

*Discipleship 202: Just A #2 Pencil*

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*Ecclesiastes 5:10-6:2, 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12, Mark 6:7-13*

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Mark 6:7-13. Listen now to God's Word. "Calling the Twelve to him, he sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits. These were his instructions: "Take nothing for the journey except a staff-- no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra tunic. Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them." They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them."

This fall, we studied Discipleship 101. We talked about the basics of being a follower of Jesus...things like prayer and reading Scripture, discipline, accountability, fellowship, and worship. As we start the new year, we're moving into the second-level course, Discipleship 202. If Discipleship 101 gave us the basics, Discipleship 202 is going to stretch all of us, myself included. We're going to talk about areas of discipleship that the church has often neglected because they are difficult. Yet I've found that the very things that challenge us, we find the most rewarding at the end. As we plunge deeper into discipleship, we may feel pushed and pulled at times, but God will grow us as we follow Him into more difficult areas of the Christian life.

Moving on...do you remember #2 pencils? Pens and pencils come in all shapes and sizes, but the only kind you had to have was a #2 pencil. Whenever you took a standardized test like the SAT, the machines that read the test slips could only read the lead of a #2 pencil. And whenever you took a standardized test, they always told you beforehand, "All you need is a #2 pencil." Obviously they didn't want anybody cheating by bringing stuff into the testing room. But it also meant you didn't need anything else with you. Everything you'd need – the test itself, scratch paper for notes, rulers or protractors – they'd provide. You brought yourself, all that you'd learned (hopefully), and that pencil, and you were set.

You may wonder what a #2 pencil has to do with discipleship. It's this: God teaches us to live a life of simplicity. God has told us that He will provide us with everything we need. We bring ourselves and our hearts and the provision God has given, and He will do the rest. But to understand godly simplicity and practice it, we need to understand how God sees simplicity versus what we see in the world.

Defining simplicity can be difficult. Scripture tells us that Christian simplicity isn't about getting rid of everything and rejecting material things entirely. God blessed Abraham, the father of Israel; he was genuinely rich. God gave material possessions to His people, often abundantly. God isn't against extravagance at times. He promised the Israelites a land flowing with milk and honey, and Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding so the rejoicing could continue! Scripture finds a middle ground where we neither fall in love with possessions nor renounce them, but we appreciate them for what they are – God's gifts to us. Squabbling over what we don't have and hoarding what we do have takes us away from God's design.

Maybe the biggest conflict over simplicity in the Old Testament occurred during the exodus from Egypt. When Moses leads the people out of slavery, they wind up in the wilderness of Sinai. There's nothing out there to eat. So every morning, God provides manna. It was like a kind of seed that could be made into cakes. I can't help but think that people tried to get imaginative with their manna recipes. What's more, manna was proof of God's provision and favor. A daily miracle occurred right in front of the Hebrew people.

Yet the Israelites complained bitterly about the manna. Back in Egypt, they had fish and cucumbers and leeks and garlic and onions. They were so jealous for what they used to have that they wanted to go back to their backbreaking, soul-crushing slavery in Egypt rather than eat the miraculous food they were provided every day, simply because they got bored with it.

Now I thought about this for a long time. And I realize I would have been one of those complainers. We say that kids are picky eaters, and in a sense, that's true. But I know, at least for myself, that I don't even much like leftovers. After having a menu available to us with everything from pierogis to pork chops to pizza, how willing would we be to go on a diet of nothing but Hawaiian bread? Many of us who suffer from diabetes or allergies know how hard it is just to drop a single element out of our diet. We aren't much different than those Israelites. We even sympathize with them. We often dismiss God's provision because while it takes care of our every need, it isn't what we *want*.

The author of Ecclesiastes this morning lamented the difficulty of living with wealth. He talks about the grievous evil of having possessions yet being unable to enjoy them. One person consumes everything he's got and there's nothing left for his family. Another loses sleep and joy over all he possesses. The writer of Ecclesiastes writes that it's better we enjoy our work and have little than be unable to enjoy what we're given by God.

The people of Israel over the centuries went through both prosperity and poverty. Yet those experiences didn't teach even the religious Israelites how to live simply. Jesus said that the trusted religious leaders had become the oppressors. Priests created loopholes in the law to their gain, judges took bribes, and the temple had become a religious marketplace. The "religious" people enjoyed their status, power, and wealth on the backs of the impoverished.

