An American investment banker was at the pier of a small coastal Mexican village when a small boat with just one fisherman docked.  Inside the small boat were several large yellowfin tuna.  The banker complimented the fisherman on the quality of his fish and asked how long it took to catch them.

The fisherman replied, “Only a little while.” The American then asked why didn’t he stay out longer and catch more fish? The fisherman said he had enough to support his family’s immediate needs. The banker then asked, “but what do you do with the rest of your time?”

The fisherman said, “I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take siestas with my wife, Maria, stroll into the village each evening where I sip wine, and play guitar with my amigos.  I have a full and busy life.”

The banker scoffed, “I am a Harvard MBA and could help you. You should spend more time fishing and with the proceeds, buy a bigger boat. With the proceeds from the bigger boat, you could buy several boats, eventually you would have a fleet of fishing boats. Instead of selling your catch to a middleman you would sell directly to the processor, eventually opening your own cannery. You would control the product, processing, and distribution. You would need to leave this small coastal fishing village and move to Mexico City, then LA, and eventually New York City, where you will run your expanding enterprise.”

The fisherman asked, “But, how long will this all take?” The banker replied, “15–20 years.” “But what then?” asked the fisherman.

The banker said, “That’s the best part.  When the time is right you would announce an IPO and sell your company stock to the public and become very rich. You would make millions!” The fisherman was in awe. He asked, “Millions – then what?”

The banker said, “Then you would retire.  Move to a small coastal fishing village where you would sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, take siestas with your wife, stroll to the village in the evenings where you could sip wine and play your guitar with your amigos.”

Have you ever stopped to think about how much of your day consists of noise? How much of your daily life consists of going after things of this world? There are distractions everywhere in our culture today and we just add more and more all the time. Our jobs, the news, TV shows, magazines, our stuff, our hobbies, our kids’ extracurricular activities and sports. Distractions and noise can even come from things that are good, like friends and family. If we let them, they can all steal our time with God, keep us distracted, out of focus.

Our ultimate goal as disciples of Jesus should be to keep our focus on him. Jesus said in:

**Matthew 6:31–33 ESV — 31** Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ **32** For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. **33** But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Jesus’ point is that we run after all these things of the world to make us feel secure. To make us feel like we’re successful. To make us feel like we’re doing okay. What we really need is to focus our lives on God, focus on seeking his kingdom first. That’s really difficult to do in a world that is screaming for our attention at every turn.

Two of the things that will help us to keep our attention and our focus where it needs to be are solitude and silence. Now those are probably both things that we don’t think of as spiritual disciplines very often. But both of those practices help us to get centered on God. They help us get our priorities straight and keep our focus where it should be.

The lack of simplicity in our lives leads us to an unhealthy attachment to material things. My wife calls me overly sentimental about things, and she’s right. I’ve come a long way since we got married. Right before we got married I had two great big boxes of stuff that didn’t really have any other purpose than just being sentimental. We were moving into a really small apartment after the wedding and we just didn’t have room for that stuff anymore, so I had to pare it down a lot. What had really happened is I let myself get attached to stuff.

When we get attached to things we start to forget what’s really important. We start to crave things we don’t need or enjoy. We buy things to impress people instead of buying them because we need them. To our culture, being in fashion, having the popular stuff, whether that’s cars, clothes, purses, shoes, or cell phones, is a priority.

What we don’t realize is that our society is sick. Our society has its priorities all wrong. If we conform to a sick society, we become sick ourselves. Until we see how unbalanced our culture is, we won’t be able to deal with our desires for stuff and we won’t desire simplicity.

We’ve coined new and inoffensive terms for some of the evil desires within us. Jealousy we now call ambition. Hoarding we call prudence. Greed we call industry. We tend to judge people’s worth on how much money they earn. We talk about ‘net worth’ as if it’s the measure of a person. The world’s standard of the worth of a person is all about what they have. But the Bible has a completely different viewpoint about our stuff.

**Leviticus 25:23 NIV — 23** “ ‘The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers.

All the ideas we get about our possessions being ours, being something we earned, those are the world’s ideas. God says everything we have belongs to him. We don’t think of our things that way because of our feeling that if we worked for it, it’s ours. If we bought it, it’s ours. If we had the good fortune to stumble on something good, it’s ours.

When God was bringing the Israelites into the promised land, he told them about how amazing it was going to be, but then he also told them to remember who had given them that land.

