

Study 7. The Main Thing

Becoming a Disciple Series

Warm-up Question: Share with one another one or two of the words of wisdom statements that either of your parents used to make.

I believe it was Steven Covey who first said that the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. Over the many years now that I have walked with Christ, I have seen that the body of Christ (The Church) is a multi-faceted body. Like a diamond with its many cuts glimmering with different colors, the body of Christ in each place emphasizes different goals and priorities in ministry, reaching beyond each local area to the world. Sometimes we can find that the main thing ceases to be the main thing. What should be the “main thing” in each local body of Christ? Plans and strategies are good, but they are only tools. A strategy or mission should support the Great Commission that the Church has been given, and not become the end in itself. I want to highlight this point with a story I came across.

The Parable of the Lifesaving Station

On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur there was once a crude little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves, they went out day or night tirelessly searching for the lost. This excellent little station saved many lives so that it became famous. Some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding areas, wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time and money and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought and new crews trained. The little lifesaving station grew. Some of the new members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and so poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. □

They replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in an enlarged building. Now the lifesaving station became a favorite gathering place for its members, and they redecorated it beautifully and furnished it as a sort of club. Less of the members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The purpose of lifesaving was still given lip service, but most of the crew were too busy or lacked the necessary commitment to take part in the lifesaving activities personally. About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet and half-drowned people.

They were dirty and sick, some had the skin of a different color, some spoke a strange language, and the beautiful new club was considerably messed up. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside. At the next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities, as it was unpleasant and a hindrance to the regular pattern of the club. But some members insisted that lifesaving was their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station. But they were finally

voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of various kinds of people shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast. They did.□

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. They evolved into a club, and yet another lifesaving station was founded. If you visit the seacoast today, you will find many exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are still frequent in those waters, but now most of the people drown!¹

What is the main thing for the Church of Jesus Christ, and how do we keep the main thing being the main thing?

People come into a church with all different types of agendas and in various stages of their journey. We all have different needs, and it is not possible for every church to meet the demand of each. Each pastor needs to know what the Holy Spirit has in store for each specific church, congregation, house church or group. Like the colors coming from a diamond, there are particular facets of each expression of the life of Christ. Some leaders feel that their emphasis should be focused more on worship. Others sense the Spirit emphasizing discipleship or teaching or helping the poor. When a pastor or group leader knows in his heart what the group is going for, then there should be train tracks that keep the train on the rails. The train tracks are purpose statements that communicate where you are going, and why you exist. The purpose statement of the church is designed to keep a leader on the track the Holy Spirit has given the group or church right from the start. With the needs of the people around us being so great, we need to remain on track and target our resources wisely, as we point people toward Jesus. We know the One who is abundantly able to meet every need, but each expression of Christ's life needs to stay true to the mission He has given His Church.

The Main Thing

I spent a lot of time at sea as a commercial fisherman in my younger years. When you are out there in one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world, the Dover straits of England, you get to see all kinds of boats and ships designed for all sorts of jobs. But for us as fishermen, our purpose was to catch fish. It would have been easy to waste time on things our boat was not designed for. Now that God has called me to work on His net, I don't want to get to the end of my life and find that I invested myself doing things that wasted a lot of time, energy and money. The main thing must be the main thing! What is the main thing the church of Jesus Christ is called to spend herself on doing? Paul says that it is the gospel, **"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile" (Romans 1:16)**. The gospel of Jesus Christ, when it is presented correctly and believed, brings about a radical change in the very core being of the believer. Paul, in the passage above, called it the power of God. Without this encounter with Christ, there is no change inside a person:

And he said: "Truly I tell you, **unless you change** and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3).

¹ Taken from Personal Evangelism 101, by Brent Hunter.

Every effort of the Church is to preach the gospel to bring about this change in the hearts of people all over this world. Some people believe that if they work hard at reforming their lives and live by the Ten Commandments, that is being a Christian. Let me tell you something important: You cannot become a Christian by living the Christian life. To live the Christian life, you have to have the Spirit of Christ living *in* you. Christ is the only One that can live the Christian life. Here is how Merrill Tenney put it,

"Christianity is not a system of philosophy, nor a ritual, nor a code of laws; it is the impartation of divine vitality. Without the way there is no going, without the truth, there is no knowing, without the life, there is no living."²

You must have Christ in you, living and seated on the throne room of the temple of your life. **"God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27).**

