

Equipping the Church

Part 8: 'The One Thing'

One of my challenges as a preacher and Bible teacher is to work out what to preach when December arrives. As someone who likes to deliver teaching series over a period of time, so I can build on a theme and dig deeper and broader each week, I usually have to pause a current series in order to speak about the greatest story ever told – the birth of the Christ child. Now I never get sick of preaching about that, but in my experience over many congregations I have found there are those who would like to see all the sermons in December to be about Christmas as our hearts are prepared once more for this very special time of the year. I get that and I have done just that many times. Others however would prefer not to break too long from a teaching series and would be happy with just a Christmas Day sermon on the birth of Christ. I have done that too. Either way, there has always be someone who wishes I did it differently. Such is life. ☺

Well, as it turns out, last week and this week I have been able to do both! I guess that's not surprising when you think of how central the birth of Jesus is to our entire Christian faith. If that first Christmas never happened, then I would really have nothing at all to preach about. Jesus is not just the reason for the Christmas season, Jesus is the reason we still breath; the reason this planet still spins. So today I want us to read one verse from the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew to get some context. Then we will turn our attention to Luke's Gospel and the story of two special people.

Matthew 6:22 *"The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light."*

This verse is far more important than most people think. In its context in the Sermon on the Mount it is applied to our response to money – but it means so much more. The principle behind this verse applies to every area of our life and ministry. Let me explain it this way. Fear, worry, anxiety and that whole suite of emotions, is released against us to distract us from our purpose and eventually re-establish our affection towards something that is inferior. Fear, worry and anxiety are the attempts of the enemy of God to distract us. Once we are distracted, without even knowing it, we begin to direct our affection towards something that's so far beneath our calling, our purpose and our mission.

Greed and lust are just as bad – this is the other side of the same problem. Jesus deals with the whole issue of lust and greed here in the Sermon on the Mount quite heavily and in this portion He says that where your heart is - your treasure is also. He's not talking against money itself, He's talking about the focus of our heart. So fear is as wrong as greed - greed is as wrong as fear. The reason is because both of them are attempts to distract us or pull our focus and attention away from the one thing we are called to.

For example, if the enemy can't get us to accept something immoral, shift us from being moral to immoral, then what he will actually try to expand our moral conviction with so many issues in life, so that we spread ourselves so thin and become ineffective. Then his desire is to pull us to defend our position outside of the Spirit of Christ. For example, for me personally, abortion is wrong. It's as wrong as the sacrificing of children to Moloch, the Canaanite deity in the Old Testament. It's just wrong. There's nothing clearer for me. So the enemy knows he will never get me to shift from that conviction, so what will he try instead? He will try to get me to operate in the flesh, in a spirit of carnality, accusation and bitterness in order to defend my position.

In other words, if he can't get me to compromise my values in one area, he tries to get me to over-extend my values to where I am no longer moving in the Spirit of Christ. These issues of distraction are huge and right now we have more distractions than we have ever had in our life. We are surrounded by distractions. Thanks to a 24-hour news cycle and the internet, it is relentless. I'm not just talking about the obvious things like all the political stuff, the racial stuff, the economic stuff, all the pandemic politics and vaccination politics – there is so much more than even that. I'm talking also about the changing nature of our whole culture and what our nation is becoming as we are inundated with the opinions of other people. Now I actually like social media. Used correctly, it can be a wonderful source of valuable information and it can be a springboard to millions of Christian websites like our own which provide a seemingly endless supply of edifying teaching and ministry opportunities. If used correctly, social media can be a great blessing. But it certainly has a dark side.

Built into the platforms themselves is the ability to like or dislike other people's posts, photos, comments and opinions. Facebook changed this feature recently so you don't get to see the likes on other people's pages anymore. That was a positive change but you still get to see the likes and dislikes on everything you post and then there's all those comments! You can certainly delete comments, but only after you have read them and been judged by them. In fact, social media has thrust upon us a whole system whereby we look for approval from other people before we make our decisions. It's subtle, we may not even know it's happening, but it's there. We now have a whole generation that has been raised on that value system. That's our context for this verse in Matthew.

Matthew 6:22 *“The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light.”*

This deserves much more attention than I'm going to give here – I shall save that for another sermon one day. I actually want to take you into the Christmas story and show you something that I hope will encourage you and add fuel to what God has called us to be and to do. One of the translations of this verse says, if your eye is *single*, another one says if your eye is *clean*, this translation says, if your eye is *good*. In the Greek, there are actually two words behind this one English word: the word *alpha* and then a word that means *voyage*. Alpha, as in Alpha and Omega, means the beginning; it means number one and voyage refers to our eternal future.

Therefore if your eye is set on *one voyage, the one thing*, then your entire body will be full of light. So being distracted away from what God has called us to actually be and do will affect us in all kinds of ways. It affects us in areas of greed and lust; it affects us in areas of fear, anxiety and all those feelings of the soul that are supposed to be anchored in the Lord Himself. These things war against our focus and our devotion to the one thing. They are subtle, but the end result is a people who, over time, diversify their affection from the Lord and His mission, to many other things, even things done in Jesus name.

