you either plateau or, worse, decline.

Here's Deaton in his own words:

No matter where you live, your emotional well-being is as good as it's going to get at \$75,000...and money's not going to make it any better beyond that point. It's like you hit some sort of ceiling, and you can't get emotional well-being much higher just by having more money.

Now, that number is a national average. It would be much less for, say, a single college kid living in Sarasota Springs than for a family of five living in San Francisco. Jennifer Robison, in her summary of Kahneman's and Deaton's research, says that it's "true, \$75,000 won't go very far in big cities...and it makes sense that a high cost of living will make even large sums feel puny." However, the study still "indicates that \$75,000 is the limit even in large expensive cities."²⁰

Turns out: once you reach what most Westerners classify as a middle-class life, money and stuff just can't deliver what they promise—happiness.

As the oil tycoon John Rockefeller so famously said when asked how much money is "enough": "Just a little bit more."

To drill down, the lie is this: more money (and, with it, stuff) will make you happier.

The truth? Poverty is really hard and a middle-class life is a real gift, but after that it's the law of diminishing returns. In fact, more money might just be "no problems." But wherever you fall in the socioeconomic stratum, the most important things in life aren't things at all; they are relationships with family, friends, and, above all, God.

You see how upside down our culture's message about money and stuff is? Richard Foster called our culture's view of things "psychotic" in that it has completely lost touch with reality. He wisely observed, "We in the West are guinea pigs in one huge economic experiment in consumption."²¹

In my opinion, the wait is over and the verdict is in: time *is* telling the catastrophic damage that materialism is doing to the soul of our society. This lie we all believe is wreaking havoc on our emotional health and spiritual lives. One cultural commentator called it "affluenza."²² It's like a disease promising to make us happy for \$49.99, while in fact it's a man in the shadows pulling our strings and stealing our money and, with it, our joy.

This all reminds me of a line from Psalm 39: "In vain they rush about, heaping up wealth without knowing whose it will finally be."²³

An engine for hurry

One of the many reasons that happiness is dropping in the West even as the Dow is rising is because materialism has sped up our society to a frenetic, untenable pace.

As Alan Fadling insightfully said,

The drive to possess is an engine for hurry.²⁴

Every single thing you buy costs you not only money but also *time*.

Think about it: you buy that motorcycle you've always dreamed of; that's great. I used to ride. I miss it. Have fun; don't die. But make sure you do the math before you sign on the dotted line. *All* the math. To own a bike costs a lot more than just the \$250-per-month payment you can't really afford. It costs you time—you have to work more hours at your job to pay for it. You have to move *faster* through your day to get everything done. You have to keep your bike clean. And maintain it. When it breaks, you have to fix it. And of course, you have to ride it. All of this takes a lot of time. Now, you might be in a season of your life where you have time to burn, and you might decide that riding a motorcycle is a life-giving activity for your soul. Great. I'm not remotely against it. I can vaguely remember a similar season, before kids. But when you run your cost-benefit analysis, don't forget to calculate: you're paying for that experience not only in cash but also in time.

And less time means more *hurry*.

Whether you're into motorcycles, sneakers, or Japanese anime, most of us simply have too much stuff to enjoy life at a healthy, unhurried pace.

Remember those predictions from the Nixon era that by now we'd all be working three or four hours each morning and playing golf in the afternoon while the robots made our living for us? What happened? Well, part of the story is that we chose money and stuff over time and freedom. We opted for a new 4K projector for movie night instead of "a life of unhurried serenity and peace and power."²⁵ Instead of spending money to get time, we opted for the reverse: we spend time to get money.

So.

I have a crazy idea.

You ready?

What if Jesus was *right*?

I mean, what if he actually knew what he was talking about?

We forget, Jesus was the most intelligent teacher to ever live. His teachings aren't just right in some arbitrary moral sense—they are *good*. That's what morality is—the good and true way to live.

It's a gross mistake to think of Jesus' teachings as some kind of socially conditioned, arbitrary law like the speed limit—who says it has to be forty-five miles per hour? Why not fifty-five? What if I have a brand-new Tesla?