We can help feed people, we can teach them to have better marriages, we can bring them into a community with others, but if we do not help them to see that they need the main thing—to be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20), all our efforts are for nothing. We must bring them to Christ to receive eternal life! The main thing is to help each person we can to be born-again of the Spirit and to live the life of Christ. This is not the job of the professionals or the gifted leaders; it is the job of all that call on the name of Christ. I am convinced that if we can help each Christian to learn how to share the gospel, a revival will break out that will be worldwide. Over the next few weeks of this series, I plan to help us with practical things that will help all of us to be able to share the gospel. Remember what we said in the last session? The pastor is to equip the flock to shepherd one another, just as the evangelist is to equip the church to be prepared to reach the lost:

But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have (1 Peter 3:15).

As Christians, we should be ready and prepared at any time to share the essence of what the gospel is, and how the person interested can know peace with God through what Christ has done for them.

In thinking of sharing the good news with a friend, what is your biggest fear?

We should realize that these fears that come to mind are part of the spiritual battle that we have entered into when we desire to communicate the gospel of Christ.

At this I fell at his feet to worship him [An Angel v.9]. But he said to me, "Don't do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers and sisters who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For it is the Spirit of prophecy who bears testimony to Jesus" (Revelation 19:10 NIV Emphasis mine).

² Merrill C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948) Pages 215-216.

What is the above verse saying? Here's how it is translated in the ESV, the KJV, and also the NASB, three other English translations of the Bible: **"For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."** Here's what I think the scripture means: When we enter into a situation and make a decision to testify to the saving work of Jesus Christ on the cross, we are not on our own, the prophetic Spirit of God will help us communicate. We choose to go against the flow of this world with an opposing spirit. The spirit of this world wants to shut down the message of the gospel, but when we choose to testify to the grace of God, we go against the spirit of control of the enemy and the Spirit of prophecy rests upon us to communicate the Word of God. The scriptures tell us that the Word of God is the Sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17). The Spirit of prophecy always stands in opposition to the way of this world.

Four Things That Interact in Witnessing to Christ

Have you ever decided that you will share the gospel with a friend or family member, and then become nervous or begin to anticipate their reaction, fearing rejection? Sometimes we can get nervous and find it hard to be a witness. Even though we know that we bring good news, we assume that people will not want to hear it. This tactic is the way the enemy, Satan, tries to silence and intimidate us. It will help us to overcome our fear when we realize that four things interact in a person turning to Christ. It does not depend on us alone!

1) The Holy Spirit. When we are open to the Spirit's leading, He will guide us in our sharing. Often the Holy Spirit will give you a window of insight into the life of the person you are speaking with. You may sense the pain of things that are crowding into the person's life as the Spirit gives you compassion for them. Remember that our Father wants to draw men to Himself. Understand that He will not "leave you hanging" as you endeavor to reach out to another person with the Good News. Jesus said in John 14:26 that the Holy Spirit will remind us of all things. Trust that He will give you the right words when you need them. At the Last Supper, when Jesus was telling the disciples that He was leaving, He reassured them by telling them that He would send the "Helper," the Holy Spirit. In the NIV translation, the Holy Spirit is called the Advocate:

⁷But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. ⁸When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹about sin, because people do not believe in me; ¹⁰about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; ¹¹and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned (John 16:7-11).

2) The Person's Conscience. On the Day of Pentecost, when Peter shared the gospel with more than 3000 Jews who had come to the sound of the wind, they were "cut to the heart" by the message that Peter preached to them. Sometimes I have seen the person I have been sharing the gospel with deeply convicted by the Spirit as He shows them something in their life that they need to change. This is why the Word of God is called the Sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17). The Sword of the Spirit cuts straight to the heart of the one listening, bringing truth and confirming that truth to their heart. God backs up His Word with His Spirit.

Share with one another a time when you came under conviction by the Spirit.

When King David came under conviction by the Spirit after his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba and subsequent murder of her husband, Uriah the Hittite, he could find no peace within his soul:

When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. ⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord." And you forgave the guilt of my sin (Psalm 32:3-5).