**Deuteronomy 8:17 ESV — 17** Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.’

**Psalm 50:9–12 ESV — 9** I will not accept a bull from your house or goats from your folds. **10** For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. **11** I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. **12** “If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine.

**Psalm 62:10 NIV — 10** ...though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

**Proverbs 11:28 NIV — 28** Those who trust in their riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.

Simplicity gives us the proper perspective. Instead of our perspective about our stuff being ’I earned it, it’s mine, I did that’. Simplicity makes our perspective into ’God gave me that, and it’s not really mine. It’s to share with people. To show his love to others’. Instead of trusting in what we have and seeking after the things of the world, the discipline of simplicity helps us trust in God and seek after him.

Jesus spoke about money more than any other single issue. He told us we can’t serve both God and money. He said where our treasure is, our heart will be also. He said not to store up treasures on earth, but to store up treasures in heaven. He told a rich young man who desired to follow after him that he need to value following Jesus more than his possessions. He said that those who store up possessions for themselves here on earth are not prudent, as we might think. Jesus called them fools. The world of the first century was very simple compared to ours. So how much more should we be paying attention to what Jesus said about simplicity?

We see simplicity elsewhere in the Bible as well.

**1 Timothy 6:9 NIV — 9** Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.

**Hebrews 13:5 NIV — 5** Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”

Now I want to be very clear about something. What the Bible says about money does not mean God wants us out on the streets with no roof over our heads. This world is God’s creation. He called it good and he wants us to enjoy it.

God never calls us to asceticism, or giving up all material things for our faith. In fact asceticism and simplicity are very different. Asceticism renounces all possessions. Simplicity just puts them in the proper perspective. There is no place in asceticism for the good and wonderful things God provides. Simplicity rejoices in the things God provides. Asceticism is only satisfied when you are living an impoverished life. Simplicity is what Paul talks about in Philippians 4.

**Philippians 4:12 NIV — 12** I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

It didn’t matter if Paul was rich or if he was poor, if he had great influence, or if he had no influence at all, if he had invested well and had a big savings account, or if he didn’t have a dollar to his name. The problem with money is not the money itself, it’s our attitude towards it. The problem is our love of money over God. Our focus on money and the things of this world over God.

We run into much the same problem with solitude. We’re talking about these two disciplines together because it’s basically the same problem. When our hearts are off balance, when our focus is in the wrong place, we run after the wrong things.

Just like we fill our lives and our homes and our driveways with stuff, we also tend to try to fill our lives with noise and with busyness. Just like we fill our lives and our houses with stuff. You can think of the noise and busyness of our lives as cluttering up our hearts the way we clutter our houses with stuff. We need some time away from that. We need to move away from the standard of the world around us. That’s where the discipline of solitude comes in.

When you think about it, we are pretty much constantly surrounded by noise. How many of you, the first thing you do when you get in the car is turn on the radio? When you get home, the first thing you do is turn on the TV? My grandparents had a radio that they kept in the kitchen that was on 24/7. It was always on an AM radio station. I couldn’t stand it, but they always had to have that noise.

Many of us are uncomfortable and maybe even afraid of silence and solitude. So even when we are alone, we find ways of adding in the noise and clatter of the TV or the radio. Practicing solitude does not mean we can never watch TV or listen to the radio in the car. It’s not all about being quiet and alone all the time. As we talked about at the beginning of this series, the spiritual disciplines are much more about the condition of our hearts than about what we do. Solitude is more about where your heart is at than how many people are around you.

Richard Foster talks about a solitude of the heart that can be in place no matter how many people are around. It’s very possible to not be around any other people and never experience true solitude. But it’s also very possible to have the inner attitude of solitude even in the midst of a large crowd of people.

Dietrich Bonheoffer wrote a book called *Life Together*. It’s an excellent book all about community with other Christians. He has a chapter in that book called The Day Together, which makes sense in a book called *Life Together*. But the very next chapter is called The Day Alone. Both are essential for spiritual success. Bonheoffer says, “Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. Let him who is not in community beware of being alone. Each by itself has profound pitfalls and perils. One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and the one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation, and despair”.

That means we have to be intentional about seeking out solitude if we want to be with other people in any meaningful way. We also have to have fellowship and accountability in order to have genuine solitude.

A big part of solitude is silence. Those two go hand in hand. Without silence, there is no solitude. Silence could mean that you don’t speak, but silence always means listening for God’s voice. You could be quiet all day long, but if you’re not listening to God, it’s not the kind of silence that helps us practice the discipline of solitude that brings us closer to Jesus.

