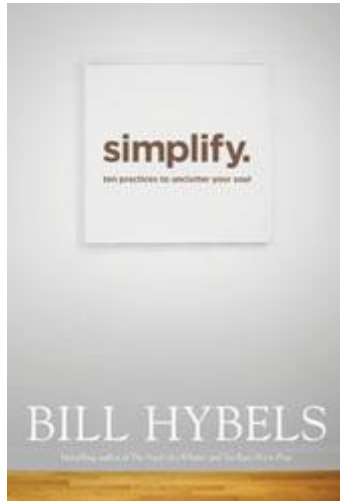


Simplify

TEN PRACTICES TO UNCLUTTER YOUR SOUL

Curriculum Sermons
Four Sessions



Session

1

Streamline Your Schedule

Who Do You Want to Become?

OPENER ▶ THIRTY HOURS OF LEISURE

A few years ago, a staff writer for the *Washington Post* was asked to participate in a work group tasked with studying the newspaper reading habits of the *Post*'s target demographic. Wanting to better understand how people make use of their minutes and hours each day, the writer placed a phone call to University of Maryland sociologist John P. Robinson, who is considered the father of time-use studies in the United States.

The reporter hoped to validate her work group's assumption that the reason for the decline in newspaper sales and online viewership was that people just didn't have time to read the paper anymore. People were *far too busy* for that.

But Professor Robinson *didn't* validate that assumption. Instead, he told the writer that her team's conclusion *couldn't* be accurate, given that people today, in twenty-first-century North America—you, and me, and all the would-be readers of the *Washington Post*—have upwards of *thirty hours of leisure time each week*.

The writer was incredulous. *Thirty hours of leisure time each week?* What planet did Mr. Robinson reside on? Certainly not Earth.

On *this* planet, we have deadlines.

On *this* planet, we have to-do lists.

On *this* planet, we have obligations and meetings and projects to complete.

We have laundry to fold. Lawns to mow. Dogs that need to be walked.

We have places to go. People to meet. Things to do. Twitter feeds to check.

Here on planet Earth, we are *busy*.

Thirty hours of leisure time a week. Yeah, right. Talk about a *preposterous* thing to say.

But then, there've been other preposterous things said along the way. Like this: You can have life that is *truly life*, and you can have it in *abundance*.

Or this: Whatever your burdens are, you can lay them down. You can pick up freedom and peace in exchange.

Preposterous, right?

How about this: For every six days you work, you can take the seventh one off. You can actually *do nothing*, for an entire, twenty-four-hour span.

Or this: If your soul is weary, it can be replenished. If you're feeling deflated, you can abound in hope.

Replenished? Abounding in hope? At rest and at peace, in the deepest parts of who we are?

Preposterous!

Who would say such crazy things!

Before we go any further today, let's first pray to the one who did.

OPENING PRAYER ▶ EYES TO SEE, AND REALLY SEE

Heavenly Father, we know *you* are the one who said these seemingly preposterous things. And how grateful we are, as your people today, that you actually meant every word you said. Teach us today. Instruct us in your mind-blowing, countercultural ways, so that we may be people of rest—of quiet spirits, gentle words, peaceful lives. People of profound spiritual and emotional leisure.

We love you. We love your Word. Give us eyes to see *and really see* truth today. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

SETUP ▶ OUR SERIES, AND A STORY

Today we begin a four-part series on how to *simplify* our too-busy lives and how to *unclutter* our souls. What we're after here are not just cleaner closets or a more efficient use of our morning commute. No, what we're hoping for are straightened-out *souls*—souls in which space has been cleared for the Holy Spirit to live and breathe and work.

Bill Hybels penned the curriculum that our church will be going through over the course of these four weeks, and as he explains it, the reason he devoted himself to studying the subject of *busyness* in modern culture is that he noticed a trend. When he asked people how they were doing—as we do in normal, everyday conversation—the typical response included one or more of the following three statements:

“I'm *exhausted*.”

“I'm *overwhelmed*.”

“I'm *overscheduled*.”

It wasn't that he heard this type of response every now and then; he heard it *nearly all the time*.

Busyness had evidently become an epidemic, and Bill knew that the trend must be reversed—both for the sake of God's Kingdom agenda and for the sake of our own too-busy souls.

Bill tells the story of a crisis he narrowly avoided many years ago, when his ministry was just getting off the ground. In those days, as is often the case with a new business or a new initiative, Bill lived each day as if his hair was on fire. He was constantly racing from obligation to obligation—meetings and planning sessions, kids' sporting events, fund-raising dinners, and more. One evening, just as he pulled out of his driveway to head to an elders' meeting at church, something—or Someone—told him to stop. He quickly moved his foot to the brake pedal and scanned his surroundings. Had he forgotten his paperwork? His Bible? His wife? Was she supposed to come with him tonight?

Seeing that he had everything he needed for the meeting, he glanced absentmindedly in his rearview mirror. And that's when he saw her: the young daughter of a neighbor, riding her pink tricycle right behind his car. This was before cars were equipped with backup cameras or other devices that automatically alerted you to any activity behind your vehicle. Bill exhaled as the reality sank in that, had he plowed ahead in his rush to get to church, he likely would have run over that little girl.

That day, speed would have killed.

Speed *does* kill, doesn't it?

It is my conviction that the speed of our lives is killing us. Maybe not physically—although don't get me started on the health ailments we as a society suffer from, in direct relation to the stress load we choose to carry. But emotionally? Financially? Relationally? Professionally? *Spiritually*? Speed is not our friend.

What is speed killing in *your* life? Where in your life are you gasping for breath or struggling to survive?

Quality time with your husband or wife doesn't happen when you're moving too fast.

Sound business decisions don't get made when you're moving too fast.

Admirable money management doesn't happen when you're blowing and going all the time.

Meaningful connections with God: How can you make those when you're buzzing in and out of his presence, more desirous of a spiritual tune-up than of a significant encounter with him?

PASTOR'S PERSONAL ILLUSTRATION ▸

[Pastor: Tell of a time when you sensed that your priorities or pace of life caused you to lose something meaningful to you. Perhaps you made a hasty buying decision that cost you for years thereafter. Or maybe you signed up for a high-capacity role that in the end crippled your effectiveness as a parent or spouse. The point of this illustration is to resonate with the theme "speed kills" and to validate the felt need for a means of slowing down and taking stock.]

TRANSITION ▸ SEEING OUR LIFE'S CHAOS FOR WHAT IT IS

It's humbling for me to admit that, on more than a few occasions, I've allowed my life to descend into sheer chaos, as a result of the decisions I've made along the way. But part of what compels me to share these things is that I know I'm not the only one struggling to live a simplified life. As I talk with people throughout the week, I see and hear a lot. For many of you—by your own admission—chaos reigns supreme in your world; things feel as if they're spinning right out of control.

You're working seventy or eighty hours a week and saying it's "just a season," even as you see no end in sight.

You're behind on nearly every bill. . . . Ever-higher debt is your monthly norm.

You're too scattered and scheduled and just plain tired to have an unhurried conversation with your kids.

You keep gaining more and more weight, and you know that the culprit is stress.

The list goes on, but I've got good news for you, friends: *Jesus offers us a brand-new list.*

We're back to those "preposterous things" we talked about earlier, aren't we? Things like, "You can abound in hope" and "You can live lives of peace." The list Jesus offers us says we can be *victorious*. We can know *abundance*. We can live lives that aren't *out of control*.

Instead of being exhausted, overwhelmed, and overscheduled, we can be rested, confident, and well-paced.

I know this seems preposterous, given how hyper-obligated and road-weary we feel. I know it seems *unbelievable*. But God says, "Believe it. It's true."

BIBLE TEXT ▸ EXODUS 33

Turn in your Bible to Exodus 33:7-23, our text for today. You'll find these verses up on the screens as well. *[Pastor: Adjust these directions as necessary.]* Follow along as I read:

Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the "tent of meeting." Anyone inquiring of the LORD would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp. And whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose and stood at the entrances to their tents, watching Moses until he entered the tent. As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the LORD spoke with Moses. Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshiped, each at the entrance to their tent. The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent.

Moses said to the LORD, “You have been telling me, ‘Lead these people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, ‘I know you by name and you have found favor with me.’ If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people.”

The LORD replied, “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

[This promise is central to our discussion today. We’ll come back to it in a moment.]

Then Moses said to him, “If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?”

And the LORD said to Moses, “I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.”

Then Moses said, “Now show me your glory.”

And the LORD said, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.”

Then the LORD said, “There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.”¹

By way of context, the reason for this little exchange between Moses and God is that God had asked Moses to fill a particular leadership position for him. God wanted his people to build a tabernacle—a dwelling place—where his presence could abide, and he thought Moses should head up this project.

Now, the grooming process for this role had been unfolding for quite some time. The scene I read to you just now happened *after* God protected Moses when Moses was a baby. Remember the baby-in-the-basket story? The leader of Egypt, Pharaoh, in a move to exterminate the Jewish population of the day, ordered the killing of all male babies at birth. Moses’ mom defied the Pharaoh’s orders and instead hid Moses in a basket among the reeds along the edge of the Nile River. Moses was found by the Pharaoh’s daughter and wound up being raised as a member of the royal household.

This conversation between Moses and God also happened *after* Moses had grown incensed with the slavish treatment of his fellow Israelites by the cruel Egyptians and had allowed his anger to spill over to the point that he took the life of one of the slave drivers, and then fled in shame to Midian.

This conversation happened *after* Moses received his call to ministry—when he saw God in the form of a burning bush that was not consumed.

It happened *after* Moses was informed by God that he—Moses—would be the vessel God would use in delivering his people from bondage and oppression.

After Moses’ intense struggle with the Pharaoh—“Let my people go!” remember?

After the ten plagues that finally caused Pharaoh to concede.

After the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea.

After the divine handing-down of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai.

After God made a covenant with his beloved people.

Moses had racked up quite a bit of experience with his heavenly Father, and now, here in chapter 33 of Exodus, he has just one question for God: *Will your presence still be with me?*

Moses had devoted his entire life to following God, to going God's way at every turn. He hadn't followed *perfectly*—but *faithfully*? That he had done. And now here he was, facing perhaps the most significant leadership challenge of his life, erecting a dwelling place for the Most High God, and yet he sensed that the very same God who had been so faithful down through the years was trying to slip out undetected through a side door.

"I've gone your way all this time, and still today I'm following you, wherever you choose to lead; and yet now you're going to ditch me? You're going to make me go it alone?"

Moses must have been enraged. Or, at a minimum, scared down to his toes. To think of accomplishing something this significant for God without having God there to direct his steps? He couldn't conceive of it! Hence the little chat he initiated with God.

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson renders verses 12 and 13 this way: "Moses said to GOD, 'Look, you tell me, "Lead this people," but you don't let me know whom you're going to send with me. You tell me, "I know you well and you are special to me." If I am so special to you, let me in on your plans. That way, I will continue being special to you. Don't forget, this is *your* people, your responsibility.'"²

In today's parlance, Moses was getting up in God's grille.

There's something here for us to glean. Actually, there are two things for us to take away from this exchange between a faithful follower and his God. The first is this: Go with God.

TAKEAWAY 1 ▶ GO WITH GOD

It should be striking to us, as we read the first part of today's text, that Moses was a man concerned more with God's will and ways than with his own. The text says that Moses spoke to God "face to face," as a man speaks with his friend. You don't achieve this level of intimacy on the fly. You don't breeze into the presence of the Almighty every few weeks, lob a few prayer requests his way, and expect to be considered his *friend*.

No, this type of relationship is *cultivated*. There is intention here. Investment. Depth.