3) The Body of Truth in the Word of God. There are specific facts that must be communicated if we want people to believe and trust in the finished work of Christ. The more we convey of the truth in the Word of God, the higher the chance that the person will come through to a powerful life-changing experience of being born again (John 3:3). Our own words can come up short, but scripture tells us that God's Word never returns to Him empty, without effect or void. (Isaiah 55:11). How many times have you heard a message that seems as if it is designed to entertain, but lacks any truth and fails to point to Christ? In seeking to be relevant, we must not shrink back from holding out the truth of God's Word with love. This is an unbeatable combination that will never be out of style or out of touch. God the Father speaks everyone's language and knows how to reach every heart. A gospel message shared with truths that pierce the heart and spoken by a man of God under the sway of the Holy Spirit is a powerful instrument to win a lost person seeking for peace to his or her troubled soul.

4) The Person Sharing. A person sharing the message of Christ can have his message empowered or anointed of the Spirit by preparing his or her own heart. Before you speak to someone, or even as you are with them, be praying and listening to God. Trust that He will give you the right words and give you compassion as you share His message. One of the greatest encouragements to us as witnesses is that we have divine help from the invisible world around us:□

¹⁸Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

Here Jesus is telling the disciples that as they go with the gospel, they are not alone; the Lord Himself will be with them as they go. He is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). We can draw on His help as we rely on the Holy Spirit to give us insight and the right scriptures to use. Without Him, we can do nothing. If our eyes were opened to the spiritual world around us, we would see all kinds of spiritual help. This is what Gehazi, Elisha's servant, found out when he looked outside the city he was in and found that Israel's enemies surrounded it. □

¹⁶So he answered, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." ¹⁷Then Elisha prayed and said, "O LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he may see." And the LORD opened the servant's eyes and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. ¹⁸When they came down to him, Elisha prayed to the LORD and said, "Strike this people with blindness, I pray." So He struck them with blindness according to the word of Elisha (2 Kings 6:16-18).

When you read the words, "those who are with us are more than those who are with them, what do you think this means? Do you believe that these beings play a part in the battle for the souls of humankind? Explain. □

One last thought: In our reaching out, there must be a heart of compassion and love for the one to whom you are appealing. Don't have a pushy attitude, but be gentle and kind to each person you seek to share the good news about Jesus. There is an old Christian song that says, "You're the only Jesus some will ever see." Earlier in this study, I referred to the Body of Christ as a many faceted diamond. The thing that makes the diamond shine, the thing that makes it beautiful, is the light. We are like vessels to be filled, or diamonds that God wants to shine His light through. We trust in the power of His truth, His light, His love.

Even if you feel that your words are faltering, even if you feel inadequate, people will sense the love of God in you, and they will respond to His words one way or another. Also, remember that even if someone does not respond positively, you do not know what God is doing on the inside with that person. Many of us had experienced a battle in our souls before we finally decided to come to Christ. Love that is unfaltering, in the face of any response, will wear down a person's self-protective defenses. Some people find it hard to accept that God loves them because they are filled with guilt, or they feel unworthy. The enemy, Satan, tries to keep people from believing that if there is a God, how could He ever love them? I am reminded of a story of an American family's son returning home from the Vietnam War:

The phone rang in a high society Boston home. On the other end of the line was a son who had just returned from Viet Nam and was calling from California. His folks were the cocktail-circuit, party kind—drinking, wife swapping, gambling, all the other things that go with it. The boy said to his mother, "I just called to tell you that I wanted to bring a buddy home with me." His mother said, "Bring him home for a few days." But, mother, there is something you need to know about this boy. One leg is gone, one arm's gone, one eye's gone, and his face is quite disfigured. Is it all right if I bring him home?" His mother said, "Bring him home for a few days." The son said, "You didn't understand me, mother. I want to bring him home to live with us." The mother began to make all kinds of excuses about embarrassment and what people would think, and the phone clicked. A few hours later the police called from California to Boston. The mother picked up the phone again. The police sergeant at the other end said, "We just found a boy with one arm, one leg, one eye and a mangled face, who has just killed himself with a shot in the head. The identification papers on the body say he is your son."³

³ Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Ultimate Book of Illustrations and Quotes*, Published by Thomas Nelson, Page 109.

Treat everyone that you get to talk to as if he or she is your son or daughter. If the person is a stranger to you, he or she is someone's loved one that is more than likely being prayed for by someone in their family. **Cast your bread upon the waters, and after many days it will return to you (Ecclesiastes 11:1 KJV).** What does that verse seem to be saying? When we give out of our spiritual abundance, do not be surprised when it comes back to you— **“give and it shall be given to you, pressed down, packed together, running over, shall be heaped back to you” (Luke 6:38).** When we share the Word of God with others, somehow, it seems to come back to us in some way to touch our lives. You cannot out give God.

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