



## 1 Abundant Life with God

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Matthew 6:19-21

As followers of Christ, many of us would like to live a conversational life with God and be filled with a deeper sense of God's companionship. We'd also like to change--to be more kind and less crabby, more generous and less self-absorbed, more genuine and less forced.

If we want these things enough, we may start reading books and attending classes and retreats, practicing disciplines usually taught there: solitude, silence, reflective prayer and meditative ways of reading Scripture. We often find these ways of relating to God to be nurturing and life-changing. We even talk about how we'll never read the Bible the same way or how we're opening up to hearing God in our life. We want more!

But when we get back to normal life, it doesn't work. Those possibilities seem to fade. That's because we try to breathe in the oxygen of real life with God without breathing out the daily chaos that chokes out such interaction.

One way to breathe out this frantic way of life is to weave disciplines of simplicity into the rhythm of our life. Such simplicity is the often overlooked factor in seeking God and soul-nurturing companionship with God. It is the unstated ingredient built into a retreat that isn't easily practiced at home and work. On retreat, speech is slower and simpler perhaps to the point of silence. Access to possessions (including clothing and electronics) is minimal so we are less distracted. Time flows slowly and easily. Leisure abounds. Without realizing it, we are practicing disciplines of simplicity: *simplicity of speech, frugality, spaciousness of time, holy leisure, simplicity of appearance and technology.*

Simplicity is not a discipline itself but a *way of being*. We let go of things that others consider normal. It is an "inward reality of single-hearted focus upon God and [God's] kingdom, which

results in an outward lifestyle of modesty, openness and unpretentiousness and which disciplines our hunger for status, glamour and luxury.”<sup>vi</sup> What causes this to happen is intentionally arranging our life around God and what God is doing in us and in this world and letting the rest drop off.

## **Experiments**

Such careful arrangement comes from following disciplines of simplicity, several of which (mentioned above) form chapters of this book. Within these categories, specific practices may be used to help us breathe out. For example, Carol experimented with simplicity when several of her friends at work were giving up things for lent. She didn’t ordinarily practice lent but the idea of simplifying drew her. To her husband’s surprise, she gave up shopping. The exception was that once a week she did grocery shopping for her family but for forty days she never bought anything for herself.

Whenever she thought about something she wanted to buy during that time, she said to God, “I’ll let it wait. You are enough.” By the end of the forty days, she’d forgotten about most of the things she wanted. Reflecting on her experiment, she notes: “I had more time for people because life was less hectic. Being in stores messes with your mind. It convinces you that you *need* things you don’t need at all.”

**CALL OUT:** By the end of the forty days, she’d forgotten about most of the things she wanted.

Carol’s experiment with setting aside shopping also gave way to more daily conversation with God as well as making more space for loving others. She experienced a little more of the abundant life here and now humans were created for--trusting God, abiding in Christ and living in terms of the Spirit (Mt 6:33; Lk 17:21). Living the moments of our day in this kingdom life brings about justice, joy and peace in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17).<sup>ii</sup>

## **Treasuring God**

You may be reading this book because you want to learn how to slow down and be happy, live a rich life by spending less, or work smarter not harder. Those things may occur as a natural part of simplicity--living more intentionally attuned to the presence of God’s Spirit--but they are only byproducts. The point of simplicity is not efficiency, increased productivity, or even living a healthier, more relaxed life. The point is making space for treasuring God’s own self (Matthew 6:19-21).

“The most important commandment of the Judeo-Christian tradition is to treasure God and his realm more than anything else,” says philosopher and author Dallas Willard. “That is what it means to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. It means to *treasure* him, to hold him and his dear, and to protect and aid him in his purposes.”<sup>iii</sup> Disciplines of simplicity equip us to gather treasures in heaven, which Dallas describes as: investing our life in what God is doing; investing in our relationship to Jesus himself (and through him to God); and devoting ourselves to the good of other people—those around us within the range of our power to affect.<sup>iv</sup>

So the Christian focus of simplicity is to abide in Christ or what we might call “hanging out” with God. As a result of this abiding in Christ, fruit such as love, joy and peace appear organically (Jn 15:1-17, especially vv. 4-5), which creates an obedience that is so empowered and remarkable that it surprises us (15:10-17). This is the change we’ve been looking for.