So, we read that Moses set up a tent of meeting outside the Israelites' camp, where he received the people when they had questions about spiritual issues. Moses would enter the tent—sort of a precursor to the Tabernacle that God would later ask him to construct—and on behalf of his friends and peers, Moses would solicit input from heaven on how to deal with the problems of earth. We're not told the size of this tent, but we know the tent was symbolic; it reminded people that, because of their sin, they were estranged from a holy God. They didn't enjoy the type of intimacy with God that Moses enjoyed. Maybe, like some of us here today, they thought they had a better way. They thought they had a better plan. They thought the "will of God" was a little less intriguing than whatever their own self-will compelled them to do. And so they were kept at bay.

Maybe a few of those Israelites were soccer moms. They wanted to be close to God—or at least that's what they *said* they wanted—but with all those weekend tournaments their kids had to play in . . . when were they supposed to go to church?

Maybe some of those Israelites were business owners. Sure, it would be nice to serve—to volunteer to advise Moses on his leadership decisions or to help clean the tent of meeting from time to time—but when was that supposed to happen? With board meetings to attend and financials to explain and marketing initiatives to launch and . . . and . . . and . . . a person can only do so much.

Some of them may have been student athletes. Have you *seen* a student athlete's schedule? It would be wonderful to have discretionary energy to invest in mentoring at-risk kids or leading youth huddles at the community church up the road, but by the time a student athlete's obligations for the day are met, all that's on the mind is *sleep*.

I wonder if some of them were retirees. Yeah, maybe there was a little extra time on their hands, but what about golf? And bridge club. And plotting their escape to Florida.

I think some of them may have been twentysomethings, still struggling to sort out life. The idea of God was okay, but only if he could net them a date and a job.

The Israelites could have been single parents working three jobs to make rent, or double-income couples with more money than they could spend in good conscience, or anyone in between. They could have been paid ministers, people actually *compensated* to like the will of God. And yet for all of them . . . and for all of us . . . they liked their own way better than God's.

Is there anyone I haven't offended yet? I've even offended myself, I think.

I think Moses must have looked at that bunch of beloved ones—the Bible calls them that, you know: *beloved*—and absolutely fumed inside. Actually, we know this to be true. In chapter 32 of Exodus, the chapter right before the one we're looking at now, Moses came down from Mount Sinai with two stone tablets. Does anyone know what was on those stone tablets? Right. The Ten Commandments, etched by the very finger of God. Moses had just had this incredible moment with God the Father, during which God established a covenant relationship with his people, and when Moses goes down from that high place—literally and figuratively—guess what he finds when he re-enters the ranks of his people?

Idol worship.

Apparently, the people had gotten bored waiting for Moses to come back, and all manner of bedlam had ensued. The people—the beloved people of God—were drunk. They were having orgies. They were melting down their precious metals and forming idols out of them. All hell had broken loose—in fact, hell was literally having its way among the people whom God adored.

Upon seeing this eruption of chaos, the text says, Moses did four things. First, he smashed the tablets of the Law, which symbolized the breaking of the people's covenant with God. Second, he burned the idol—the golden calf—reduced it to powder, threw it out onto a body of water, and made the people drink the chalky mix. This, evidently, was to make the deviants suffer a little consequence from their grave sin. Third, he asked Aaron, who had been with the people the entire time, to give a full account of what had gone down. (Aaron had nothing useful to report. Despite his faithful companionship to Moses to that point, he himself had been the one to form the idol.)

And then fourth and finally, Moses cleaned house. He insisted that everyone who had been involved in the riotous acts step forward, and he proceeded to take off their heads. Exodus 32:28 says that three thousand of the Israelites—the beloved Israelites—died that day.

Moses had spent his life following hard after God. And now the people he'd been tasked to lead were following hard after their own wayward desires. The text says "his anger burned."³

He wasn't angry because the people weren't obeying the law.

He wasn't angry because the people weren't doing what he said to do.

He wasn't angry because this display of deviance was a bad PR move for Israel.

You want to know why he was angry?

He was angry because they'd *lost the plot*.

Moses burned in anger toward his own people because he knew that the intimacy he'd been enjoying with God was something his friends would never know. Not now, anyway, while they were insisting on going their own way.

Moses was mad because he wanted more for the people he loved.

If he were standing here today in our presence, I think he'd want more for us, too.

You know what I think he would tell us?

I think he'd say, "*Nothing* beats going with God."

If Moses were here with us today, I think he'd take this microphone and wander up and down our aisles. I think he'd say, "You—there in the blue shirt. How has God been faithful to you?"

He'd move up further and say, "You—with your five darling kids. How has God been faithful to you?" "You—in the red. God's faithfulness . . . can you speak to that in your life?"

“You—in the glasses. Surely God has been faithful to you.”

You. And you. And you. And you. And you. And you. And . . . me.

How has God been faithful, church? What stories would we tell?

In the same way that God protected the newborn baby Moses floating in a basket along the banks of the Nile River. In the same way that God provided for the adolescent Moses, a Jew in the Egyptian Pharaoh’s court. In the same way that God redeemed and restored and renewed and revived Moses all throughout his life—rebutting objections, squelching fears, calling out greatness, parting seas—*God has shown up for us.*

Hasn’t he? Hasn’t he done great things in our midst?

And yet we strike off into our daily lives, assuming he wants nothing to do with all that. We say *yes* to the soccer tournaments and the board meetings, to the endless errands and the “things we *have* to do,” all the while breezing right past the God who made us, who loves us, who, as the psalmist says, “delights in every detail of [our] lives.”⁴

I think Moses was so irritated back then—and would be irritated today as well—because he knows what we know deep down in our souls, which is that God’s faithfulness can’t be trumped. When we trust God with our lives, he is faithful. When we trust him with our days, he’s faithful there, too.

I think Moses would say, “You say you want to be close to God? Set up a tent of meeting for yourself. *Commune with God* frequently. Don’t let *anything* get in your way.”

I believe he’d say, “I know you think your way is better. But your own *testimony* proves that’s not true.”

First, we *go with God*. Nothing good happens when we go our own way. Next, we *let God go with us*. Like Moses, we refuse to go it alone.

TAKEAWAY 2 ▶ LET GOD GO WITH YOU

You’ve probably had the experience of facing a really important meeting—maybe it was with a doctor or with a prospective employer; with the bank you were trying to get a loan from or with the parents of the person you hoped to marry. [*Pastor: If you have a personal example of enlisting support before a critical meeting, insert the illustration here.*]

Whatever the case, I bet you enlisted the support of someone before you went. You may have even dragged that person with you: *I can’t do this alone!* But at a minimum, you probably called or texted and said something like, “Meeting’s in an hour. Prayers appreciated.”

What you were really saying to that loved one was, “This is a really big deal in my life, and it would feel less daunting if I knew I wasn’t alone.”

That is exactly what Moses was after. Here he was, about to lead a group of people—and a “stiff-necked people” at that, according to Scripture—through the process of building the dwelling place for God’s very presence. Talk about a really big deal in life! And as Moses faced that prospect—of getting it launched, of getting it done, of getting it right—I think he looked skyward and said to God, “I’ll do your will, heavenly Father, but only if you’re right by my side.”

You want to know what God said in response? Let’s put that verse back on the screen. [*Pastor: Adjust these directions as necessary.*] Moses says in Exodus 33:15, “If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here,” to which God replies—we’ve skipped to verse 17 now—“I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.”

Ahhh.

Doesn’t that response make you exhale? Doesn’t it *elicit deep longing* in your soul? To be found pleasing by God himself? To be known—*by name*—by him?

Can I tell you a secret today?

God is pleased with you, my friend.

God is *familiar* with your name.

This isn't like that cocktail party where some acquaintance who "knows you so well" introduces you as Joe when your name is John. No, no. This isn't at all like that. This is *intricate familiarity*. This is the stuff of family. Of intimacy. Of *love*.

God says, "You are my beloved. You are *known* to me. You are loved."

And we look at him and say . . . well, what will we say? Will we say, "Abba! Father! God, it is *you* alone I adore!"

Or will we say, "Pfff. I'm too busy for this lovey-dovey stuff."

Guess how he knows the posture of our hearts?

You got it: by the way we invest our lives.

We choose chaos.

Or we choose peace.

We choose madness.

Or we choose simplicity.

We choose our own deal.

Or we choose his.

We say, "I'm too busy for you, loving and gracious Father . . ."

Or we say, "I'll give you everything I've got . . . won't you please stay by my side?"

Oh, friends. *Insist* on going God's way. And *demand* that he stay by your side.

Lay down your burdens. Your to-do lists. Your projects to complete. Pick up freedom and abundance instead. Let him dictate the pace of your life, yes. But start by letting him dictate the pace of your *days*.

The American Journal of Physics ran an interesting story back in the early 1980s. Some of you weren't even born yet, God bless you. Yes, there was life on planet Earth back then. And one person who was alive was doing a cool study on the effect of small mass on big mass—in other words, how powerful can a chain reaction become?

The physicist in charge of the study decided to line up dominos—but these weren't ordinary dominos; they were increasingly larger in size. He started with a small one, a domino about the size of a SIM card—five millimeters high and about a millimeter thick. Then he added a dozen dominos to his chain, each domino one-and-a-half times larger than the previous one. Do the math and the thirteenth domino was more than a meter tall and weighed upward of one hundred pounds.

Using tiny metal forceps, the physicist carefully placed the smallest domino at the front of the line and gave a little push. In dramatic fashion, all thirteen dominos, right in sequence, fell with a resounding *crash*.

The physicist then explained that the study he had conducted was with thirteen dominos, but if he had expanded the study to include *twenty-nine* units, the final domino would have been as tall as the Empire State Building.

That's a tall building, friends. Anyone remember how tall? With its spire, it's nearly 1,500 feet. And yet that teeny-teeny five-millimeter SIM-card-size domino would have laid it flat on its back.

Big things are affected by little things. Big changes start with little changes. Uncluttering your life begins with uncluttering your days.

So what am I asking? I'm asking that here and now, starting this week, you begin to *measure your days*.

Many of us, I think, approach our days with panic rising in our chests as we ask ourselves, *What do I absolutely have to get done today, and how on earth am I going to do it?* But this week, instead of taking the normal approach, I'm suggesting that you start with a different question: *Who do I wish to become?*

When God asked Moses to be a leader, a deliverer for his people, that's who God wanted him to become. So, for Moses, "going with God" meant to prioritize that goal.

Deliverer. For his people. That's what Moses was all about.

For you and me, here in twenty-first-century North America, our answer to the question of who God wants us to become probably isn't "*deliverer of the nation.*"

But it could be "devoted husband."

Or "grateful employee."

It could be "financially responsible young adult." Or "better listener." Or "kinder parent." Or "someone who forgives easily."

I don't know the specifics of what it will mean for you to "let God go with you." What I do know is that, like Moses, when we choose to go with God, there will be adventure, divine protection, and the deep-seated sort of satisfaction that bubbles up when you're living life from the center of God's perfect will.

Who is God asking you to become?

Will you arrange your schedule around that?

This week—just for this one week—will you plan your days, not according to the demands of your to-do list, but according to the divine promptings of God?

If you've grown distant in your walk with Christ, will you schedule time for Bible reading and prayer—even fifteen minutes at the start of each day?

If your relationship with your spouse has morphed into a strictly logistical arrangement—who's dropping off the kids at soccer? who's traveling for work when? what's for dinner tonight?—will you carve out time this week to sit eyeball-to-eyeball and have a real conversation for a change?

If your money matters are keeping you up every night, and there is no relief in sight, will you swallow the pride pill this week and finally talk to a counselor or sign up for a class? [*Pastor: If your church offers classes such as Dave Ramsey's Financial Peace University, consider pointing the congregation to a website or other resource for more information.*]

If out-of-control health issues are affecting your ability to experience peace, will this be the week you finally say, "Enough!" and make a change?