In comparison, Jesus lived a radically simple life. He warned one man who said he'd follow Jesus anywhere, "Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." His disciples once asked Him to eat, but He replied, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to complete His work." While friends like Mary and Martha and Lazarus provided Him food and shelter when He visited, we see Him own nothing and ask for very little.

When Jesus sent out His disciples, they didn't look like the religious leaders whose robes and garments spoke to their position. They had no money to impress people or even a day's worth of bread. Their message of repentance, calling for their listeners to turn from sin and turn toward God, wasn't heard because they were rich or powerful; it was heard because their authority came from God, who gave them the power to heal and to drive out evil spirits. God gave them exactly what they needed for the journey.

When Jesus told them to stay in the first place they were welcomed until they left town, it was because many people might invite them in once they performed miracles in their midst. Other religious teachers looked to be invited into the best accommodations; Jesus wanted His followers to stay where they had been welcomed as simple travelers on a mission from God. And Jesus didn't promise them perfect sailing; He gave them instructions as to what to do if they weren't welcomed into a town. This would not be an easy journey, but one where they would grow in faith because God would provide for them.

Now not everyone is called to be a traveling evangelist. When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, he told them that there would be nothing better than for them to live a "quiet life" with regular work and a lack of idle gossip; that life would gain respect from those outside the church community. By doing this, Paul says literally, you will have need of nothing. Just like those in Thessaloniki, most of us aren't called to positions of authority and power. We aren't meant to be famous. We're simply meant to be faithful where we are with what we have.

So let's get to the heart of it. What are all these Scriptures saying to us? When Jesus spoke over and over again about money and wealth and possessions – the topic He talked about most based on what the Gospels record – what was He trying to get through? In studying simplicity this week, I had a couple thoughts I explored. The first one was this: *the opposite of Christian simplicity is not complexity but distraction and desire.*

In English, "simple" and "complex" are antonyms, polar opposites. But Christian simplicity is different altogether. In fact, God shows a love for immense complexity from the very design of the universe all the way down to the tiniest living things. The Scripture that God gave us is complex; that's why we don't just read the Bible but study it. Complexity isn't bad.

The enemies of Christian simplicity are distraction and desire. Simplicity calls on us to focus on God and His attributes, to enjoy His kindness and love, to be caught up in the wonder that is our Maker and Savior. Simplicity calls on us to live our lives in such a way that in our work, in our leisure, and in all we do, we don't lose sight of God. In comparison, distractions are blinders that hinder our vision, that block our view of God. Distractions are those things that lead us away from what it is we are supposed to be doing.

And distractions are fueled by desires. When James speaks to the church, he says, "Don't you know that these fights and quarrels that rage among you come from the cravings and desires that war within you? ... You covet what you cannot have, so you engage in disputes and conflicts." When we are distracted, it's because we are being pulled to desire something, often something we cannot have right at the moment.

If this was true 2000 years ago, it is the definition of how we live today. We live distracted lives. We create laws just to keep people from texting while driving. When television was introduced, getting three channels was rare. Now there are thousands of channels and tens of thousands of movies and shows available instantly. There are over 4500 Xbox games. There are millions of internet sites and billions of tweets and Facebook posts to follow. In the developed world, 97% of folks own cell phones; in the third world, it's over 47%. Technology has made it so that virtually anything or anyone is available anytime, anywhere.

But that same technology has us distracted to the point of danger. Focus is harder to sustain when everything comes at you at the speed of light. And what is it that's being pushed at us? Much of it appeals to our desires. You need these clothes, these movies, these cars; take these trips, see these sights, send your kids to these schools, support these causes so you will be thinner, taller, faster, more attractive, smarter, and more connected. We've been taught the lie that the person who dies with the most toys wins. The only way to truly win that game is to choose not to play. Because distraction is not just an inconvenience. The book of James tells us that temptation comes from the lure of our own evil desires. After desire has conceived, James says, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. The path of distraction is ultimately destruction.

With that in mind, here's my other main thought for the morning: *Christian simplicity is a desire to seek first the Kingdom of God which motivates us to remove anything from our lives that might replace God on the throne of our hearts.* In a famous passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us not to worry about what we eat or drink or wear. Most of us know the quote from the King James: "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." God promises to provide for us when we seek Him first...not everything we desire, but all the things we need for life.