In reality Jesus' moral teachings aren't arbitrary at all. They are laws, yes. But moral laws are no different from scientific laws like $E = mc^2$ or gravity.²⁶ *They are statements about how the world actually works.* And if you ignore them, not only do you rupture relationship with God, but you also go against the grain of the universe he created. Cue the splinters.

So many of Jesus' teachings—especially on money and stuff—were just telling stories about the way the world actually *is*.

It is more blessed to give than to receive.²⁷

Notice: that's not a command, much less an arbitrary law. It's a counterintuitive observation of the human condition.

You cannot serve both God and money.²⁸

Notice, again, not a command. He didn't say, "You *shouldn't* serve both God and money." He said, "You *can't*."

Life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.²⁹

Yet again, he didn't command, "Don't buy more than three pairs of shoes." He just made a statement about the way life actually works. The most important things in life aren't in your closet or your garage or your online portfolio. That's just not where "abundance" is found.

You see what he was doing? He was teaching what's *true*. Whether we believe him or not is another matter. Either way, his ideas about money and stuff correspond to reality. Ours to psychopathy.

Now for a bit of confession. I grew up reading the Bible all the way through every year, and around September I would get to Jesus' teachings. They say something like 25 percent of Jesus' teachings are on money and stuff. Basically, none of them are positive. Wherever the "prosperity gospel" came from, it didn't come from Jesus. And honestly, when I read his teachings on money, I cringed. They sounded *horrible*. Right up there with fasting and celibacy. Like, if I were to live those teachings, it would suck the joy right out of life.

Like many of my fellow Americans, I did not believe the gospel of the kingdom. I didn't yet trust (that's what it means to believe) that Jesus was a master teacher, an astute observer of the human condition, and that his teachings were not just right but were *the best way to live*.

It wasn't until I started to dabble in minimalism (more on that in a bit) and it immediately unleashed a flood of joy and peace in my life that I started to take Jesus' teachings on money seriously. I can still remember the afternoon where it hit me like a freight train: Jesus was *right*.

Daaaaang...

This is actually a better, freer way to live.

At the time this was a shockingly virgin idea for me, full confession.

Then I started to question all the assumptions of my culture. I took Tyler Durden's advice: "Reject the basic assumptions of civilization, especially the importance of material possessions." (And, yes, that was a quote from *Fight Club*.)³⁰

I started asking myself questions the secret police of advertising would disappear me for:

- What if the formula "more stuff equals more happiness" is bad math?
- What if more stuff often just equals more *stress*? More hours at the office, more debt, more years working in a job I don't feel called to, more time wasted cleaning and maintaining and fixing and playing with and organizing and reorganizing and updating all that junk I don't even need.
- What if more stuff actually equals *less* of what matters most? Less time. Less financial freedom. Less generosity, which according to Jesus is where the real joy is. Less peace, as I hurry my way through the mall parking lot. Less focus on what life is actually about. Less mental real estate for creativity. Less relationships. Less margin. Less prayer. Less of what I actually ache for?

- What if I were to reject my culture's messaging as a half-truth at best, if not a full-on lie, and live into another message? Another gospel?

Jesus and the "evil" eye

For all the flack that pastors get for talking about money too much (a lot of which is well deserved), Jesus actually had a ton to say on the subject.

Let's take a closer look at Matthew 6 and his most in-depth teaching on the subject in the so-called Sermon on the Mount. Interestingly, it takes up about 25 percent of the sermon.

First Jesus said this:

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.³¹

Basically: don't invest all your time and energy (and money) in things that get old and rust and go out of style and can be snatched from the back of your car if you park too far from the streetlamp. Instead: put your life into things that matter, like your relationship with God and life in his kingdom. Because where you put your resources is where you put your heart. It's the steering wheel to your engine of desire.

Then:

The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. 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!³²

If you're thinking, *Wait, what does optometry have to do with money?* this is a first-century idiom that's lost on our modern ears. In Jesus' day, if people said you had a "healthy" eye, it had a double meaning. It meant that (1) you were focused and living with a high degree of intentionality in life, and (2) you were generous to the poor. When you looked at the world, you saw those in need and did your best to help out. An "unhealthy" eye (or as the King James Version has it, an "evil" eye) was the exact opposite. When you looked out on the world, you were distracted by all that glitters and lost your focus on what really matters. In turn, you closed your fist to the poor.