The purpose of solitude and silence and simplicity is focusing on the right things. It’s about getting to a place where our distractions go away and we are able to see and hear God working and speaking in our lives. These disciplines aren’t so much about not being alone and silent as they are about keeping ourselves under control.

**Ecclesiastes 3:1, 7 ESV — 1** For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:.. **7** ...a time to be silent and a time to speak,

**Proverbs 25:11 ESV — 11** A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.

Here’s the thing, if we speak when we should be silent, we are obviously not living out these disciplines. But if we are silent when we should be speaking, then we are also not living these disciplines. It’s all about controlling our tongues and urges and keeping our focus on God.

James compares our tongues to the rudder of a large ship. It gives control, guidance. Such a small thing controls something enormous. But it’s hard for us to remain silent sometimes. It makes us feel helpless. We tend to start talking and keep talking because we are trying to control how other people see us. Jesus wasn’t worried about that. He practiced silence and solitude all the time.

**Luke 6:12 ESV — 12** In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God.

**Matthew 14:13 ESV — 13** Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself….

**Matthew 14:23 ESV — 23** And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone.

**Mark 6:31 ESV — 31** And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.”...

**Luke 5:16 ESV — 16** But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.

Jesus sought out times and places to be alone. He was often surrounded by crowds, but he took the time to go and be alone with the Father.

Both simplicity and solitude are disciplines that help us deal with the same fundamental problem of having our focus shifted to something other than God. Simplicity can reorient and refocus our lives and our hearts so that we can genuinely enjoy our possessions without letting them control us. All the times Jesus talked about how it would be difficult for the rich to enter heaven, the answer is simplicity. Without simplicity we either fall into materialism, or we go the opposite route and fall into asceticism. Neither are what God wants for us. Both lead to a kind of idolatry. Both will slowly pull us further away from God.

Solitude is the discipline that gives us freedom and ability to stop and be silent for a time, so that we can quiet ourselves and hear God’s still small voice. If you remember back to when we talked about meditation, we defined it as the ability to hear and obey God’s voice. We need silence and solitude to be able to practice meditation well. These disciplines go hand in hand.

One of the dangers of simplicity is that we will become legalistic about it. Most of us conveniently ignore Jesus’ words on the subject of simplicity. But when we do try to follow them, we face the temptation of legalism. We tend to start identifying simplicity as the specific things that we do that might constitute a simple life. Giving up eating out, giving money to the needy, buying off brand clothes, doing away with extravagances that aren’t necessary.

But the truth is that simplicity has nothing to do with things we give up. It has everything to do with our attitude and our focal point. Both simplicity and solitude help us focus on the right thing. We find out what that focal point should be in:

**Matthew 6:31–33 ESV — 31** Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ **32** For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. **33** But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

The way to lead a life of simplicity, the way to have the right attitude about your stuff, is to seek the kingdom of God first. Make that your primary goal, your first priority, your biggest achievement. You cannot overstate that point in your life, that seeking God’s kingdom comes first. If we want to be disciples of Jesus, we have to keep our priorities straight. Nothing can come before seeking God’s kingdom, or we aren’t really seeking God’s kingdom.

Soren Kierkegaard, who was a Christian philosopher asked the question what sort of effort should be made to pursue the kingdom of God. He said, “Should a person get a suitable job in order to exert a virtuous influence? No we must first seek God’s kingdom. Should we give away all our money to feed the poor? No we must first seek God’s kingdom. Maybe we should go out and preach that truth to the world, that people are to seek first God’s kingdom? No we are first to seek the kingdom of God.”

You see if anything, even with the best of intentions, keeps us from seeking first the kingdom of God, then we have failed to keep that as a priority. None of the things Kierkegaard mentioned are wrong, none are bad. But none of them can be our priority if we are to truly seek the kingdom of God. His conclusion is, “..then in a certain sense it is nothing I shall do. Yes…in a certain sense it is nothing, become nothing before God, learn to keep silent; in this silence is the beginning, which is first to seek God’s Kingdom.”

The way we learn to seek first the Kingdom of God instead of seeking after all the things the world has to offer is by practicing these disciplines of simplicity and solitude. To make seeking first the Kingdom of God our priority, we have to block out all the noise of this world.

Several things start to happen as we learn to practice these disciplines. 1. First, we learn to do away with extravagance. We won’t be attached to our stuff in unhealthy ways. We also will find ourselves buying things because we need them, not because of the status they might bring us.