But do we seek Him first? And if not, why not? Because if we truly believe Jesus' words, if God will provide all we need if we seek Him first, then it would only make logical sense to do it. I think we fail at it not because we don't believe it to be true. It's that seeking God seems far more difficult than attempting to get what we want by ourselves. And if God promises what we *need*, what about what we *want*? Ultimately, if we're going to genuinely seek God first, we need to start removing the distractions.

In the past, we've talked about removing sin out of our lives, and that's fundamental. The difference between sins and distractions is that the things that can distract us can, in the right situation used properly, serve a genuinely good and useful function. Clothes and food, chairs and beds and furniture, even television sets and telephones can have a real function that serves God's purposes. They can be used wisely as we seek wholeheartedly after the Kingdom of God.

But distractions are those things which distract *you* from God's Kingdom, that lead you down the path of worry and greed and sin. For example, I could give two rip snits about clothes. I never have. But if clothes make you start thinking about how you compare to your neighbors or how you'll look come next Sunday at church, then it's a distraction that can lead to sin. It's not about what distracts your neighbor; it's about that honest conversation between you and God and what's getting in the way of *your* relationship.

Each of us has our own distractions. This last week, our 13-year-old TV set smoked and sparked and sounded like it was gonna blow. Well before that happened, I'd started researching TVs. My college degree was in radio and television, I love films, and a nice big-screen TV looks very tempting. But then worry sets in. What if it's not the best TV? What if I don't like it as well as another model? What if the price goes down next week? Worrying about it doesn't help you write a sermon on simplicity! We may wait a few weeks...not just because TVs go on sale during the SuperBowl, but because I need to get some perspective, not another distraction.

There are other distractions, ones that aren't driven by our own interests and desires, and we need to be aware of them too. We need to give ourselves permission to step out of the rat race. It's OK not to be available all the time. It's OK to check email just once a day. It's OK not to be involved in everything. It's OK to have downtime and to unplug. Very little in this life that seems urgent truly is, and those things that are genuinely urgent – such as trusting in Christ and sharing Him with others – don't always seem to be. Getting rid of the distractions that surround us can help us sort out what is truly urgent and what isn't. We need to rethink anything, even our work, if it constantly pulls away from that which is really important.

I've been reading a book called *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster, whose primary concern is spiritual renewal in the church. He makes some suggestions on simplifying that I've turned into questions that might help us to work together to focus on God's Kingdom:

- Am I buying this item – this bike, this shirt, this house – because it is useful and needed or because it gives me status?
- Simplicity gives us freedom in Christ. Does anything – TV, books, soda – have me addicted so that I am not free?
- Do I need the things I have accumulated? Do I give anything away? Do I give away things I genuinely use and like, *especially* if I am attached to them?
- Is this purchase going to genuinely simplify my life or complicate it – *especially* if it claims it will simplify my life, as many gadgets do?
- Can I enjoy this thing without owning it? Do I take time to enjoy things in God's creation that are free?
- Am I taking on debt for any reason? Why?
- Do I speak and act simply, with honesty and integrity?

These questions aren't a list of do's and don'ts but a way to become aware of simple living. It doesn't do us any good to become legalistic about simplicity. Our focus is to be on God; we must find that delicate balance between living simply and becoming obsessed or focused on simplicity rather than focused on our Lord and Savior.

Focus on Christ is incredibly important because a lot of folks, not just Christians, are starting to realize the benefits of simplicity, of getting unplugged and living with less clutter and stress and stuff. There are plenty of people out there that will tell you how to simplify. But if God isn't our center and source, if God isn't the reason we simplify, simplifying becomes prideful and distracting itself. On the other hand, if we simplify to honor God, to please Him and to get closer to Him, as we declutter, He will break through in our lives more and more.

Friends, this is not an easy journey we've been called to take with Christ. Living simply, living without having to fulfill every desire or own everything the world says we need, is radically countercultural. And yet that was the life Jesus led, and it's a life that can be richly rewarding when it focuses us on God, the author and perfecter of our faith. I don't pretend to have all the answers on this one; I don't even claim to do it very well myself. But let's pledge to journey together as we listen and obey Christ's call to enjoy His provision and live in contentment with those blessings He gives.