Then Jesus took it over the finish line:

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.³³

Again, cannot, not should not.

For Jesus it's a non-option. You cannot serve God and the system.³⁴ You simply can't live the freedom way of Jesus *and* get sucked into the overconsumption that is normal in our society. The two are mutually exclusive. You have to pick.

And if you're on the fence about it, as I was for years, the next line from Jesus was the clincher for me:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life.³⁵

Notice how Jesus connected money and stuff to *worry*.

You see that?

The word “therefore” is the key. It ties together three short teachings on money and stuff to one long teaching on worry (go read the end of Matthew 6 for the full version). Basic point? We worry about what we worship. If you worship money, it will eat you alive.

Who wants that?

Basically nobody.

Now we’re ready: simplicity

Is there a way off this merry-go-round from Gehenna? A practice from the life and teachings of Jesus to break free of the soul-draining habits of Western materialism and live into the reality of how life actually works?

That’s a leading question. Of course there is. This practice is called simplicity, but it goes by a few other names:

Simple living—that’s a bit clearer, which is nice.

Frugality—this is what the monks called it, but that word has lost all positive connotations, so I avoid it.

Minimalism—more recently, this is what a number of bloggers and writers have been calling a secularized version of the ancient practice, updated for the wealthy Western world. I like it.

For this chapter, I’ll use simplicity and minimalism interchangeably.

To get started, what exactly *is* it?

Well, let’s start with what it’s *not*.

First, it’s not a style of architecture or design.

A lot of people hear the word “minimalism” and think of a modern home with angular design, high-end furniture, a black-and-white palate, magazinesque neatness, and of course, no kids.

If you have OCD and are a clean-freak, perfectionistic architecture enthusiast like me with an odd taste for monastery meets MoMA, you get excited by that.

Most don’t.

But hey, good news: you don’t have to be into modern design to be a minimalist. You can dig California-Spanish revival or *Kinfolk*-earthy chic or ’80s video-game arcade with a touch of Boba Fett—whatever your style is. That’s great.

Secondly, it isn’t poverty. It isn’t a bare home, an empty closet, a joyless life with no freedom to enjoy material things. The whole goal is exactly the opposite—*more* freedom.

Again: a lot of people hear *minimalism* and think of Steve Jobs's house—an empty living room with nothing but a chair and lamp in it.

(Hey, at least it was an Eames Lounge Chair in walnut. The man had *taste*.)

Minimalism isn't about living with *nothing*; it's about living with *less*.

Thirdly, minimalism isn't about organizing your stuff. Cleaning out the garage every spring. Cleaning out your closet for the ninth time. Making a run to Target to buy twenty plastic bins and a label gun.³⁶

God bless Marie Kondo, her work is great, but I would argue that “organizing” is antithetical to minimalism. If you have so much stuff that you have to organize it, box it up, label it, and stack it in a way that cuts down on space, then the odds are you have too much stuff!

(Unless you live in a tiny apartment in San Francisco or New York, in which case you get a pass.)

What if you had only what you needed, and there wasn't anything to organize? There's an idea worth chasing down.

Well, then, what *is* minimalism? Or simplicity, or whatever label you prefer? Here are a few definitions I find helpful.

Joshua Becker, a follower of Jesus and former pastor who now writes about minimalism full time, defined it these ways:

The intentional promotion of the things we most value and the removal of everything that distracts us from them.³⁷

Another fine definition comes from Richard Foster and Mark Scandrette:

“Simplicity is an inward reality that can be seen in an outward lifestyle”³⁸ of “choosing to leverage time, money, talents and possessions toward what matters most.”³⁹

Notice that minimalism isn't just about your money and stuff; it's about your whole life. As Thoreau joyfully said after going off into the woods for a multiyear experiment in simple living:

Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand.... Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life?⁴⁰

See how he connects the dots between simplicity and hurry? Perceptive.

To live this way, we have to pare down *all* our resources, both time and money. As Saint Francis de Sales, bishop of Geneva, once said, “In everything, love simplicity.”⁴¹ I love that—in *everything*.