2. Second, our speech will start to change. A person’s tongue serves as kind of a spiritual thermometer. It’s one indicator that lets us know how we are doing in becoming more like Jesus. Practicing silence and solitude let us use our tongues not only as thermometer, but also as a thermostat. It will help us gauge how we are doing spiritually, but also help us control ourselves.

**James 3:2 ESV — 2** ...if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect [or mature, or complete] man, able also to bridle his whole body.

Controlling our tongues helps us control the rest of us as well. 3. You’ll also find that God tends to work on changing you through the stillness of silence and solitude maybe more than any other time. God works in our lives and on our hearts when we give him deliberate time away from everything else and let him have control.

When we are practicing the discipline of solitude, 4. we will increase our sensitivity and compassion for others. Thomas Merton said, “It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers. The more solitary I am the more affection I have for them... Solitude and silence teach me to love my brothers for what they are, not for what they say.”

So I want to give you some practical ways to put these into practice in your life. Just remember that the whole point of these disciplines is not simply to practice them, but to help us seek first the Kingdom of God and get closer to Jesus. Practicing simplicity means having the right perspective on our stuff.

1. Buy things for their usefulness instead of their status. Buy clothes only when you need new clothes, not because a new style or fashion popped up on the supermarket magazine rack. Buy the car you need, not the car that looks best in your driveway.

2. Get rid of anything in your life that produces an addiction in you. Food, TV, soda, tobacco. Even if that means getting rid of your TV. Even if that means you stop drinking coffee. If you are addicted to something, it means you are a slave to it. Refuse to be a slave to anything but Jesus.

3. Develop a habit of giving things away. When you find yourself getting attached to your stuff, give it away. It’s amazing how much stuff you can accumulate in just a short time. Beth and I will have moved six times in almost 12 years. The amount of stuff you accumulate over the years is staggering. We can blame it on the kids, but really we have a lot of stuff because we’ve bought a lot of stuff. Don’t be wasteful, but give things away.

4. No matter what the TV says, you don’t need the newest iPhone or washer or dryer, or the latest model car. Your kids and grandkids will be perfectly happy without the latest gadget or toy. Buying the best sometimes seems like a better investment, but you don’t always need the latest and greatest.

5. Avoid as much debt as possible. That’s just good financial advice, but realize that debt is also a form of bondage. **Proverbs 22:7 ESV — 7** The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender.

 Don’t be a slave to anything but Jesus!

6. The last and most important in this discipline of simplicity, do away with anything that distracts you from seeking first the kingdom of God.

When you start to practice solitude, you will likely have people in your life who will try to keep you from doing so. They might mean well, but some people look at being by yourself as a bad thing. 1. Don’t listen to people who try to distract you from seeking first the Kingdom of God.

2. Take advantage of the little times throughout our days when we have moments of solitude. Those few moments between when you wake up and when you get out of bed. While you’re drinking your morning coffee. When you get caught in traffic for a few minutes or have to wait in line. Give those times to God. Let those be times where you sit in silence and listen for the voice of God. Taking those little moments can help us to reorient our lives. Capturing those little moments helps us to be genuinely present in our day.

3. Instead of a vocal prayer when you pray with other people, use that time to be silent as a group for a few moments. Use that time not only to pray, but to listen for the voice of God.

4. Find a specific quiet place where you can go and be alone and have some solitude. Maybe it’s a special chair in your house. Maybe it’s a corner in the public library. Maybe it’s a booth at a restaurant or coffee shop, or a park bench where you can go and be alone. Whatever it is, find yourself a place where you can have some solitude.

5. Live in silence for a while, maybe even an entire day. Don’t be legalistic about it, just use it as an experiment, just let it be a time of silence for God, listening for his voice.

6. Let you words be full and few. Become known as someone who has something to say when they speak. We all know people who just can’t stop talking. If you never stop talking, eventually people stop listening.

7. Take some time every year, several times a year if you can, to withdraw for a while. Take a retreat so that you can be in solitude with God, with no other motives in mind.

Simplicity, silence, and solitude were tough things to do in Jesus’ time. That’s why he taught about them so much. They are probably even harder in our culture today that puts so much emphasis on stuff and noise and busyness. But if we want to get closer to Jesus, if we want a deeper relationship with him, then practicing these two disciplines in our lives can be the thing that helps us keep our focus on seeking first the Kingdom of God.