I don't know what situation is keeping you from living a simplified life. But I'd venture to guess that you do. Certainly God does. And between the two of you—you and God—I imagine you'll sort it out. That is what this four-week series is about: sorting out the chaos that is keeping us from living with uncluttered souls.

In that spirit, I want to encourage those of you who have not yet joined a *Simplify* small group to do so today. Many, many people from our congregation have already confirmed their participation in these groups and are committed to simplifying their lives. I think you should do the same. We have tables set up in the lobby so that immediately following this service, you can get involved in a group beginning this week. [*Pastor: Adjust these instructions as necessary.*]

In the context of that small group, you will have an opportunity to delve deeper into these concepts and receive support for the journey, as you cast aside the chaos that's dragging you down.

CLOSER ▶ THE REST OF THE STORY

Well, in case you're wondering whatever happened to that *Washington Post* staff writer who called the brilliant time-use researcher John P. Robinson and was told that she—along with everyone else in the world—has thirty hours of leisure time a week, I'll give you the rest of the story.

Mr. Robinson took the writer to task and asked her to keep a thorough time log for an entire week, jotting down every *everything* she found herself doing, down to the most mundane of tasks. If she waited in line at the grocery store for ten minutes, she was told to write that down. If she plopped down in front of her laptop at the end of her day to decompress with Pinterest, she had to record that time. If she took a phone call and wound up chatting for twenty minutes, that time had to be logged.

Stuck in traffic?

On hold during a phone call with her bank?

Walking from one building to another at work?

Waiting for a cab or a bus?

All of those bursts of time had to be logged, according to Mr. Robinson's approach.

At the end of that week, the writer submitted her journal to Mr. Robinson, and guess what her efforts revealed? She had logged *twenty-seven hours* of leisure time, thus proving the researcher more right than wrong.

The time had been there all along; she'd just never had eyes to see it.

The time is here for you and me too, all that "leisure" time to invest as we wish. We just have to have eyes to see it, friends. We have to have God-given sight.

Scripture tells of a man who was blind but then was given eyes to see. Jesus and his disciples came to a town called Bethsaida, and villagers nearby who had heard of Jesus' miraculous ability to heal people and give them abundant life rushed up to him with their friend, who was blind. Mark 8 says they "begged Jesus" to touch their friend. They had faith that Jesus could heal him. They believed *to their toes* that their friend would someday see.

The text says that Jesus led the blind man by the hand outside the village—and then spat on the man's eyes. Can you imagine how shocking that would have been to the blind person? Then Jesus checked to see if the healing had stuck.

"Do you see anything?"⁵ Jesus asked him.

The blind man squinted and replied, "I see people. They look like trees walking around."⁶

Mark 8:25 says, "Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly."

I love that story! Seeing clearly is sometimes a process, isn't it, instead of just *bam!*—a one-time thing. But when we have faith that Jesus can heal us from the chaos that is ruling our lives, and when we believe *down to our toes* that someday we'll be able to see . . . I promise you you'll receive crystal-clear sight. God will give you eyes to see.

Do you want to see clearly the abundance, the rest, and the peace that God says are yours in Christ? Do you want to see all the spare time you presently have, that you could be investing in the wisest of ways? Do you want to see clearly the effect that all this busyness is having on you, so that you can start today to chart a new course? Do you?

I hope you do. I surely do. Let's ask for God's help as we start this week, for his strength to enable us to go simplicity's way.

CLOSING PRAYER ▶

[Pastor: Pray briefly that those listening will choose simplicity instead of chaos this week.]

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Session

2

Spend Wisely

Being Satisfied with Job and Money

OPENER ▶ THE ANVIL THAT TAKES US DOWN

Is anybody up for a joke this morning? This is an old Jay Leno joke, but it makes me laugh, so you're all going to have to tolerate a bad joke right out of the blocks today, all right? Actually, it's a good joke. It's a joke with a point, I promise.

Here goes.

Two guys are hunting, and they come upon a huge hole. One of the guys says, "Whoa. How deep is that?"

The other guy says, "I don't know. Let's see." He finds a rusty old anvil sitting nearby, drags it over, and heaves it into the hole. *Whiiiiiooooo*, the anvil whistles its way down the hole. The guys don't even hear it hit the bottom, the hole is so deep.

The next thing the hunters know, they hear a rapid *clippity-clap, clippity-clap, clippity-clap* approaching. A goat comes *flying* toward them, almost knocking them over. Before they can stop it, the goat soars into the air and falls right down into the hole.

A few seconds later, the hunters see an old geezer running toward them. "Becky!" the geezer is crying. "Beeeeeckyyy!"

The man reaches the hunters and says, "Hey! You fellers see a goat go by?"

The one hunter says, "Yeah! We did! Just now! The thing went by at like eighty miles an hour and jumped right into that hole!"

To which the old geezer says, "That's impossible. I had her chained to an anvil."

That's pretty good, right?

In all seriousness, can I let you in on a little secret? All joking aside, here's what I want to tell you today: We're more like Becky than we care to admit. The anvil that takes us down an impossibly deep hole? It's our work. And our money. A warped view of either, and we're goners, just like that goat.

SETUP ▶ SIMPLIFYING WORK AND MONEY

We're continuing our four-part series, called *Simplify*, today, which we launched last week. This week, we're talking about simplifying our lives on two key fronts: our working world and our finances. These fronts are intimately connected, aren't they? We work in order to earn money, and we can only spend the money our work has allowed us to earn.

In theory, anyway.

One of the reasons I say our money is like an anvil that sends us careening down a black hole is that, for too many of us, we refuse to live within the boundary lines that our earnings have drawn. Instead of learning to be content within the provision level God has provided, we say, "Nah. I think I know better what I need to buy, even if it means I go into debt."

For too many of us, that debt level has become debilitating. It is singlehandedly robbing us of peace and joy.

As it relates to our working world, I hear far too many stories inside our church of people discontented in their jobs. So, we'll also talk about how to evaluate your job's effectiveness, and how to make a change if the time has come to relaunch your career.

You've probably noticed that when you hate your job, all of life feels like drudgery. Similarly, when you're up to your eyeballs in debt, or when your spending is selfish and out of control, something in your soul always feels a little bit *off*. Or a *lot* off, as the case may be.

On the flip side of the coin, when we are thriving at work and when we are following God's principles for managing our finances, we find ourselves breathing deeply of the inner peace we so desperately crave.

Will you pray with me, as we dive in?

PRAYER ▶ WHERE FREEDOM IS FOUND

Father, I know that today's subject matter is sensitive, that when we talk about our work and our money, we're talking about very personal things. I'm grateful that you've gone before us in this conversation and that you're prepared to lead the way. We give your Spirit full leeway today, to shift our attitudes and assumptions, to empower us to change our habits and our plans, and to show us where true freedom is found, which always is in your will and your ways . . . and never in our human schemes.

We love you. We trust you. We welcome your presence here today.

PASTOR'S PERSONAL ILLUSTRATION ▶

[Pastor: Recently, Bill Hybels was asked by a friend to watch a movie about a stock broker who makes nearly every bad decision a man can make in life—as a means for Bill to understand the pressure on businesspeople in today's world. Bill watched the film, and he was devastated. In the movie, every time the main character had the opportunity to be honest (both to others and to himself), to be faithful, to be sober, or to be fair (to his family, to his employees, to the IRS, and so forth), he bucked it with the sort of egotism that always digs a person's own grave.

Bill said he felt like he needed to take a shower after seeing such deviance and deception portrayed on screen, and after having watched this man follow foolishness to its predictable end. It reminded him of the story of Solomon, who, despite being wise and beloved, decided to chase after worldly pleasures galore. We tend to fall into the same sort of trap, when we refuse to heed God's Word. As it relates to workplace satisfaction and responsibility in our financial world, it's especially important to hear from heaven, and to do exactly what God asks us to do.

In this personal illustration segment, either use Bill's story secondhand, as noted above, or else deliver a firsthand account of a time when you came face-to-face with what greed and selfishness form in a person, and with what rejecting God's ways always yields.]

TRANSITION ▶ THE USEFULNESS OF ALIGNMENT

What I'd like to do today is work our way through a series of *alignments* related to achieving satisfaction with both job and money.

Alignment is a useful thing. If you've ever driven a vehicle that is misaligned, you know how much effort it takes to overcome the car's tendency to pull to the left or to the right. You and I are sort of like that car: When we are living in alignment with God's purpose, we're able to track straight and true along the path God has laid out for us to walk. When we're living "out of alignment," we find ourselves veering off course. All throughout Scripture, we're encouraged to keep our feet on the path of righteousness, which means the path of right living, the path that honors God.

Today, let's look at nine alignments pertaining to work and money that help us to stay on that right path. If you've joined us in working our way through Bill Hybels's *Simplify* curriculum—the book and also the small-group experience—you will recognize these alignments as his. [*Pastor: Adjust this introduction as necessary.*] We'll begin with the alignments related to our finances.

PART ONE ▶ ALIGNMENT IN OUR FINANCES

The first alignment regarding our finances is this simple belief: *All I have comes from God.*

In our culture, we tend to be suckers for the rags-to-riches story. We love to hear of the young man who grew up in a rough neighborhood and overcame a thousand obstacles, eventually rising to become the CEO of a successful corporation. We give that kind of person lots of credit, lots of accolades, lots of press, lots of awards. But here's what we mustn't forget: When that guy takes the stage to receive his umpteenth award, what does he do? He thanks a whole *slew* of people. He thanks his mom, for persevering in raising four kids alone. He thanks his teachers and his high-school principal, who saw something special in him and worked to draw it out. He thanks his coaches and his mentors, who refused to quit on him even when he was about to quit on himself. He thanks all the people along the way who helped him rise above his circumstances and "make something of himself." But does he think to thank God for all his blessings?

If you and I are honest, we have a whole slew of people to thank too. Our parents, teachers, bosses, mentors, coaches, neighbors, extended family members, and friends all played a part in our being where we are today. And guess who was behind their investment? God. God knew you before you were born and has cared for you every step of the way. He has allowed helpful people to cross your path so that you, too, could rise above the challenges you faced.

In addition to placing helpful people around you, God has wired you with helpful gifts. He gave you capabilities. Talents. Insights. Specific bents that allow you to excel. He gave you educational opportunities and chances for development and growth.

He's also given you material possessions along the way, the "stuff" you own in life.

And what he asks for in return is that you use all these things for his good. He asks that you be *grateful* for all these marvelous things you have—your talents, your possessions, your network of friends and helpmates. He asks that you stop and say thanks.

People who are living in alignment financially are those who recognize that everything they have and all that they've become is a direct result of a loving heavenly Father. They know they aren't "self-made."

Here's a second alignment pertaining to our finances: *I live joyfully within God's current provision for my life.*

You want to know what kills financial alignment faster than anything else? *Discontentment.*

Discontentment says: "I don't have enough."

Discontentment says: "What I do have is not nice enough . . . or new enough . . . or big enough."

Discontentment says: "I want what she has."

Discontentment says: "I need what he has."

Discontentment says: "I *deserve* what she has."

Discontentment says: "I know I can't afford this, but I've already decided it's mine."

Discontentment says: "I worked hard to be able to buy nice things. And so I will."

Discontentment says: "Nobody else is going to take care of me but me."

Discontentment says: "Once I get this [house, car, article of clothing, vacation], I'll be happy."

Discontentment says: "I'm not asking for the world. I'm just asking for a little bit more."

You want to know what kills discontentment faster than anything else? *Contentment.* Any guess as to how we get to the place of contentment?

We practice *gratitude*.

We practice gratitude like it's our job. Because truthfully, according to Scripture, it *is* our job. First Thessalonians 5:18 says, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

Gratitude says, "Thank you." A million times, it says thanks. "Thank you for seeing my need, God, and for promising to provide."

Knowing that God is the true Provider, gratitude says, "I trust you."