The goal isn't just to declutter your closet or garage but to declutter your *life*. To clear away the myriad of distractions that ratchet up our anxiety, feed us an endless stream of mind-numbing drivel, and anesthetize us to what really matters.

To keep the definitions coming, here are a few one-liners for clutter:

Anything that does not add value to my life.⁴²

Anything that does not “spark joy.”⁴³

Too much stuff in too small a space,...anything that we no longer used or loved, and...anything that led to a feeling of disorganization.⁴⁴

The goal here is to live with a high degree of intentionality around what matters most, which, for those of us who apprentice under Jesus, is Jesus himself and his kingdom.

If you're a bit cynical and you're currently thinking, *Isn't this just for rich people?*

Well, yes.

Poor people don't call it simple living; they just call it *living*. They don't read books on minimalism; they pray for justice.

But if you're reading this book, the odds are very high that you're not poor. Again, and with zero guilt trip, to put things in perspective, if you make \$25,000 a year or more, you're in the top 10 percent of the world's wealth. And if you make \$34,000 a year or more, you're in the top 1 percent.⁴⁵

Listen to Paul's command to the rich in Ephesus:

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain....

Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.

In 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.⁴⁶

This was Paul riffing on Jesus' teaching from Matthew 6. See the quote in there? And he was saying the same thing Jesus did: simplicity is actually the way we reach out and grasp the "life that is truly life."

I read this verse for years and thought it was about somebody *else*. I know a few rich people; I figured this verse was about them. Not about me. I grew up thoroughly middle class. We had a home, which was a gift, but our vacations were camping or staying at my grandparents' cabin. My clothing was never name brand. I remember getting mercilessly mocked in grade school for my ugly shoes. We rarely ate out. So I just never thought of myself as wealthy.

I also grew up hopelessly out of touch not only with global poverty but also with the way that many people, especially people of color, are living right here in our own country.

But even if I *weren't* rich (which, turns out, I am), I'm not off the hook; most of Jesus' teachings on money weren't to rich people. In fact, the majority of his audience was likely poor.

Think about Jesus. Simplicity is a practice that's entirely based on his life. Myth-busting time: Jesus wasn't nearly as poor as many people claim. Before he became a rabbi, he was a tradesman, likely making a living wage. Once he started teaching full time, he was supported by a group of wealthy donors (mostly upper-class women) who paid for his food and travel expenses.⁴⁷ He even needed one of his disciples to manage the budget (of course, that didn't turn out too well, but...). He was friends with both the rich and the poor, but there are lots of stories about him eating and drinking at the home of one of his rich friends, so much so that the gospel writers admit he was accused of being a "glutton and a drunkard."⁴⁸ Even at the cross the Roman soldiers cast lots for his garments, meaning they were worth something. John even wrote, "This [under]garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom."⁴⁹

In Jesus' life and teaching we see the very same tension that runs all the way through the library of Scripture: on the one hand, the world and everything in it are "very good" and meant to be enjoyed and shared with those in need.

On the other hand, too much wealth is dangerous. It has the potential to turn our hearts away from God. When that happens, our greedy, off-kilter hearts wreak havoc not only on our own lives, sabotaging our happiness, but more importantly on others', widening the gap between rich and poor and doing damage to the earth itself.

We see Jesus happily living in that tension. Enjoying a good meal in a friend's home one minute and warning about what money can do to your heart the next.

To be fair, in that tension Jesus clearly sided with minimalism over materialism. No question. As Richard Foster noted, "a carefree unconcern for possessions" is what "marks life in the kingdom."⁵⁰ And Jesus put on display this "carefree unconcern" so incredibly well.

To follow Jesus, especially in the Western world, is to live in that same tension between grateful, happy enjoyment of nice, beautiful things, and simplicity. And when in doubt, to err on the side of generous, simple living.

The practice

So, you ready to get started?

One of my favorite things about Jesus as a teacher is how he regularly ended his teachings with small, creative practices to live out his heady ideas about the kingdom of God.⁵¹ Let's do that.

First we'll hit on some principles, then the practice itself. Note: these are principles, not rules; this is about more freedom, not more rules. Here are my top twelve.