### **Bloated Christians**

One way practices of simplicity help us connect with God is quite practical. They clear the mind and calendar to make room for better things (such as holy leisure and gut-level prayer). Without simplicity practices, people wake up in the morning and begin filling their mind with a list of things to do. They can’t pause because they feel driven to:

- be busy and be productive;
- to get going on all the things they’ve promised to do;
- clean, fix and tidy up their possessions;
- give their feedback about crucial situations;
- do whatever’s needed to participate in the current frenzy for physical attractiveness.

To limit time and attention spent on these things is not to miss out. In fact, it’s a relief. A life of personal interaction and adventure with God gives rise to being content with making an adequate income and living in one’s current apartment or home. We can see the beauty in these things as gifts from God. We live life treasuring God and what God is doing today.

In the recent past, however, followers of Christ have practiced mostly disciplines of engagement, such as study, prayer, service, worship, and fellowship. Disciplines of engagement are what help us take in life of God while disciplines of abstinence (for example, fasting, solitude, silence, chastity, secrecy, frugality, and simplicity of speech and time) help us let go of life-draining behaviors. We need to exhale what is unnecessary as well as inhale nurture from God. Practices of simplicity then keep us from being bloated and swollen—unable to digest or use the information and nurture that we have taken in. Only as we say no to certain things is space created to say yes to God in living adventurous abundant lives full of relationships and meaning.

**CALL OUT:** Disciplines of engagement are like breathing in and disciplines of abstinence are like breathing out. We need to exhale as well as inhale.

This choosing the engaging, relational life we were built to live is described better by Pedro Arrupe, S. J.:

Nothing is more practical than finding God, than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything.

It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you will do with your evening, how you spend your weekends, what you read, whom you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.<sup>v</sup>

## **Unchanged and Stuck**

This engagement-discipline-only tendency often creates people who seem filled up (as we say) but become agitated when things don't go their way or when you and I don't do what they think we should do. They may even know, do and teach spiritual practices but still seem to be impatient or egotistical or pushy. They have often not practiced disciplines of abstinence, which prune away our self-indulgence and willfulness, which we may prefer to call stubbornness (John 15:2). Abstinence disciplines train us to be sweet and content when we don't get what we want, which might be an achievement, a doughnut, deserved recognition, others doing things our way, or any possession that comes into our mind.

If we don't practice abstinence disciplines regularly, we find ourselves stuck. We have to rely on our own devices to get people to do things (yelling at them, making power plays) or to find inappropriate nurture (being defined by our job, checking out internet porn). We're unable to be transformed, no matter how much we pray or meditate, because there's so much stuff in us that needs undoing. We may not even be aware of the seeming unchangeable patterns in ourselves that crush others and sabotage ourselves: how we use words, possessions, and busyness to feel important, manage other people's opinions of us and most of all, to get people to do what we want. An inner neediness of soul pushes us to indulge ourselves and work harder to get people to like us.

To get a glimpse of this, think about how you felt the last few times you did something about which you now feel twinges of regret: you said or spent too much, you tried too hard to impress someone, you put too much effort into trying to have fun, or you spent a little too many hours wandering the internet or watching television shows because you were bored.

As simplicity disciplines nudge us into temporarily not doing these things, we see how deeply we count on them to (falsely) feel nurtured and acceptable. We also see how they suck up our time, drain our energy and create craziness in our inner life. Simplicity's undoing process creates space for God to work with our motives and thoughts. We begin asking ourselves, Can I let go of this grudge, this dessert, this role, or this incredible phone and rely on God to meet my needs instead? As this neediness of soul becomes clear, we use disciplines of engagement to find the specific kind of nurture from God we truly need.

In this undoing process we learn to rely on God minute-by-minute for practical things when we don't seem to have what we need or want. This greater dependence on God, in turn, rehabilitates those patterns we don't want to think about. This is not punishing but freeing. We shed ways of speaking, spending time, energy and money that are pretentious and perhaps forced. Choosing what to buy and how to enjoy leisure becomes less complicated because we make intentional and unadorned choices. We become clear-headed in our thinking.