Gratitude says, "What I have is enough."

Gratitude says, "What I have is big enough, new enough, sufficient for my real needs."

Gratitude says, "I don't have to live in want."

Gratitude says, "I don't have to covet what others have."

Gratitude says, "I don't have to keep up with the spending habits of others."

Gratitude says, "I refuse to go into debt to buy something I cannot afford."

Gratitude says, "God sees me. He cares for me. He provides."

Gratitude says, "I know that happiness comes only from God."

Gratitude says, "I'm simply a steward of all these resources."

Gratitude says, "I've trained myself to live with contentment."

God says, "Prove yourself faithful in the small things, so that in the big things you will be found faithful too."

Whatever your provision level today, insist on being content *right there*. Prove yourself faithful in this when nobody's looking. Strengthen contentment's muscles, and you'll be strong. [*Pastor: Insert a quick illustration of someone you know who lives with a grateful heart. How does gratitude simplify his or her world? What words would you use in describing the freedom he or she enjoys?*]

Here's the third financial alignment: *I honor God by giving the first tenth of all my earnings to his purposes in the world.*

If I had to recount every conversation with an individual or a couple that ended with "and then we started tithing, and *that one act of faith* changed *everything*," I couldn't do it. There have been far too many of those conversations. And I delight in every one. Show me someone who is faithful to give the first tenth of their earnings to God's work through the local church, and I will show you a person who has *radically* simplified life.

Not *any* tenth, but the *first* tenth.

Not 9 percent or 8 percent or 3, but the first *tenth*.

People who give the *first tenth* of their earnings to God's kingdom work have clean hands, light hearts, and easy sleep. Why? Because they are obeying the Scriptures. And because they are walking by faith. And because they are trusting God to do what God says only he can do.

Only God owns the cattle on a thousand hills.

Only God owns every beast in every forest.

Only God sustains *all* of creation by the simple act of his will.

Only God can feed thousands upon thousands with a few loaves of bread and two fish.

Only God can part waters and rescue an entire *nation* that is being chased.

Only God can raise a dead person to life again, able to walk and talk and thrive.

Only God can do the things you and I desperately need done for us . . . the stuff of miraculous multiplications and radical rescues and dead things coming to life. Isn't that true?

Who among us can't relate to having more debt than dollars at the end of a month? To staring down an unexpected expense and realizing there isn't enough money to cover it? To giving in and buying something unnecessary, despite funds already being tight?

We've all veered off course at one time or another. God says, "You can track true today." And the best place to start is with tithing. With declaring to yourself, your family, and your money that as for you and your house, *God is in charge*.

You want cool God-stories to tell, about how you achieved mastery over your finances? Give God your first 10 percent. Then stand back and see what he will do.

A fourth alignment: *I set aside a portion of all my earnings into a savings account for emergencies, for giving opportunities, and for my later years.*

After you give your first 10 percent to the church, take that second 10 percent and give it to yourself. You heard right: *Pay yourself*. Put that second 10 percent into a savings account of some sort, knowing that you'll absolutely need it someday.

Water heaters break.

Cars fall apart.

Medical emergencies arise.

Taxes increase.

There are thousands of ways that a "financial winter" may come to you, but I guarantee you this: *Winter will come*. The easy, breezy days of financial summertime don't last forever, friends. Winter is *going* to come.

But when it does, you can stay steady, knowing you've planned for it, you're ready, you're okay.

Pay yourself with the same discipline that you pay your tithe. Do it each time, on time, whether you're "in the mood" or not.

And finally, our fifth alignment related to our money: *I live each day with an open ear toward heaven, eager to respond to any whisper from God regarding my resources.*

This is where things get fun.

Bill Hybels tells the story of a morning when he was working on a sermon in a diner, and he noticed that his server—a woman—was having a rough day. She was buzzing from table to table, meeting every demand for coffee or breakfast or extra napkins as best she could, but something was obviously on her mind. Bill had seen her check her phone briefly while scurrying back to the kitchen, and something about what she saw—a text? an e-mail?—stopped her short. Whatever the news was, it caused her countenance to cloud over and her eyes to well up with tears. Knowing she didn't have time to linger, she thrust the phone back into her pocket and quickly resumed her duties.

Bill was partway through his preparation when he sensed a "whisper" from God. As he describes it, God asked Bill to stop working on his sermon and to write the woman a note of encouragement instead. Wanting to obey God's promptings, Bill flipped to a blank sheet of paper and began jotting down a few encouraging lines. As he wrote, a second prompting came, this one a little tougher to swallow. "Oh, and Bill?" God seemed to be whispering. "I also want you to leave her a *breath-taking* tip—one hundred dollars."

If you know anything about Bill Hybels, you know he's Dutch. Which sometimes means *frugal*. A hundred bucks was a lot of money for him to part with, but he was absolutely sure this is what God had asked him to do. And so, with a quivering hand, he began counting out bills from his wallet, seeing if he even had that kind of money on him that day.

He did.

And so, after subduing his incredulity, he gathered his materials, anchored the note and tip with his empty coffee cup, and left the diner, knowing he'd done exactly what God had asked him to do.

But the story doesn't end there.

One week later, Bill was in the very same neighborhood diner, being waited on by the very same woman. After he finished his breakfast, and as he was gathering his papers to leave, the server stopped by his table and handed him a card. "Read this sometime later," she said. Bill did. Guess what it said?

That morning the previous week, when she'd received word of some sort of bad news? Her husband had just informed her she'd be served with divorce papers that day. He was leaving. Her marriage was done. Her note ended with these lines: "That day was one of the worst days of my life. But then I found your note and your financial gift. It just reminded me that God is faithful and he will provide for me."

God *will* take care of us, you know?

See, you just never know what cool things God will do through you, if only you have ears to hear him when he calls. Tune your hearing to his voice. Be available when he calls. Be a river, not a lake: be a person through whom God's resources can freely flow.

PART TWO ▶ ALIGNMENT IN OUR WORKING WORLD

All right. Let's switch gears and look at the second of the two places where we tend to get locked up. The first is by living in misalignment with our finances. The second? It's in our working world.

You and I will spend at least one-third of our lives at work, doing our jobs. And yet, for far too many of us, we're barely surviving in those environments, let alone *thriving* hour by hour. The writer of Ecclesiastes describes work as a "gift from God" and says we can actually be "happy in our toil." Let's talk through the four workplace-related alignments so that this vision of work can be true for you.

The first is this: *passion*.

Someone once said that passion is *energy*. I think that's a fitting description. As you survey the experiences you've had, the opportunities you've been given, the coursework you've studied, the hobbies you've dabbled in along the way, what would you say gives you the most *sheer energy*? What seems to consistently fire you up?

Is it mentoring at-risk youth?

Gardening?

Writing or editing—the process of refining the written or spoken word?

Tinkering under the hood of a car?

Teaching math?

Caring for animals?

Caring for elderly people?

Caring for people with disabilities?

Caring for your family?

Cooking?

Sewing?

Training leaders?

Taking pictures?

Shooting video?

Writing songs?

There are a million things that fire people up; the question is . . . *what is it for you?*

Can I encourage you today to spend a few minutes this week with that question? "What always seems to fire me up?" Ask the question and then answer it, not with what you *think* you should feel, but rather with what you *do* feel.

Then, take a closer look at your current job. Does it relate at all to what you're most deeply passionate about?

Listen, there are seasons in every one of our lives when, because of certain situations, we find ourselves doing a job we don't want to do. [Pastor: Insert a one- or two-sentence story here of a time when you had to do an unappealing (to you) job.]

Let's be clear: I'm not asking you to up and quit your job, just because it doesn't perfectly align with what you're most passionate about.

Instead, a reasonable response to this exercise is to keep an eye on that area of passion, while you do the job you're blessed to have right now. Ask God to open doors that will lead you closer to your passion. Find volunteer opportunities that will allow you to get near it. Take evening classes to learn more about it. Talk to people who are good at it.

Keep your central area or areas of passion top-of-mind, so that if and when God presents an opportunity for you to do that thing vocationally, you're ready to jump in with both feet.

Let me show you what I mean.

A woman who was in ministry leadership had a suppressed desire to be a writer. She'd written stories as a little girl. She'd excelled in English and literature classes all through high school and college. She'd written Bible study curricula "on the side" while she worked various ministry and corporate jobs. But she'd never taken the plunge. She'd never become a *writer*, occupationally.

One day, while she was at work, she bumped into an author who was in town to visit the ministry where she worked. The two of them struck up a conversation and stayed in touch via e-mail for months to come. Several months later, that author reached out to the aspiring writer, saying, "I need help with an upcoming book . . ."

And that single request changed everything. The aspiring writer said *yes*, she worked the project, and she's now been a full-time writer for the past nine years.

She knew what elicited *passion* in her. And she watched for God to open big doors.

The second working-world alignment is *culture*.

There are two aspects to this alignment I want to address. The first is this: *What is your work culture doing to you?* If you've ever received a paycheck, then you know that every place of employment has a certain *culture* that is distinct to that organization. *Culture* is the set of norms that guides everything from how decisions are made to the dress code that employees must follow. Culture is what tells you whether it's okay to arrive at a nine-to-five job at nine-fifteen or if you'd better be there at eight forty-five. It's what tells you how prepared you should be for a given meeting. It's what determines how likely you are to speak up if you think something unfair is happening.

Culture is established by *people*, which means there always will be aspects of corporate culture that we wish would change. Be that as it may, I still find it wise to step back every so often and assess: *What impact is my workplace culture having on me?* Go ahead and think it through. Do you enjoy going to work each day, or do you dread it? Do you feel spent in a good way by day's end, or do you feel empty, exhausted, or even *mad*?

What is the impact of your workplace culture on your family? On your friends? On your dog?

My point is this: Examine carefully the impact your workplace has on you, so that you'll know where things stand on this front.

And then there is the second aspect of the culture alignment: *What are you doing to your work culture?* In my leadership experience, I find there are two types of employee: One type makes the culture better, and the other type makes it worse. Pretty straightforward, don't you think? Bill Hybels calls these people culture *builders* and culture *busters*. Fair enough.

Once you've assessed the impact that your workplace culture is having on you, I strongly encourage you to consider the impact you are having on that culture. Now it's easy to draw up a list of all the ways that your workplace culture is awful:

"They make me work like a dog."

"They don't pay me for unused vacation."

"My boss never includes me in decisions that affect me."

On and on it goes. You could paper the walls of your house with this list. But what you'd be overlooking is the second part: How are *you* affecting the culture?

Do you add to the culture—or take away from it?

Do you bring it life? Energy? A sense of diligence and expertise?
Or are you an outright drain?

Here's what I know: Every one of us can do better on this front. And until we rightly assess how we're adding vibrancy and vitality to our workplace culture, we've only addressed half the equation.

If your workplace culture is broken, first consider how you can help fix it. Show up on time. Come to work with a teachable spirit. Be a person who is true to his or her word. Find ways to encourage your boss, even if that person is tough to get along with. Don't be a gossip. Be honest in all your dealings. Smile. Instead of playing Candy Crush on breaks, roam the halls to see if there is something you can clean up, someone you can encourage, some problem you can help solve. Even if your colleagues look at you like you're crazy, choose to be a culture builder.

And then, only after you've racked up some time in the culture-building camp, are you allowed to sort out what still remains broken in the culture you serve. If you find that the brokenness is just too much to take, then begin asking God to open a door of departure for you, so that you can preserve the health of your soul.

If, on the other hand, you discover that you were part of the problem . . . and that now that you're committed to building up the culture around you, things seem to be getting better, then ask God for wisdom and grace to stay the culture-building course.

Let's keep going.

There's a third working-world alignment, which is called *challenge*.