So the lamp of the body is the eye, therefore your eye is set on one voyage. That means there is one thing you desire above all else. The Scripture says this one thing is to see Him and to dwell in His temple forever, to be one who glorifies Him - this one thing I have desired.

It's critical to fuel that one fire in my soul - so much so that nothing else matters. Everything else flows, from or to or through that one thing. I don't have a confusing life of serving God and serving my family and serving the city and serving you. I have one thing – one focus of my greatest affection and deepest commitment and that's my unyielding adoration and absolute passion for Jesus Christ. But I become more fully equipped as a husband, more fully equipped as a father, as a grandpa and as a Pastor the more I embrace the one thing. OK, let's go to Luke chapter two.

Luke 2:25-38 *“Behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. And this man was just and devout waiting for the consolation of Israel. The Holy Spirit It was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit, that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. So he came by the Spirit, into the temple. And when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the law, he took him up in his arms, and he blessed God and he said, Lord, now you're letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word from my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared before the face of all the peoples and light to bring revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people, Israel.*

And Joseph and His mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of Him. Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, “Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”

Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; and this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.”

So here we have Simeon and Anna - two amazing people, both of whom are often overlooked in the Christmas narrative and the teaching on the incarnation. I personally think they should be two of the most honoured people in heaven. Just think about this. They lived in a time without any prophets; they lived in a time without any thundering displays of God's power and yet they lived for one thing. That's why Anna never left the temple. I don't know if people brought food to her. I don't know how she lived like that but what the Holy Spirit wants us to see in this text is her extreme devotion to one thing, which was that Israel would finally have a Redeemer; that Israel would have vindication and restoration; that salvation would come to God's people. Anna lived for that one thing. She had been married for seven years, but her husband died. So as a widow she spent the rest of her life serving God at the temple in fasting and prayer.

Then we have Simeon. For his entire life he was a friend of God - the Bible says the Holy Spirit was upon him. Nobody was born again yet - so the Holy Spirit didn't live inside him, but the Spirit rested on him. He was a prophet in the sense that he could see and hear the word of the Lord. He had that promise given to him that he would see the Redeemer, the Vindicator; he would see the Deliver. That was his primary focus - his one thing. So the point I want to make today is that the more focused you are on why you're alive, the less it takes to encourage you and guide you.

I read a very interesting article some years ago written by a sniper in the US military who had served many tours on the front line of war. I hate wars of every kind and so I'm not wanting to say anything positive about war itself, this is just an excellent illustration for today's teaching. Good snipers are an unusual breed of people. They dress in camouflage uniforms but then they cover themselves with leaves, branches and twigs from the area around them so they can literally disappear into their surroundings. Once positioned, there are times where they need to move and they must make sure they are not seen by the enemy. So a sniper can at times take several days to crawl just metres.

They do everything physically in their clothing - gross, but true. If they slide onto an anthill they may have to remain there for hours, enduring hundreds of ant bites. All the time they are completely focused on their assignment. They show no pain and they make no noticeable movement. They are not distracted by anything around them. The sniper who wrote this article said that when he is in that space, he is so focused on his assignment, his purpose, that he can notice when a single blade of grass moves hundreds of metres away. It really is an amazing skill.

There's something about focus; there's something about knowing my purpose; there's something about refining what is going to excite me; refining what I'm going to feed my soul; refining my understanding, my conscious awareness of why I am on planet Earth. I get to be a husband, I get to be a dad, I get to be a grandpa, I get to be a Pastor and shepherd of God's people ... all things I love to be and to do. But all of these are expressions of why I am really alive. All of these things feed into and flow from the one thing. I live to know Christ and to represent Him, to expand His kingdom and bring Him glory. That's why I am here and anything that doesn't fit into that purpose, that assignment needs to take second place. It may be good; it may be moral; it may be upright. But if it's there to divert attention and eventually draw away my affection then it's a dangerous distraction.

When I look back on some seasons in my life and I look at a lot of other Christian's lives today I am reminded of a guy who can spin multiple dinner plates on sticks and his entire focus is spread across every plate to make sure none of them stop spinning and fall. All his energy, concentration and focus is spread across many, many plates. If you are into trivia, the Guinness World Record for spinning multiple plates is held by David Spathaky who spun 108 plates simultaneously on a television show in Thailand in 1996. An amazing feat indeed, but his focus, his purpose was split 108 ways and that is not normal and nor is it sustainable. It's a great stunt – but it's no way to live.