As life becomes more outwardly simple, it becomes more inwardly rich. It also becomes more fun because we can focus on one thing at a time without being stressed. With greater satisfaction of heart, our restlessness (*I'm bored . . . I need to . . .*) disappears. We move toward being a more contented person who finds it easier to experience unexpected adventures with God as we say yes to God in new ways.

CALL OUT: As life becomes more outwardly simple, it becomes more inwardly rich.

### **More of Jesus, Less of Ego**

Simplicity is an organic part of an interactive life with God that Sharon illustrates well by her family's adventure: "What happened was just a next step in apprenticeship to Jesus. Bob and I sold our house and scaled back. We were not trying to do anything heroic or exemplary. Because of the kindness of God, this seemed wise, smart, and even relaxed.

"It began because I had a longing for God that found practice and intimacy in a life of solitude and silence, fasting, and contemplative reading. Reading these books drew me to live a more generous life, by invitation not by guilt. I wanted more of God and wanted to live in the kingdom now, and not just talk about it. I began seeing Jesus as someone who cared about real people, not just about correct doctrine. As I talked with Jesus about what was on his heart, wealth display seemed like it wouldn't make his top ten list.

CALL OUT: I wanted more of God and wanted to live in the kingdom now, and not just talk about it.

"Also, our worldly way of accumulation was not working. It turned out to be time consuming. Achieving and maintaining the magazine home was an exhausting burden, even with help to keep it up. So my desire also arose out of failure as well as the gentle proddings of God.

"It has been so liberating. With the freed up money, we were able not only to buy a smaller house for ourselves but also to hold the loan for a Congolese immigrant family we'd begun working with. With reduced economic pressures, we were able to give more. Once we started to live more simply, it made shopping a waste of time because we didn't want more stuff to enter our house.

"Because I wanted more time for God, I began eliminating activities. This freed emotional space, so I was increasingly able to consider new ideas that came to my attention that seemed to be more on God's radar than my next tennis match. Tennis is fine, of course, but it was something I was willing to give up in order to have more of Jesus. Plus, I was a lousy tennis player!"

Sharon continues, "This simplifying of time and money also came out of a concern for character formation. A new thought wiggled into my mind: I could be free of the compelling drive to demand my way (nicely, of course). Until this point, it seemed the only natural way to live. My practice of fasting confirmed this. I realized I was just fine without what I wanted (food). Then I

started to test it out in other areas of life. Simplifying has been one of the greatest adventures for me. Life has gotten more interesting. I really like it.”

Sharon’s journey began with a longing for God and she began having conversations with God about this. She found that the narrow door to life that is truly life is difficult to pass through with her arms full of all the stuff she owned, tasks to do and leisure opportunities to grab (Mt 7:13-14; 1 Tim 6:19). One of those gentle proddings of God was that they noticed their life of amassing possessions wasn’t working. Noticing this is not easy because it’s such a counter-cultural notion. She and Bob’s decisions resulted not only in freedom from financial pressures but also in freedom to participate in the adventure of helping an immigrating family. Sharon also saw herself freed from that compelling drive to have her way.

## **Examining The Heart**

The undoing process of simplicity disciplines can feel uncomfortable, however, because they reveal the little things we do to be noticed or to indulge ourselves. We didn’t know we were hooked on luxuries, getting other people’s attention or dressing to impress until we temporarily abstained from them for a week or a day or an hour. Then we find we’ve used these things to prop ourselves up or push ourselves forward. We begin wondering, *Why does it devastate me to think about giving away this item? Why was it so important that I mention that accomplishment? Will I make a decent impression if my clothes don’t make a “statement of me”?* Disciplines of simplicity help us realize that we don’t yet trust God to help us feel acceptable when we’re not managing what others think of us.

As these awarenesses of treasuring so many other things besides God come to the surface, we ask ourselves (and God), *What have been the subtle payoffs of my busy schedule, gathering knowledge of trivia, or owning the latest technology?* We may be shocked to discover we’re continually concerned with “impression management” or devoted to creating a certain image. Disciplines of simplicity typically reveal self-serving motives we thought only other people had: pride, greed and desires to control.

**CALL OUT:** What have been the subtle payoffs of busy schedules, gathering knowledge of trivia, or owning the latest technology?