You'll talk in your small groups this week about this issue of striking the right balance between being dangerously over-challenged and being under-challenged in your work, so I won't spend much time on that here today. But here's a key point I would like to make: As you absorb the teaching this week about locating and living from your sweet spot, remember that *only you* can manage this dynamic.

In ministry, especially, we've established a bad reputation for using people up and spitting them out. You and I both have seen far too many pastors and ministry leaders burn out, sometimes in tragically spectacular ways. This is a horrible trend! But I think it stems from something as simple as poor self-management.

If the organization where you work is known for using and abusing its staff—to the tune of eighty-hour workweeks, substandard benefits, the modeling of inappropriate moral conduct, dishonesty with overseers, and the like—then you've got to take responsibility for standing up and saying "enough."

Similarly, if you are foundering in a job that underutilizes your skills, initiative, or expertise, please, please, please begin praying now that God will lead you to a role that's a better fit.

But again: Only you can manage this stuff. Only you know what's right for you.

Let's talk about our fourth and final working-world alignment: *compensation*.

There is an age-old balance in the workplace that most of us try to strike—even if it's only subconsciously: We want to love what we do (there's that *passion* idea again), and we want to be paid a lot of money to do it.

Right? Don't we tend to feel this way?

That's why so many educators in our nation are so vexed: They are incredibly *fired up* about pouring knowledge into the next generation's minds, but they are incredibly *frustrated* about the pittance they receive to do it. And they should be.

By way of contrast, we have professional athletes in this country signing contracts that will net them hundreds of millions of dollars. Miguel Cabrera signed a ten-year contract with the Detroit Tigers spanning 2014 through 2023 for \$223M. Two hundred and twenty-three *million* dollars. The guy makes more than \$180K for each game he plays. Actually, he gets paid whether he shows up to play or not.

Now, listen: I'm sure Miguel Cabrera *loves* to play baseball. I'm also sure he is being paid quite handsomely to play it. This is what we call a win-win on the pay-versus-passion front.

But for the rest of us, it's often not this clear. Sometimes we love what we do but realize we're not receiving a fair exchange. Sometimes we don't necessarily love what we do, but the hefty paycheck sure is nice.

I simply want to raise the issue today: Where do you fall, when it comes to passion versus pay? And, what might God be asking you to do in order to supplement one side or the other? Do you need to find a second job, so that your "pay" side is up to par? Do you need to seek out a meaningful volunteer opportunity, so that your "passion" side can light up?

God made you. He knows you. He loves you and is committed to your success. Ask him how to sort these things out, and then lean in to hear what he says.

CLOSER ▶ MADE TO LIVE FREE

There is a fantastic story in Acts 12, about the apostle Peter's unexpected prison break. Here, we find King Herod on a rampage, going after church members—people of "The Way." Herod had no use for any of Christ's followers, and he was committed to snuffing them out. He'd just murdered James, another apostle, and now he's thrown Peter into jail. Just to be sure there wouldn't be any funny business, he assigned sixteen guards to Peter's cell.

As the story goes, one night while Peter was sleeping—can you imagine sleeping in a situation like this?—an angel of the Lord appeared right by his side and woke him by shaking him and yelling, "Hurry! Get up!"

The shackles that had bound Peter to a nearby guard inexplicably fell away, as the angel said, "Get dressed! Put on your shoes!" Stunned, Peter did as he was told. You and I would have been stunned too.

The angel then told Peter to grab his coat and follow him—the angel—out of the jail. I'm sure Peter was flabbergasted over this mind-blowing turn of events, but he was smart enough to follow, even though he couldn't explain what had just taken place.

The text tells us that the next morning, the entire jail was in an uproar, as it was discovered that Peter had fled. How did he get out, when sixteen strong men were guarding him? What kind of magic trick was this?

You know, I read this story, and I can't help but think about how God wants freedom for us, too. He never wants us to be bound—whether it's literal bondage in a dark, dank prison cell, or bondage of the figurative type.

If you're in bondage today—either in your workplace or in your finances—God stands ready to set you free. What he asks of you is the same thing he asked of Peter that day: that you'll *go*. That you'll *go quickly*. And that you'll be willing to *go by faith*.

Go.

Go quickly!

Go by faith.

Nobody is going to achieve these alignments for us, friends; this is work that is ours alone to do. Will we do it? Will we stop acting as if we're destined for imprisonment and instead live as if freedom is ours? It *is* ours, just as it was Peter's. All that remains is that we get up and go.

We *go*. We resolve in our hearts that we're ready to change—to live in alignment in these areas, for once.

We *go quickly*. We don't let grass grow under our feet here; we say, "Today, I'm taking a stand."

And we *go*, as always, *by faith*. We say, "Heavenly Father, only you know the parts of my work and my money worlds that are imprisoning me, and only you can make a way of escape." We trust God to lead, and we commit to him that we will follow. And then we move out in faith toward the land of the free.

Friends, can I speak to you as your pastor here for a moment? Today is your day to move. *Get going.* That step you know you've been needing to take, regarding your finances or your job? Decide *today* to take it. Let's pray.

CLOSING PRAYER ▶

[Pastor: Close the service in prayer by asking God to help congregants take the steps they've been needing to take. Consider closing the service with encouragement for people to sign up for a Simplify small group, if they haven't done so already. Be sure to provide instructions accordingly.]

###

Session

3

Strengthen Your Relationships Conversations that Simplify Life

SETUP ▶ THE EXTERNALS MATTER TOO

For the past two weeks, we've been talking about how to simplify our lives. Today, we'll continue our series on that subject—by looking at how to simplify our relational world. Yes, we can simplify our schedules and simplify our finances and get our working world nice and aligned. But if we don't simultaneously focus on the *externals*—specifically, on streamlining our interactions with others—all that inner-world work will fail to satisfy.

Enter this week's topic: strengthening our relationships, by engaging in conversations that simplify life. Before we dive in, let's pray.

OPENING PRAYER ▶

[Pastor: Offer an opening prayer for God's presence to be felt, for his power to be known, and for his provision to be great, as the congregation wrestles with how to clean up their relational world.]

OPENER ▶ TALK TO A FOOL

I'd like to begin by looking at a few proverbs. You all know the book of Proverbs, right? This is a collection of sayings about how to live wisely, written mostly by King Solomon, called the "wisest man" to ever live. He knows what he's talking about, I think you'd agree.

But instead of reviewing these proverbs in a traditional fashion, today I'd like to offer a few of them in reverse. *Anti-proverbs*, if you will. Such as this one: "In your time of trouble, the Lord is *nowhere* to be found. He'll *always* allow your foot to be snared."

Or how about this one: "When you have resources that could help someone else, keep them to yourself. Don't share your stuff. Sharing stuff is bad."

Or how about: "*Every chance you get*, speak perversely. Let corrupt talk *flow freely* from your lips."

And this one: "Love stirs up conflict, but a good dose of hatred covers over all wrongs."

Now that we're on a roll, let's keep going:

- Whoever conceals hatred with lying lips and spreads slander is a genius! The *wisest* of men.
- The lack of integrity of fools guides them, and the faithful are destroyed by their uprightness.
- Only unrighteous people will be rescued from trouble; the trouble will fall on the righteous instead.
- A gossip is a *lovely* person. Try to be untrustworthy at every turn.
- Anxiety is great for the heart! Worry as much as you can.
- Don't bother with choosing your friends carefully. A companion of fools has a blast!

- Stay close to fools. You may not find knowledge on their lips, but what they say will never fail to entertain.
- An anxious heart is what you're striving for, and envy is your friend forever.
- A hot-tempered person is a joy to be around; the one who is patient is a bore.
- Who needs life-giving correction? Hang out with people who will affirm your every wrong move.
- A cheerful heart is annoying as all get-out, and a crushed spirit is just part of the deal.
- When you're wronged, be sure to seek revenge. Say, "I'll pay you back for this wrong!"
- To do what is right is no fun at all. Who cares what the Lord thinks, anyway?
- Always associate with people who are easily angered, so that you can learn their ways and get yourself ensnared.
- Speak often to fools. Use coarse language, just like they do.
- Pay everyone back for what they do to you.

I could keep going, but I think you get the point. These "reverse words of wisdom" are ridiculous, aren't they? They're anything *but* wise. I mean, we'd never teach our children to adopt one of these proverbs as a life verse, would we? "Little Johnny, I think the *perfect* life verse for you is Anti-Proverbs 99:6. It says, 'Gravitate toward the wicked, so that your heart can plot violence alongside them, and so your lips can talk about making trouble.' There you go, Little Johnny. That wisdom ought to serve you well, all the days of your life." Of course we wouldn't do that.

We'd never buy a T-shirt with one of these "proverbs" emblazoned on the back: "Untrustworthy at every turn!"

We wouldn't want one of these adages engraved on our tombstones, would we? "Anxiety is great for the heart. You see where it got me!"

We'd never knowingly subscribe to this list of craziness, and yet, sometimes . . . sometimes we find ourselves living as if we actually believe they're true.

We don't want to live perpetually plagued by fear . . . and yet, aren't there times when anxiety sticks closer than a brother?

We don't want to associate with fools . . . and yet, don't we sometimes stick with a toxic relationship far too long and get dragged through the muck and mire as a result?

We don't want to be vengeful . . . and yet, haven't we all thought of the *perfect comeback* to an enemy's snide remark, a day or two after the exchange? "Argh! Why couldn't I have come up with that in the heat of the moment? I *really* could have put him in his place!"

As an aside, author and behavioral scientist Daniel Goleman, in his book *Social Intelligence*, writes that "rehashing our social lives may rate as the brain's favorite downtime activity, something like its top-rated TV show. In fact, only when the brain turns to an impersonal task, like balancing a checkbook, do these 'people' circuits quiet down."⁷

That explains a lot, doesn't it? That's why you think of those great comebacks *after* the fact, because your brain has been mulling over the exchange ever since it happened. And then *bam*, three days later, you've got your knockout punch ready to throw.

But back to my point: We don't want to live like fools, even as we often allow foolishness to direct our steps. And if there is one area where foolishness seems to run rampant, it's in our *relationships*.

We say foolish things. We do foolish things. We elbow *right past* wisdom to get our own way. Foolishness! We know it's foolishness. But in the heat of the moment, it somehow looks appealing to us.

BIBLICAL ANCHOR ▶ PROVERBS TO LIVE BY

Well, as you'd expect, the Bible contains beautiful and timely instruction for us, if only we'll choose to be teachable.

Do you want to be teachable today, as it relates to simplifying your relationships?

I definitely do.

May we be found teachable today.

Earlier, we looked at a few anti-proverbs. Now let's look at some real words of wisdom regarding how to get along well with others. The proverbs I'm going to read are all drawn from *The Message*, by Eugene Peterson:

Start with GOD—the first step in learning is bowing down to GOD; only fools thumb their noses at such wisdom and learning. . . .

Join the company of good men and women, keep your feet on the tried-and-true paths. It's the men who walk straight who will settle this land, the women with integrity who will last here. The corrupt will lose their lives; the dishonest will be gone for good. . . .

Don't lose your grip on Love and Loyalty. Tie them around your neck; carve their initials on your heart. Earn a reputation for living well in God's eyes and the eyes of the people.

Trust GOD from the bottom of your heart; don't try to figure out everything on your own. Listen for GOD's voice in everything you do, everywhere you go; he's the one who will keep you on track. Don't assume that you know it all. Run to GOD! . . .

Dear friend, guard Clear Thinking and Common Sense with your life; don't for a minute lose sight of them. They'll keep your soul alive and well, they'll keep you fit and attractive. You'll travel safely, you'll neither tire nor trip. You'll take afternoon naps without a worry, you'll enjoy a good night's sleep. No need to panic over alarms or surprises, or predictions that doomsday's just around the corner, Because GOD will be right there with you; he'll keep you safe and sound. . . .