1. Before you buy something, ask yourself, What is the true cost of this item?

Back to the motorcycle example: Think about what it will cost to clean, repair, maintain, insure, finance, etc. the item. It's more than just the ticket price. Can you actually afford it? How much time will it cost me to own this? How often will I use it? Will it add value to my life and help me enjoy God and his world even more? Or just distract me from what really matters?

Finally, measure *hurry*. What will this do to the pace of my life? Speed it up or slow it down?

2. Before you buy, ask yourself, By buying this, am I oppressing the poor or harming the earth?

We all know that the level at which Americans consume is doing great harm to the earth. Scientists argue it would take something like five earths for everyone on the planet to live with the same ecological footprint as the average American.⁵² Think of something as common as polyester, which is now in a startling 50 percent of our clothes and is non-biodegradable. That cute athletic-wear outfit? It will *always* exist, in a landfill. FOREVER.

Some of us care deeply about environmental issues; others, not so much. Fine. But the earth isn't the only victim of our overconsumption.

A few years ago I was shocked and deeply disturbed when I learned about the dark underbelly of globalization. I had no clue that a huge chunk of the items in my home and life were made unjustly, if not with full-on human trafficking and child labor.

Take the garment industry for example, which has radically changed since the mad men-era. In the 1960s, 95 percent of our clothes were made in America, and Americans spent on average 10 percent of their annual budget on clothing and owned very few items.

Today only 2 percent of our clothing is made in the US, and we spend only around 4 percent of our annual budgets on it—a decrease of 500 percent. How did our clothing get so cheap? Well, multinational corporations started making our clothes in places like Vietnam and Bangladesh, where government corruption is rife and officials do little or nothing to stop the victimization of workers. Things like minimum wage, health care, and unions are alien. Workers are likely to work six to seven days a week in a sweltering factory, often in unsafe conditions with little or no protection.⁵³

And we're talking about *a lot* of people here. One in six people in the world work in the garment industry. That's just south of 1.5 billion people. For those who care about feminism, approximately 80 percent of those workers are women. *Fewer than 2 percent of them make a living wage.*

No wonder we call a cheap item a “steal.” That's exactly what it is. Theft. And we're no Robin Hood stealing from the ultra-rich CEO that we love to villainize; we're more likely stealing from a single mother in Burma just trying to take care of her family.

It's easy to post something on Instagram about how there are twenty-eight million slaves in the world today and we need to #endit. That's great; I'm all for it, genuinely. But many of the clothes we're wearing for our selfie (that we took on a device made in rural China) are *causing* it, not ending it.

As much as I want to believe slavery is a thing of the past, what were most African American slaves doing? Farming cotton. For clothes.

3. Never impulse buy.

It's amazing how much money we blow spur of the moment just because we see a new pair of shoes that we “have to have.”

Even though we already have ten pairs of shoes.

Even though we don't have an outfit that even goes with them.

Even though they were made unjustly with polyester that will live on FOREVER in a landfill.

Etc., etc.

It's also amazing that when I exercise self-control and *don't* buy an item, often the desire quickly passes.

As a general rule when you see an item you want, just sit on it for a while. The larger the item, the longer you should wait. Think it over. Give your rational mind time to catch up to your irrational flesh. Pray over it. Remember, God isn't against stuff; he made the world for you to enjoy, and it's beautiful. But if a purchase doesn't have his blessing on it, do you really want it in your life?

You'll be shocked at how good it feels to *not* buy something.

4. When you do buy, opt for fewer, better things.

Often, in an attempt to save money, we end up buying a lot of cheaply (and often unjustly) made items instead of living without for a while and then buying a quality item that will last. “Buy it once” is a great motto to live by. If you can’t afford the high-end version, consider used. Either way, in the end you’ll save money. And if Jesus was right and all our money is actually God’s money and we’re just his money managers, then that’s a good route.

Still, before you go out and buy some high-quality thing, always ask yourself, *Do I actually need this?*

The English designer William Morris offered a good rule of thumb: “Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.”⁵⁴

Remember, the world is constantly asking, “How do I get more?” But the apprentice of Jesus is regularly found asking, “How can I live with less?”