Our calling in Christ is to make sure all parts of our life are funnelled into and flowing from the one thing which matters most and truly defines us in God's kingdom. Like the guy who every day intercedes and prays for the nation of Israel; who prays for the nations of the world; who prays for the Messiah to come. Can you imagine being Simeon? Then one day in the middle of your prayer, the Lord shows up says, *"Before you die, you will see this great Deliverer. Before you die, you will see the Messiah."* Why is Simeon alive? His primary purpose, his sharpest focus, his deepest affection is for this one thing. God sees that and so the Spirit of the Lord moves him, directs him to go to the temple this one day – and when he enters the temple he sees an infant. He sees an infant. He doesn't see a mighty deliverer; he doesn't see a man with a sword; he doesn't see a man with an army; He doesn't see somebody with a great pedigree and great wealth. He sees an infant, a baby - Who just happened to be eternally God. This was the one thing Simeon had been longing for, waiting for, praying for and he immediately knew in his spirit that in this child lay the deliverance of Israel and salvation for the Gentiles. He saw it in a baby; he saw it in a child.

You see, when you live for one thing, it doesn't take a lot to encourage you. Because you are so focussed you notice the movement of a blade of grass, you notice the slightest little indication. As I look at Anna and Simeon, they both move me so much because they recognized the King of Glory was present in an infant that couldn't do anything. Such was their focus. They saw what nobody else would have seen. This is what we need right now if we are to be equipped as the Church of Jesus Christ. In the midst of this ever-changing, swirling, opinion-obsessed world we desperately need to be people who can just dial down and focus. Why am I alive? Why am I where I am in this season? Why am I here? And then we lean in to the one thing which defines us in eternity and all of a sudden, we get this little word of encouragement. We hear this testimony over here. We see these things happen around us that are just indicators of a much bigger deliverance, a much bigger thing that God is doing, and right now we really need encouragement in our lives, maybe more than any other season of our life.

How foolish is it to live within reach of a feast of encouragement, and not apprehend it, not take hold of it. It's foolish to live so close to the ultimate internal strength of faith, a focus of living with divine purpose and not take hold of it. I'd like to suggest that the Lord is releasing an Anna and Simeon anointing, for want of a better term. It's the Matthew 6 anointing as the eye that has settled on one journey. The reason my whole body is full of light, the reason my entire life is under the visible manifestation of the glory of God is because I have determined I am alive for one thing, I'm alive for one reason and through that one reason God has illuminated everything in my life.

It never ceases to astound me when I think of how God is so committed to partnership, to relationship with us - His wayward, rebellious, broken children. I think if there was anything God can pull off on His own without our assistance or involvement it would be Jesus coming to earth and yet it was God, the Holy Spirit Who came upon Anna and Simeon to stir them to intercessory prayer. Why? God wanted them to be a part of the process. That's what intercessory prayer is all about – our partnership with a miracle-working God. He doesn't *need* us to pray in order for Him to act – He *chooses* to partner with us in prayer so that we *participate* in those miracles with Him – yes, even the miracle of the incarnation. Simeon and Anna got to be part of the greatest miracle of all time! Day after day after month after year - faithfully interceding and crying out for God's intervention in our lost and sorry world.

Of course, powerful prayer is not always pretty. There's nothing very appealing about it. When you are gripped in your soul by something that's got to be birthed into the earth that has not yet come, it can be painful. Your prayer may sound at times like groaning as your focus on the one thing becomes almost unbearable. But God gives you just enough energy and encouragement to keep going. It's only when you are in that focussed dedication to the one thing that you will discern God in some of the most unexpected places. You may even see the Saviour of the world in a tiny, helpless baby. Everybody else saw a baby – just like all babies - cute, cuddly and pretty useless right now. But Simeon and Anna had invested thousands of hours waiting on God and crying out to Him for the salvation of Israel and the world and they saw, in this baby, the answer to their prayers.

My prayer is that we would develop that same focus on the one thing as we move through this unusual season – and it is unusual. Let's be honest. If I had asked you in 2015 to describe what life would be like in five years time, I guarantee none of you would have come close to what we have been living through this past couple of years. None of us saw this coming. But we need to trust God, Who knows the end from the beginning, and see this season as a gestation period for what God has in store next. This season will come to an end and I believe there will be a birthing of something very powerful, very new across the earth and specifically in you and in me. Until then, every day, the Spirit of God is wooing us towards the one thing; calling us to not allow the distractions to take us somewhere other than being committed to the one thing. For some of us that will mean the Lord will ask us to remove some things from our life, our schedule and especially the thoughts and issues which dominate our mind every day - to simplify our lives so our primary focus is on the one thing.

So I want to encourage you to be praying every day and asking God to heal us as a people as we come out of this crazy pandemic season. We need God's forgiveness for allowing ourselves to submit to the distractions which have been at war with our hearts, trying to redirect our affection, our values and our attention. We need God to heal us as a people so that we can emerge from this time simplified, refined, focused, madly in love with Jesus and passionately committed to His mission, our mission, the only reason we still walk this earth. We have been commissioned to make disciples of all nations, disciples who will also focus on the one thing: their calling and purpose in Christ, through Christ, for Christ.

I know of no better time in the year to re-connect with the one thing than Christmas. With all the joy and celebration and warmth of what Christmas can mean to us all, may we never, ever allow anything to shine brighter than Jesus, the baby, the long-awaited saviour, the Messiah, the Christ, the author and finisher of our faith, the One in Whom we live and move and have our being. Amen.