Don't walk around with a chip on your shoulder, always spoiling for a fight. Don't try to be like those who shoulder their way through life. Why be a bully? "Why not?" you say. Because GOD can't stand twisted souls. It's the straightforward who get his respect. . . .

The ways of right-living people glow with light; the longer they live, the brighter they shine. But the road of wrongdoing gets darker and darker—travelers can't see a thing; they fall flat on their faces. . . .

Keep vigilant watch over your heart; *that's* where life starts. Don't talk out of both sides of your mouth; avoid careless banter, white lies, and gossip. Keep your eyes straight ahead; ignore all sideshow distractions. . . .

Riffraff and rascals talk out of both sides of their mouths. They wink at each other, they shuffle their feet, they cross their fingers behind their backs. Their perverse minds are always cooking up something nasty, always stirring up trouble. Catastrophe is just around the corner for them, a total smashup, their lives ruined beyond repair.

Here are six things GOD hates, and one more that he loathes with a passion: eyes that are arrogant, a tongue that lies, hands that murder the innocent, a heart that hatches evil plots, feet that race down a wicked track, a mouth that lies under oath, a troublemaker in the family. . . .

"So, my dear friends, listen carefully"—*[this is God talking here]*—"those who embrace these my ways are most blessed. Mark a life of discipline and live wisely; don't squander your precious life. Blessed the man, blessed the woman, who listens to me, awake and ready for me each morning, alert and responsive as I start my day's work. When you find me, you find life, real life, to say nothing of GOD's good pleasure. But if you wrong me, you damage your very soul; when you reject me, you're flirting with death." . . .

GOD's blessing makes life rich; nothing we do can improve on God. An empty-head thinks mischief is fun, but a mindful person relishes wisdom. . . .

A good person's mouth is a clear fountain of wisdom; a foul mouth is a stagnant swamp. The speech of a good person clears the air; the words of the wicked pollute it. . . .

Moral character makes for smooth traveling; an evil life is a hard life. Good character is the best insurance; crooks get trapped in their sinful lust. . . .

The loose tongue of the godless spreads destruction; the common sense of the godly preserves them. . . .

When you're kind to others, you help yourself; when you're cruel to others, you hurt yourself. . . .

GOD can't stand deceivers, but oh how he relishes integrity. . . .

A life devoted to things is a dead life, a stump; a GOD-shaped life is a flourishing tree. . . .

The good acquire a taste for helpful conversation; bullies push and shove their way through life. Careful words make for a careful life; careless talk may ruin everything. . . .

A mean person gets paid back in meanness, a gracious person in grace. . . .

Slowness to anger makes for deep understanding; a quick-tempered person stockpiles stupidity. . . .

A gentle response defuses anger, but a sharp tongue kindles a temper-fire. . . .

Hot tempers start fights; a calm, cool spirit keeps the peace. . . .

Overlook an offense and bond a friendship; fasten on to a slight and—good-bye, friend!

A quiet rebuke to a person of good sense does more than a whack on the head of a fool. . . .

Don't ever say, "I'll get you for that!" Wait for GOD; he'll settle the score.⁸

TAKEAWAY 1 ▶ WISDOM'S THREE THEMES

Friends, I've just given you a three-minute litany of wisdom, and yet we've barely even scratched the surface. The Bible in general, and the book of Proverbs specifically, contains a *stockpile* of helpful insights for getting along well with others. Can you imagine what would happen in our rage-fueled world if even a portion of those who say they follow Christ started befriending wisdom throughout their days? Blows the mind, doesn't it?

In the verses I just read for you, you may have noticed a few themes. Living wisely—especially in relation to other people—demands that we *trust God*. That's the first theme.

Theme number two: That we *care for others*.

And here's the third theme: Live *as a person of peace*.

Trust God. Care for others. Live as a person of peace.

Sounds simple, right?

It's not simple, as you probably already know. But once you choose to live by these themes, oh, how simplified your life can get.

TAKEAWAY 2 ▶ LIVING WISDOM'S THREE THEMES

What I'd like to do with the time that remains today is to work through three common relationship scenarios, keeping our trio of themes in mind. How do we *actually live out* the three themes we find in the wisdom literature of Scripture?

Let's look at the first scenario: *I want to be an authentic person, but the truth is too hard to admit*.

Jack and Jill have been dating for quite some time, and now there's talk of marriage. Jack is ready to propose, and Jill is ready to say yes—but Jack is harboring a secret. Jill is totally unaware that Jack has a rampant cucumber addiction. He sneaks away to the grocery store without telling her, he hoards cucumbers in a reusable produce sack on the top shelf of his closet, and he secretly gobbles them up whole—like you would a banana—nearly every night.

He wants to let Jill in on this troubling tendency, but he doesn't know how to tell her. What will she think? How will she respond? More importantly, will she still want to be in a relationship with him?

We've all been in Jack's shoes, haven't we? Maybe not with cucumbers, but with something. We hide the fact that we're overeating, or overdrinking, or overspending, or overcommitting. We hide our true feelings, our true beliefs, our true fears. We hide the reality about our finances or our spiritual confusion and doubts; or our job satisfaction; or our physical pain—all because we're afraid of what the people who love us will think, or what they will say, or what they will do.

Let's revisit our three themes, shall we?

First: Trust God.

Before you spend another moment wracked by fear, go to God in prayer. Trust him to hear you, to see your situation, and to guide you in your next steps. Say, "Heavenly Father, you know the pain I'm carrying these days, and you know how it can be relieved. I want to lay down this heavy burden and pick up your light burden instead. Will you help me? Will you take this burden from me—the cucumber addiction, or whatever it is—and give me your peace instead? I surrender my fears to you, and also my need to control this situation. Tell me what I need to do in order to be freed from this burden, and I will do it. If I need to make amends, I will make them. If I need to change a habit, I will change it. If I need to admit my need for help, I will admit it. You lead, and I will follow. I will follow with a joyful heart."

Maybe God will prompt you to have that conversation, or enlist that help, or radically overturn that bad habit. My point is this: Whatever God asks you to do, *do it*. Trust God with the course of your life.

Then, care for others as you take the steps God has asked you to take. Consider their feelings. Consider their needs before your own. Be true to your word. Be kind. Emblazon this proverb on your mind and heart: "Don't lose your grip on Love and Loyalty. Tie them around your neck; carve their initials on your heart. Earn a reputation for living well in God's eyes and the eyes of the people."⁹

Don't lose your grip on love and loyalty. . . . Isn't that a noble goal?

Several years ago, a ministry leader was caught in an awful situation: It came to light that he had been unfaithful to his wife and had been hiding a drug addiction. It was a very bad day, the day his entire world came crumbling down around him. But you know what he said weeks later, after the initial destructiveness of the storm he'd created had passed? He said that being caught was a relief.

Duplicity is stressful, friends. It's exhausting to live two lives. Only God knows what steps you need to take in order to become an authentic person, but I bet he'll share them with you. Trust God to tell you what your path needs to look like. Be gentle with those around you as you travel that road. And then live from the place of peace that will exist once you've been courageous enough to confess the hard truth.

Let's look at a second scenario: *As much as I hate to admit it, a key relationship of mine has become toxic.*

Mark and Paul have been friends for years. They used to work together and share similar recreational interests—golf, skiing, boating, rock climbing. Their wives are friends, and their kids are the same ages. Their families have even vacationed together over the years. But now Mark senses dissonance in the relationship. He has been growing deeper in his intimacy level with Christ and as a result has changed some of his ways. The rough language and off-color jokes have faded away, as has his propensity to drink a little too much on the golf course. Without really trying to, he has become more invested in his relationship with his wife. He listens better when she wants to talk. He's more tuned in to how to help relieve her stress when her job and home responsibilities collide. He's a more responsible employee, now that he's realized that conscientious work affords him greater flexibility to work from home and not travel as much. He has tried to talk to Paul about some of these changes—even encouraging him to consider making the same changes in his life. But he gets the brush-off. Paul isn't at all interested. Mark knows that continuing to spend so much of his discretionary time with a guy who isn't as committed to spiritual things, who struggles to practice kindness with his wife, who drinks too

much and curses like a sailor when someone upsets him, isn't a great idea. But what's he supposed to say? How do you undo a decade of close friendship, now that the friendship isn't as close anymore?

This is tough stuff, wouldn't you agree? To have to put the brakes on a key friendship . . . to say good-bye to someone you love? Not easy, ever.

Before I address this scenario, I want to make sure we're clear on something: Scripture is full of exhortations to look outside our holy huddles and enfold in community those who are far from Christ. So I'm not suggesting we should surround ourselves only with shiny, happy people who live for Jesus every minute of the day. There is a definite place in our lives for engaging with those who don't believe in God, those who are angry with the church, those who curse like sailors and drink too much and even are mean to their wives. These people need the light of Jesus, don't you think? When we're living in darkness, we need the light.

But I am saying that we cannot deny the scores of sayings in God's Word about being careful in selecting the people we yoke ourselves to. In other words, when you're picking your inner circle—the people you do life with, the people to whom you look for spiritual guidance and encouragement and care—be very careful about those choices. "Join the company of good men and women," Proverbs says.¹⁰ In other words, when you're weighing who to be close friends with, give the nod to the non-toxic ones.

Toxic people make us toxic; have you noticed this?

Toxic people make us toxic. But good men and good women? Those who love God and happily live life for him? Those people make us Christlike. Christlike is a good thing to be.

So, to the scenario in question: What do you do when you discover that a key relationship has turned toxic and the other person isn't interested in detoxing? Let's revisit our themes.

First: Trust God. Pray for wisdom. Pray for insight. Scour the Scriptures for guidance. Keep an ear open heaven's way. Lay out the entire situation before God, and then listen, listen, listen for cues. Does God want you to say something to the other person? Does he urgently want you to remove yourself from the situation? Does he want you to do nothing? Ask him for direction, and then wait for his response. Don't take a single step he doesn't explicitly direct you to take.

Next: Care for others. Sometimes the most caring thing we can do for another person is to say, "It looks like we're headed in different directions in life, and while I wish you well along the path you're choosing to take, I've got to take a different path."

Once God gives you marching orders, follow them to the letter. But be sure to follow them with kindness at hand. We're told in the Bible to speak truth, but we're told very clearly to do so in love.

Finally: Live as a person of peace. If God directs you to sever ties with a friend, choose to speak well of that person when questions arise. And they always seem to arise! You might confide in a spouse or accountability partner the truth of the situation; but, for the most part, decide in advance how you will characterize the separation, and then stick to your guns when asked. When a third party says, "Hey, what happened with you and so-and-so?" you might simply say, "You know, we just decided to head in different directions. I'm grateful for your concern, but that's about all there is to report."

One time, two women in the same church community had a falling out. A third person who had once been in a small group with the two women approached one of them in the hallway one Sunday and asked what had happened to cause the argument. I love what the woman said in response. Knowing that she and her friend would probably find a way to reconcile, or that they would find an amicable way to part, she simply said, "Can you do me a favor? Ask me again in six months. We just need some time to sort things out."

What a great response!

It afforded the two people having the disagreement some time and space to work through things. It kept the offended party from bad-mouthing the other woman. And it poured water on the gossipy fire

that was spreading throughout the women's ministry. A lot would happen in six months' time; by then, the news would be old. Smart Christ-followers refuse to stir up contention. Instead, they let wisdom have its way. They live as people of peace.

To that wise woman, I say, "Well done."

All right, a third scenario, and then we're done. This one is perhaps the toughest of the bunch: *I'm not sure how to get past the fact that I've been horribly wronged.*

On the morning of October 2, 2006, a thirty-two-year-old truck driver, named Charlie Roberts, entered a tiny, one-room schoolhouse in the Amish community of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. He was heavily armed, and so his demand that the men and boys leave immediately was followed without question. Mr. Roberts then began tying up the women and girls and told them to stand in line in front of the blackboard. One by one, he shot them in the head, execution-style. By the time the police were able to storm the small building and take control of the situation, four girls, ages six to thirteen, had been killed, along with the gunman, who had turned his gun on himself. Later, a fifth young girl also died, and five other girls were injured by gunshots. They would survive the attack, but not without lasting effects. The youngest, and also the most severely injured, of the survivors, was Rosanna King, age six at the time of the incident. Her wounds would leave her wheelchair-bound, unable to walk or talk ever again.