5. When you can, share.

The sharing economy has its downsides, but it’s great for simple living. Apps like Lyft and car-sharing services like car2go make it easy to get around cities without owning a car. Vacation rental sites like VRBO make it easy to enjoy the beach without owning a beach house. Not to mention life in community. I share all sorts of things with my community. Why buy a power washer? Matt has one.

As one early church father said, “We hold everything in common except our wives.”⁵⁵

Too good.

6. Get into the habit of giving things away.

Remember Jesus on the subject of reality: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” It feels good to put on a new T-shirt, for sure, but it’s incredibly life giving to help a child climb out of poverty or just help out a friend in a tough stretch.

Want a more blessed life? Give. Generously. Regularly.

When I first got into minimalism, my favorite part was giving away things I didn’t need to people who could actually use them.

Since then our family has established a little “blessing fun” in our monthly budget. It’s not much, but it’s enough to keep an eye out for people with needs and have a heck of a lot of fun playing Secret Santa.

Less shopping means more money to share, which in turn means a more blessed life.

7. Live by a budget.

It’s kind of bizarre to even put this on a list, but I’m shocked at how many people don’t have a budget.

A budget is far more than a way to stay out of debt, as vital as that is. A budget is to your money what a schedule is to your time. It’s a way to make sure that your “treasure” is going to the right place and not getting squandered.

There are all sorts of great resources for doing a budget Jesus’ style, but the key is to actually do it.⁵⁶ And then, if you’re up for it, share your budget with your community or a close friend. Each year Matt (of power-washer fame)

and I redo our budgets together. He has mine; I have his. We can speak into each other's spending habits at any time. We also put a rule in place where we have to get approval for any purchase over a thousand dollars.

Ironically, since we implemented that rule, I haven't had to use it.

8. Learn to enjoy things without owning them.

One quirk of our culture is we think we need to own something to enjoy it. We don't. I deeply enjoy the park down the street from my house. And our local library and the books I get from it. And sitting in Heart Coffee on Twelfth, where the price of admission to stellar design in the heart of downtown is two dollars, for which I also get an excellent cup of Guatemala Rosma. I don't own any of these things. But I enjoy them. So can you.

9. Cultivate a deep appreciation for creation.

Speaking of enjoying things that are free, have you been outside recently? Last I checked, oxygen was still free and a state park was within a short drive. Creation—especially places that are yet untouched by civilization—has the potential to wake us up to our Creator in ways that few things ever can. It invokes gratitude and that secular unicorn, wonder. If materialism despiritualizes us, the material world itself has the opposite effect; it respiritualizes our souls.

10. Cultivate a deep appreciation for the simple pleasures.

The older I get, the more I enjoy the simple things—a cup of coffee or tea in the morning, a home-cooked meal with my family, riding my bike to work on a summer day. These experiences usually cost very little, yet they pay huge dividends of happiness.

Every evening stroll, every sunrise, every good conversation with an old friend is a potential portal to the grateful, joyful enjoyment of life in God's world.

This posture of living says less about our income and more about our relationship to time and the kind of attention we give to God and the goodness of his world.

There's a reason that the teacher in *Ecclesiastes*, at the height of his ostentatious wealth, said, "A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil."⁵⁷

It's the little things, ya know?

11. Recognize advertising for what it is—propaganda. Call out the lie.

As my favorite Quaker so provocatively said, "Refuse to be propagandized by the custodians of modern gadgetry."⁵⁸

This one is actually *fun*. One of the few times where sarcasm feels Jesusy to me. I love to turn this into a game with my kids. When we see an ad, we stop and call out the lie.

See that ad for a new Volvo? The model couple driving off into the Norwegian fjord? Ha. Good one. As if buying that car will make us look like models. The *truth* is...

Parenting is a lot of fun.

12. Lead a cheerful, happy revolt against the spirit of materialism.

It was said of Saint Francis and his band of followers that they “led a cheerful, happy revolt against the spirit of materialism.”⁵⁹ They saw spreading Jesus’ message of simplicity as one and the same with spreading his message of joy. You don’t have to be grouchy about it or all uptight over how many socks you own. Just smile, relax, and let joy be your weapon in the fight.