Without these conversations, our transformation will be shortchanged. They create a *self-awareness that is central to transformation* because they show us the reality of how our self-referenced thinking dominates our decisions and exalts what we truly treasure. Indeed, the devotional masters stressed the twin themes of knowing God *and knowing ourselves* in how the Spirit works with us.<sup>vi</sup> If we are to journey toward transformation into Christlikeness, we need to know “what is”: what we are truly like today. Being unaware of our faults fools us into thinking that the external doing of practices is enough. No. True abiding in Christ will help me see God’s radiant beauty but also my internal self-centeredness and absurdities. The heart exams of simplicity disciplines help us recognize, surrender and begin to work through our shortcomings with God.

**ALTERNATE CALL OUT:** Self-awareness is central to transformation.

Perhaps it sounds too devastating to recognize your character defects this way. God gives us grace to be gentle with ourselves. The Holy Spirit does not make us aware of our shortcomings to make us feel guilty so we'll force ourselves to shape up. (This doesn't work anyway; the distraction of guilt keeps us stuck and distances us from God.). We are given insightful awareness so we have a place to start. Such reality is safe because God is not mad at us, but mad about us. So God is a safe shelter for us to face our underlying motives and to determine the next steps.

Without such heart exam moments, we continue living the unexamined life of a sleepwalker, which philosophy professor Tom Morris describes well: “getting up, dressing, eating, going to work, breaking for lunch, working some more, going home, eating again, watching TV, leafing through magazines, exchanging a few words with fellow family members in the house or with friends on the phone, changing for bed, and falling to sleep—just to repeat the same routine all over, and over and over, without ever thinking about what it all means or how life should be really lived.”<sup>vii</sup>

I confess that some of my experiments with simplicity have made me extremely disappointed over discovering that I was obsessed with me. I thought I was selfless but in fact I was preoccupied with what others thought of what I said. It was tempting to go back to the sleep walking life. But I also realized that no one—not God, not the angels, and certainly not my husband—was surprised by my self-obsession. Only I was. To be disillusioned with my needy spiritual state was to make my spirituality about *me* (more self-obsession) when I wanted it to be about God. My job was to ask God to show me my next small step and to empower me to take it. Then I needed to continue being open to what God might say to me.

Our misguided motives do not need to surprise us. The big deal is never our spiritual status, but God. We need to “get over” ourselves and our inadequacies and let Jesus become the central figure on the computer screen of our minds. It's not about “getting it right” but following Jesus because that's the wisest, most winsome thing we could ever do.

**CALL OUT:** It's not about “getting it right” but following Jesus because that's the wisest, most winsome thing we could ever do.

### **Not Getting Sidetracked**

To keep focused on treasuring God, set aside these ways of thinking.

*Trying too hard.* All spiritual disciplines are the way of *experiment* and *adventure*. We ask, What would it *look like* to trust God enough not to promote myself by means of overcommitment and a hurried life? To *force ourselves* to try certain practices that others try or to try to *achieve* simplicity doesn't work. Such coercion defeats self-awareness by requiring us to numb ourselves in order to adhere to the rigors of the practice.

Perhaps more sadly, if we force ourselves to do these things and seem successful, we become self-righteous. We begin to think we're better than others because they haven't given up what

we've given up. *See how frugal I am, especially compared to you!* Eventually I resent you because I gave up certain things and you didn't, but now you get more attention than I do.

CALL OUT: All spiritual disciplines are the way of *experiment* and *adventure*.

Simplicity disciplines may be especially challenging for you if you're hooked on looking good, feeling good, having people like you or not wanting people to misjudge you. In those cases, it's wise to ask God what practices would be most helpful and not force yourself into simplicity martyrdom (throwing the cell phone into the fountain at the strip mall you vow to never frequent again). Keep in mind that *God woos and draws us into unusual but appropriate practices of simplicity*. From them (and the conversations with God they create) come simplicity of life.

ALTERNATE CALL OUT: God woos and draws us into unusual but appropriate practices of simplicity.