We'd all agree that this was a tragedy. Of course we would. And yet the community that had been wronged decided not to let the story end there. As was well publicized in the weeks and months following the shooting, men, women, and children from Nickel Mines made a point of forgiving Mr. Roberts for his wrongdoing. They embraced the parents of the gunman, Chuck and Terri Roberts, who were horrified by their son's actions that day. Terri Roberts, after being so well loved by the family of young Rosanna King, over time became close friends with Rosanna, showing up at the little girl's house every single week, to read Bible stories to her, sing to her, and read beloved children's books aloud, such as *Anne of Green Gables*.

Was it a tragedy? Yes. But was it also a triumph? Yes. It was a triumph for the ways of Christ.

There's an interesting dynamic surrounding forgiveness, which is this: As Christ-followers, when we hear stories like this one, we want to stand up and cheer. Our chests puff out, our eyes water, and our hands can't help but clap. We applaud this type of behavior, because deep in our souls, we know it's reflective of Christ.

But then the moment we are wronged, instead of reflexively choosing grace and forgiveness, we rush down the path paved by swift justice: "Somebody's got to pay!"

Let's revisit wisdom's words on this front, shall we? Again, these are from *The Message*:

- A mean person gets paid back in meanness, a gracious person in grace.
- Slowness to anger makes for deep understanding; a quick-tempered person stockpiles stupidity.
- A gentle response defuses anger, but a sharp tongue kindles a temper-fire.
- Hot tempers start fights; a calm, cool spirit keeps the peace.
- Overlook an offense and bond a friendship; fasten on to a slight and—good-bye, friend!
- A quiet rebuke to a person of good sense does more than a whack on the head of a fool.
- Don't ever say, "I'll get you for that!" Wait for GOD; he'll settle the score.¹¹

We could continue this litany for a full hour, and we wouldn't have covered even *half* of what God's Word has to say regarding turning the other cheek when we're wronged, instead of demanding that someone pay.

It hurts to be wronged. For that Amish community, it hurt *badly*. [*Pastor: If appropriate, briefly share a time in your own life when it hurt deeply to be wronged.*]

In a community our size, I guarantee there are people in this room who can relate. They too have been badly hurt. They have been *profoundly, deeply wronged*.

For others, maybe the wrongdoing didn't cut quite as deep, but still it left a mark. A physical mark. An emotional mark. A financial mark. A spiritual mark.

I want to prepare us for what we'll find as we revisit our themes once more, this time related to the subject of what to do when we're wronged. What does it look like to trust God, to care for others, and to be a person of peace when we've been wronged? Regardless of the level of pain caused by the wrongdoing, Jesus' advice to us is clear: *forgive*.

Jesus was deeply wronged. The wrong done to him was deeper than any wrong you and I will ever know. And yet his response to his wrongdoers was quick and genuine: He chose from his heart to *forgive*.

A lot of other responses would have seemed justified. Anger. Revenge. Disbelief. Betrayal. Rage. The calling down of the entire angelic host, to rain down justice on that Roman crowd. But these aren't the responses he chose. He chose, instead, to forgive.

We're learning to simplify our lives, remember? As it relates to relationships in general, and to being wronged in particular, there is no clearer path to stress-free relational simplicity than forgiveness—quick, sincere, and full forgiveness. In your small groups this week, you will see a powerful story of forgiveness extended by the family of a young girl whose life was cut short when a man fell asleep at the wheel of his car. That dramatic act of mercy reminds me that because I have been forgiven much, I can forgive much when I've been wronged. No matter the wrong. No matter the pain. Forgiveness can be our course.

CLOSER ▶ LOVING WISDOM'S THEMES

This week, we have an opportunity. In each of our relationships, we can choose to practice the three themes we've looked at today—trusting God, caring for others, and living as people of peace—or we can choose instead to go our own way.

Friends, as people talk with us this week, let's ensure they don't talk to a fool. *Deal?* Let's let wisdom have its way in our lives, in our hearts, in our minds, in our speech.

CLOSING PRAYER ▶

[Pastor: Close the service in prayer.]

###

Session

4

Fully Surrender Let God's Word Lead

OPENER ▶ THE THINGS THAT FILL OUR MINDS

To begin today, I'd like to test your general knowledge of information. Are you feeling alert at the moment? Here's how it will go: I'll ask a question, and you shout out the answer. Fair enough? Don't be shy, now. If you know the answer to the question, go ahead and let the rest of us know. No wall-flowering today, okay?

Let's start with a softball: *Who won the last Super Bowl?* [Pastor: Feel free to adjust this and all other trivia questions, based on what would be most interesting and entertaining to your church.]

Who was our nation's thirteenth president? [Millard Fillmore]

What is the capital of Illinois? [Springfield]

Who is the richest person in the world? [Bill Gates—yes, he's back on top]

How old do you have to be to vote in this country? [Eighteen]

Who is the only player to be drafted by the NFL, the NBA, and Major League Baseball? [Dave Winfield—he chose baseball, and he's in the Hall of Fame]

What is the numerical equivalent of pi? [3.14]

What is the square root of 144? [12]

Wow! All our mathematicians are awake today. Way to go.

Ready for more? How about this one: *What is the temperature at which water boils?* [212°F]

What are the names of the five Great Lakes? [Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, Superior]

What are the titles of our country's three branches of government? [Judicial, Legislative, Executive]

What was your phone number when you were in the fifth grade? [Anything goes here.]

What is your shoe size? [Anything goes here as well.]

What's your Social Security number? Wait! Don't shout it out. You could get identity-thieved, right here in church. But you know it, don't you? Which supports my point. I'll make that point here in a moment.

There has been a US flag staked on the moon for each of our moon landings. How many US flags are presently on the moon? [Six]

Let's keep going. *On what date was John F. Kennedy assassinated?* [November 22, 1963]

In what city? [Dallas, Texas]

On what date did famed Christian apologist C. S. Lewis die? [Same date: November 22, 1963]

In what city? [Oxford, England.]

When is Tax Day in the United States of America? [April 15]

What are the only two things you can be sure of? [Death and taxes]

Wait. And salvation. We can be sure of death. And taxes. And salvation.

Now, you're probably smart enough to realize you've been set up here. Something in you is saying that there's an underlying motivation for why I've put you through these paces, some sinister plot that explains why I, a typically efficient steward of our time together, would blow three minutes on the

regurgitation of useless facts. And if you are thinking along these lines, I want to tell you that you are, in fact, correct. There is method to this most recent madness, and I'll reveal it to you in just a moment. But first, before we go there, let's open with a word of prayer.

OPENING PRAYER ▶ "HAVE YOUR WAY"

God, we're fired up about being here today, about gleaned some insight for living from you, about getting more and more serious about letting you lead our lives. We acknowledge your presence here with us, and we tell you with open hands and open hearts to have your way today. We bless your name. In Jesus' name, Amen.

SETUP ▶ GOD'S WORD AS LEVELING AGENT

We are in our fourth and final week of our series called *Simplify*, a study on how to unclutter not just our closets and our schedules, but also how to unclutter our souls. Our subject today is a powerful one: *How to fully surrender our lives, by letting God's Word direct our steps.*

In my opinion, there is no single greater simplifying measure you and I could take than to adopt this week's core practice beginning today. The practice I'm referring to is this: *writing God's Word on our hearts.*

Let me ask you a question: If you're trying to hang a picture frame in your house, and you're too lazy to go find the level, what's going to happen?

You're going to pound in a nail or two, plop the frame on the wall, and then from that day forward, every single time you pass that frame, you're going to say to yourself, "Is it just me, or is that thing crooked?" You'll adjust it a little and move on, only to happen by it again later in the day and realize it's *still* not perfectly straight.

This is why it pays to get up and go find the level to begin with! Because when you ascertain the frame's rightness at the outset, you can rest assured the thing is *actually straight.*

This is a metaphor for living. We are that would-be-crooked picture frame, and God's Word is the level we need. It says as much in the book of Psalms. Let's begin by looking at Psalm 119, verses nine through sixteen.

BIBLICAL ANCHOR ▶ PSALM 119:9-16

Follow along on the screen while I read. [*Pastor: Adjust instructions accordingly.*]

How can a young person stay on the path of purity?

By living according to your word.

I seek you with all my heart;

do not let me stray from your commands.

I have hidden your word in my heart

that I might not sin against you.

Praise be to you, LORD;

teach me your decrees.

With my lips I recount

all the laws that come from your mouth.

I rejoice in following your statutes

as one rejoices in great riches.

I meditate on your precepts

and consider your ways.

I delight in your decrees;
I will not neglect your word.

TRANSITION ▶ FORKS IN THE ROAD

What motivates my urge to talk about writing God’s Word on our hearts today is this idea: In a given day, you and I come to a thousand forks in the road, times when we are faced with decisions of varying consequence.

What do I say to that hurting friend?

What do I need to pray for, on behalf of my spouse and kids?

What do I do when I don’t feel like praying for my spouse and kids?

Do I discipline my teenager for the latest act of minor rebellion—or wrap loving arms around her and show mercy?

How do I solve that issue with my key client, especially when he won’t take my call?

Where should I go to college?

Do I tithe on the gross or on the net?

Should I sign up for that church retreat, or not?

How do I manage the temptation I feel to engage in stuff I have no business engaging in?

Am I supposed to give money to the person on the street corner holding the sign asking for money, or not?

What should I do with my life?

Do I buy the better house that’s just beyond my financial reach but is in the “right” school district, or do I settle for a smaller space that I can easily afford?

Where do I start, in trying to heal decades-old wounds with my dad?

Do I take the promotion at work, knowing it will pull me away from time spent at home?

Should I eat this piece of chocolate cake?

So, we come to these forks in the road, and we wonder what to do. Do I go this way or that way? Do I stay silent or speak up? Do I exert effort or let things unfold? Do I take a leap of faith or do the more reserved, predictable thing? A thousand decisions we face each day: *What are we going to do?*

The idea that intrigues me is this: When faced with a fork in the road, what if we could always pick the right path?

Is that even *possible*—to *always* pick the right path?

PASTOR’S PERSONAL ILLUSTRATION ▶

[Pastor: Tell of a time recently when you faced a decision of note, describing each of the courses of action you could have taken and what you believed the outcomes would be in every case. It’s not necessary to resolve the issue for your congregation; in other words, the point of this illustration isn’t about how you ultimately made your decision or even what decision you wound up making, but rather the weight of the unmade decision that rested on your shoulders.]

If you prefer to use a secondhand story, what follows is one you may choose to use.]

A year or so ago, after a Sunday morning service, Pastor Bill Hybels was talking to a man who said that he loved Willow Creek’s worship services, but even after attending services at the church for more than a year, he still felt disconnected from other people. He explained to Bill that he’d tried out a few small groups, but none of the ones he tried were a good fit. “I love being here,” he told Bill. “But I don’t love feeling so alone.”

This wasn’t isolated input. Bill said that he had heard this type of feedback so often, for so many years, that he knew something had to give. He gathered a team of his senior leaders and

told them that he refused to meet his Maker someday and be tasked with trying to explain why all those people he was responsible for shepherding sat lonely week after week, right inside the church. Bill was determined to solve what he called the “midsize gathering” problem. “Our church is good at producing excellent weekend services, and our small-groups structure is sound,” Bill said. “But that midsize gathering is a code we’ve never been able to crack. It’s inexcusable, and it’s got to change.”