We often hear, “Less, but better.”

But what if less *is* better?

This is the message our culture so desperately needs to hear.

I say it’s time for a revolution. Who’s with me?

Getting started

Here’s a good place to start simplifying: your closet. The odds are, even if you’re a dirt-poor college student (the irony of that statement...), you have a closet. And most of us have *way* too many clothes.

The first time I went through my closet, I decided to limit my wardrobe to six outfits per season. One for every day of the week, with Sunday as a choose-your-own-adventure day. I literally had an outfit schedule on the inside of my closet door. If you saw me on Monday, I was wearing my gray sweatshirt and black jeans.

A year later I did it again. On round two I realized a different outfit every single day is kind of ridiculous. By then I also was aware of the injustice of the fashion industry, which made buying new clothes a total pain in the neck.

So I cut it in half and went down to three outfits per season. Now I was wearing my gray sweatshirt on Mon-Wed-Fri. I loved it.

Recently I went down to two for summer. I alternate every other day, and it feels *great*. I love each outfit. They were both ethically made and environmentally sourced. And for the first time I can ever remember, I have extra money in my clothing budget and no need to spend it. Or desire to.

I feel free.

Now, I’m just assuming that most of us have way too much stuff lying around our homes or apartments. I get that’s not true for everybody.

The key is to start wherever the growth edge is for you. If that’s your closet and twenty pairs of shoes, cool, start there. If it’s your ’80s G.I. Joe collection, start there. If it’s a fetish for coffee mugs, you know what you need to do.

Remember: the question we should be constantly asking as followers of Jesus isn’t actually, What would Jesus do? A more helpful question is, What would Jesus do *if he were me*? If he had my gender, my career, my income, my relationship status? If he was born the same year as me? Lived in the same city as me?

What would that look like?

To follow Jesus is to ask that question until our last breath.

The cost of contentment

In closing, let's be fair: simplicity isn't "the answer" to the hurry of our modern world. (No silver bullet, remember?) But it is *an* answer. Even an easy one. Just get rid of the crap you don't need. But it's not a *cheap* answer. Ironically, it will cost you.

As Dallas Willard so astutely pointed out, the cost of discipleship is high, but the cost of non-discipleship is even *higher*.⁶⁰

Yes, it will cost you to follow Jesus and live his way of simplicity. But it will cost you far more *not* to. It will cost you money and time and a life of justice and the gift of a clean conscience and time for prayer and an unrushed soul and, above all, the "life that is truly life."

I've been thinking about Paul's line in Philippians lately:

I can do all things through [Christ] who strengthens me.⁶¹

I hear people tear that line out of context all the time. They use it for raising money at the church or getting that promotion or beating cancer or raising a family. All good things. But do you know what Paul was writing about in context?

Contentment.

The line right before that is as follows:

I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. 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.⁶²

In context, Paul wasn't writing about overcoming some allegorical Goliath in our lives; he's writing about one of the greatest enemies of the human soul, before and after Edward Bernays: discontentment. That nagging feeling of always wanting *more*. Not just more stuff, but more *life*. The next thing might not be a thing at all; it might be graduation or marriage or children or a better job or retirement or whatever "it" is for you on the horizon.

But there's always something *just* out of reach. We live with what the historian Arthur Schlesinger called an "inextinguishable discontent."⁶³ It's what the poet of *Ecclesiastes* described as "a chasing after the wind."⁶⁴

Contentment isn't some Buddhist-like negation of all desire; it's living in such a way that your unfulfilled desires no longer curb your happiness. We all live with unfulfilled desires. In this life all our symphonies remain unfinished. But this doesn't mean we can't live happy.

The truth is you can be happy right here, right now, "through Christ who strengthens me," meaning, through investing your resources in ongoing relational connection to Jesus. You can live a rich and satisfying life whether you are rich or poor, single or married, infertile or counting the days until your four kids are out of the house, crushing it at your dream job or at a minimum wage J.O.B. Right now you have everything you need to live a happy, content life; you have access to the Father. To his loving attention.

Who would have thought it's that easy of a yoke?