Feel free to tweak the suggested experiments offered at the end of each chapter if they seem too extreme. Start small. (Or if you're more experienced, tweak them so that they mess with your distractions and desires a little more.) Be alert that the Holy Spirit will help you come up with versions that fit you much better than anything I could suggest. It's OK to let go of things slowly: "Above all, trust in the slow work of God."<sup>viii</sup>

*Thinking you have to add more activities to your life.* Disciplines of simplicity cause us to arrange differently what we *already* do (speak to others, spend money, schedule our day or have fun), not to do more things. These different ways of living lift us out of bondage and help relate to people in more genuine ways. We take on less, not more.

*Thinking simplicity practices are only about cutting back.* They are more about focusing in. Every *no* (to a shopping trip or watching a television show) makes space for a *yes* to something else, even if it's to just be, to be still, or to be still and be glad that God is God. So any practice of simplicity, no matter how small, invites us to take a step on the path of treasuring God and trusting God to be our life as we let go of other things.

In fact, you will experience more abundance in your life. Because disciplines of simplicity create more space to experience fellowship with God, we no longer drag our impoverished selves to church every week to get fixed by hearing about and claiming more promises of God. For example, less time spent on the internet and more time spent taking a walk and asking ourselves and perhaps others with us, For what am I most grateful for today? (the prayer of examen)<sup>ix</sup> creates interaction with God and gratefulness to be alive. Or less shopping allows us time to read a few verses of Scripture slowly and sit in them to get a sense of what God invites us into each day. With such a God-nurtured life, we don't need a maximum-style weekend experience to get us through the week. We begin trusting God's very own self in daily life so that when we fellowship with others at church, we have more to give (1 Cor 14:26). The abiding life overflows.

## **Experiments With Simplicity**



Think of one or two people you know who live simply. Note how simplicity helps them. (But also be honest with yourself—have you at times thought they were naïve?) Because simplicity, like goodness, is more caught than taught, talk with them about simplicity and see what they say.

Meditate on Matthew 6:19-21. Why would Jesus speak of God as the treasure? Underline any ideas in the chapter that lead you to believe that God being our treasure is a good idea. If you wish God to be your treasure, tell God so.

Make plentiful use of this prayer of self-awareness: Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me and know my anxious thoughts that drive me to distraction and excess. See if there is any offensive, ostentatious way in me and lead me in your glorious way everlasting. (Ps 139:23-24, NIV, paraphrased to move toward simplicity and away from complexity). As you pray it, paraphrase it to suit what you discover as self-awareness increases.

Experiment with how disciplines of abstinence work by going without caffeine or sweets or chocolate for a few hours or days. Note how easy or difficult it is to be nice to people when feeling deprived.

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

1. What stood out most to you in this chapter? Why?
2. Do you tend to let self-awareness help you or do you beat yourself up with it? If God were going to say something to you about self-awareness, what do you think God might say to you?
3. How do you respond to Sharon's story? What did you like or dislike about what she chose to do and what happened to her as a result?
4. Which of the traps about simplicity might you fall prey to, if any: forcing yourself to do things trying to achieve it, making it one more thing to do, thinking this is just all beyond you?
5. What does this chapter lead you to want to pray?

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i *Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible* (San Francisco, Ca: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), p. 2313.

ii For more about the kingdom of God, see Dallas Willard *The Divine Conspiracy Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco, Ca: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), pp.

iii Dallas Willard *The Divine Conspiracy Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco, Ca: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 203. (italics not mine in case you're wondering)

iv Ibid., 205.

v Fr. Pedro Arrupe, S.J. General of the Society of Jesus quoted in Richard Rohr *Everything Belongs* (NY: Crossroad Publishing, 2003), p. 122 (elsewhere I found this documentation: last major essay on Ignatian spirituality, "Rooted and Grounded in Love" (1981).

[http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article\\_id=10386](http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=10386)

vi Thomas a Kempis *The Imitation of Christ* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1955), p. 35. Or 1.3.4 in any edition.

vii Tom Morris, Ph.D. *Philosophy for Dummies* (New York: Wiley Publishing, 1999), p. 17.

viii Pierre Teilhard de Chardin "Patient Trust" line 1. *Hearts on Fire: Praying with Jesuits* Michael Harter SJ, ed. (St. Louis, Mo: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1993), p. 58.

ix An excellent but simple resource for the prayer of examen is the book *Sleeping with Bread* by Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn and Matthew Linn.