Bill and his team came up with a solution for easing people into meaningful community involvement without obligating them to a small-group experience, but now a second problem arose: Who should lead the effort? As Bill scanned the human-resource horizon at Willow for a viable candidate, God was scanning the human-resource horizon in Bill’s office, knowing that Bill himself was the one for the job.

A few days later, during Bill’s “chair time”—the fifteen or twenty minutes he spends in the same chair every day, reading his Bible, writing in his journal, saying his prayers—he says he received a whisper from God. The whisper went something like this: “Bill, you’re the person for this job.” To which Bill laughed out loud. He hadn’t directly led a ministry effort in more than twenty years and had no intention of doing so now. It just wouldn’t work! He had a whole slew of people already reporting to him, each of whom oversaw lots of people and multiple ministries. God clearly had his wires crossed.

Or did he?

Bill knew the whisper was unrelenting. And so he took the input to his senior staff and said, “I think I’m supposed to head up this new ministry that will be devoted to solving the midsize gathering problem.” To a person, his staffers laughed. They knew what Bill knew: This plan just wouldn’t work.

Bill knew the plan wouldn’t work. Bill’s staff knew the plan wouldn’t work. And yet Bill was clear on what God had said. This was a fork-in-the-road moment, to be sure.

So, I ask you: Which way should Bill have gone?]

TAKEAWAY 1 ▶ THERE IS A PATH OF PURITY

We’ll come back to that question in a moment. [*Pastor: Adjust this transition as necessary.*] Let me first back up to clarify an underlying assumption we make, based on what Scripture says is true. At every fork in the road, there is a way to go that will be pleasing to God and satisfying to you and me. The right path always exists—which leads us to our first point: *There is always a path of purity.* At every decision point, we *can go purity’s way.*

There’s a path that leads to financial purity, which involves things like getting out of debt, and living below your means, and giving generously of your resources, and joyfully paying a tithe to your local church. And not padding your expense account.

There’s a path that leads to moral purity, which involves things like being faithful to your spouse—sexually, yes, of course . . . but also visually, verbally, emotionally. It involves things like being a person of your word. Not taking advantage of situations. Not exposing yourself to books and movies and songs that aren’t life-giving.

There’s a path that leads to relational purity, which involves things like protecting the absent by not gossiping or slandering or offering up “prayer requests” that are actually judgments and condemnations. This path involves keeping short accounts: When there’s a problem, you address it. When you’ve been offended, you gently speak up.

There’s a path that leads to emotional purity, which involves things like working through your anger in appropriate ways instead of spewing rage on those you say you love.

There’s a path that leads to physical purity, which involves things like maybe not eating that piece of chocolate cake every single time.

There's a path that leads to spiritual purity, which involves things like carving out time to spend with God every day. It involves taking care of other people, the crown of God's creation. It involves listening when God whispers and doing what he asks you to do every time.

There's a path that leads to vocational purity, which involves things like being on time for work, coming prepared to meetings, being an advocate for your boss, having a positive attitude instead of dragging the place down. You're either a culture *builder* or you're a culture *buster*, remember? It involves stepping up when circumstances warrant your heartfelt involvement, and speaking up when the challenge level has gotten to be too high.

There's a path that leads to familial purity, which involves things like prioritizing conversations with your spouse and children. Or going to your son's soccer game. Or huddling your clan together at day's end and offering up a prayer of thanksgiving to God—for another good day, another round of protection and provision, the gift of a family like yours.

Friends, at every fork in the road, there is a path available that will honor God. And do you want to venture a guess as to what happens when you and I actively honor God? Do you suppose our lives get messier and more complex, or cleaner and more simplified? There is a path that will simplify life. The question that remains is this: *Will we choose to take it?*

TAKEAWAY 2 ▶ WE CAN STAY ON THAT PATH

Now, to the heart of the matter. If we were to pan for gold in Psalm 119, we'd find a handful of shiny nuggets, all dealing with this idea of staying on purity's path . . . of dramatically simplifying our lives by letting God's divine Word lead us.

Let's revisit the verses.

How do we stay on purity's path? the psalmist asks. He proceeds to offer some practical steps.

First up, verse 9: *by living according to God's Word.*

Next, verse 10: *by not straying from God's commands.*

And then, verse 11: *by hiding God's Word in our hearts.*

And verse 12: *by having a teachable spirit regarding God's decrees.*

Verse 13: *by recounting God's laws . . . by speaking them aloud again and again.*

Verse 14: *by rejoicing in following God's statutes, even as one rejoices in great riches.*

Verse 15: *by meditating on God's precepts . . . and by stopping to consider God's ways.*

Verse 16: *by delighting in God's decrees . . . and by refusing to neglect God's Word.*

It's all so straightforward, isn't it? And yet so very challenging. The magnetic pull of our self-made wisdom, our self-centered strategies, our self-aggrandizing schemes, is strong—stronger than most of us care to admit. Here, in these verses, we hear God whispering: "I know you think you know what's best for yourself, but your vision . . . it's so limited in scope! Trust me to care for you as only I can, as a loving Father to a short-sighted son."

It would be handy, wouldn't it, if God's insights were like a pit crew at a NASCAR race: We could just zoom into his presence for fifteen seconds, get topped off, and then zoom on with our day. Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. God says, "I want you to come to me prepared to *linger*. I want you to stop your labors and sit with me and *rest*."

We don't have much use for these ideas in today's world, do we? I was talking to a friend this week who just got back from his family's vacation. They went to the beach for a week, which sounds peaceful and relaxing. But somehow, they managed to fill their days so full with adventure sports and paid excursions and dinners out that they came home utterly *exhausted*. They now need another vacation, to recover from the non-restful vacation they just took. It's madness. And yet we all fall prey. Which is why God has to remind us, "No, no. Don't come to me expecting a quick fix. Come to me expecting relaxed conversation, intimacy, divine insights that unfold over time, like the slow bloom of a beautiful rose."

We will only know the right path to take when we know *God*. And we come to know God primarily through up-close interaction with his Word.

We can know *for a fact* the things that will please him, in the same way we know *for a fact* who won last year's Super Bowl, or who served as this country's thirteenth president, or the names of the five Great Lakes.

When we come to a fork in the road—a financial fork, or an emotional fork . . . a relational one, a spiritual one, a fork of *any* kind—we can know with certainty the better path to take. How? By knowing with certainty God's Word.

In God's Word, we learn that *no temptation can overtake us*, and that *even when we're tempted, God always provides a way of escape*. That's 1 Corinthians 10:13. [Pastor: Replace any and all of these examples with Scriptures that will serve your community best.]

In God's Word, we see that *nothing can separate us from the love of God*. Nothing! That covers a lot of ground. That's found in Romans 8:38-39.

In God's Word, we find that we're to *delight in the spouse of our youth*. That's Proverbs 5:18. Do you know how many inappropriate conversations, seemingly "innocent" flirtations, and outright extramarital affairs could be thwarted, if every married person actually lived by this creed? *I'm not going to deceive my spouse or denigrate my spouse or secretly despise my spouse while pretending to tolerate him or her. No, I'm going to delight in my spouse. I'm going to apply myself—mind, body, habits, heart—to delighting in my spouse.*

Can you imagine what would unfold? Wow. Blows the mind.

In God's Word, we find that it's really never wise to take on financial debt; that in Christ we are overcomers; that love is an action verb; that it is more blessed to give than to receive; that foresight and careful planning tend to build a better house; that kids don't benefit from being spoiled; that gentleness is what turns away wrath; that our diligent work brings a smile to God's face; and that if we're careful to always let our yes be yes and our no be no, we'll never have to bother with verbal assurances: "Really. I promise. You can believe me this time. You've got my word."

We learn in God's Word that his sheep hear his voice. And that our Shepherd has more to say than we often think.

It's worth your read, this book. It's alive. It's inspired. It's good.

But that's what we're all after, isn't it? We want to know which path to take. We don't want to needlessly invite chaos and confusion into our lives. No, we want what simplicity offers us. We want clean hands. We want pure hearts. We want integrity to have its way in us.

There's no other way to get these things, but to saturate ourselves with God's Word. And so, this week, I'm asking you to carve out the time, to find a chair, and to crack open God's Word every day. If you don't know where to start, start with the Gospel of John. Read it straight through. Then read Proverbs, a bulk of which we looked at last week. Read the Psalms. Read the book of Ephesians. Read the book of Acts. Maybe save Leviticus for later. But Acts? You'll love every word.

But read. Read God's Word. If you're a screen person, download a Bible-reading app to your phone or tablet, and read it there. I don't care *how* you read Scripture. I simply care that you do.

As we close today, can I whet your appetite a little for the power-packed language you'll find, as you thoughtfully and intentionally engage with God's inspired Word? You can sit back for the next three or four minutes. Close your eyes if you wish. Just let these words wash over you, quenching the places in your soul that thirst.

- Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.¹²

- The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.¹³
- You have been my hope, Sovereign LORD, my confidence since my youth. From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother’s womb. I will ever praise you.¹⁴
- I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live.¹⁵
- Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.¹⁶
- If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.¹⁷
- Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word.¹⁸
- My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.¹⁹
- You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.²⁰
- Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.²¹
- Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.²²
- Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.²³
- He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.²⁴
- Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.²⁵
- We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.²⁶
- I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.²⁷

These words have a way about them, don’t they? You read them—or in this case, hear them—and your shoulders drop. Your mental RPMs settle down. Your heart rate calms. Your vision clears. Listen to me closely: You won’t ever regret the time you spend in God’s Word. Can I say that again? *You won’t ever regret the time you spend in God’s Word.*

CLOSER

A final thought, and then we’ll close. I know many people who get so fired up by a particular verse or passage of Scripture that they claim it as their “life verse.” They memorize it. They carry it with them in their heart. They consider it. They meditate on it, as the psalmist encourages us to do. They delight in it. They let it arbitrate decisions they make.

In your *Simplify* small group meeting this week, you'll explore the power of having a life verse—and if you don't already have a life verse, you will learn how to select one. I know it will be a profitable time.

Want to know what my life verse is? [*Pastor: Share your own life verse here, describing when you adopted it as your life verse and why it has been so meaningful to you along the way.*]

CLOSING PRAYER

All right. Shall we pray before we go? [*Pastor: Close the service in prayer, thanking God for empowering his followers to live simplified lives, lives of easy yokes, light burdens, and peace that passes understanding.*]

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² Exodus 33:12-13, *The Message*, copyright © by Eugene H. Peterson 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

³ Exodus 32:19

⁴ Psalm 37:23, *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

⁵ Mark 8:23

⁶ Mark 8:24

⁷ Daniel Goleman, *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2006), 68.

⁸ Proverbs 1:7; 2:20-22; 3:3-7, 21-26, 30-32; 4:18-19, 23-27; 6:12-19; 8:32-36; 10:22-23, 31-32; 11:5-6, 9, 17, 20, 28; 13:2-3; 14:14, 29; 15:1, 18; 17:9-10; 20:22, *The Message*.

⁹ Proverbs 3:3-4, *The Message*.

¹⁰ Proverbs 2:20, *The Message*.

¹¹ Proverbs 14:14, 29; 15:1, 18; 17:9, 10; 20:22, *The Message*.

¹² Lamentations 3:22-23

¹³ Zephaniah 3:17

¹⁴ Psalm 71:5-6

¹⁵ Psalm 116:1-2

¹⁶ James 1:27

¹⁷ 1 John 3:17-18

¹⁸ Psalm 119:37

¹⁹ Philippians 4:19

²⁰ 1 John 4:4

²¹ Proverbs 3:5-6

²² Isaiah 40:30-31

²³ Psalm 25:4-5

²⁴ 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

²⁵ 1 Peter 4:8

²⁶ 2 Corinthians 4:7-9

²⁷ Ezekiel 36:26-27