

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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One Thing

Malachi 3.1-4, Matthew 5.1-2, 8

Russ Dean, August 6, 2006



Psychologist David Brandt writes, "The disappointments of midlife all revolve around one central theme — now that I know what it's really about, I'm disappointed that's all there is."¹ This kind of mid-life disappointment led Billy Crystal's character, Mitch, to leave the ho-hum life of the city for an adventuresome two-week quest on a real-live dude ranch, in the delightful comedy, "City Slickers." Out in the Wild West, Mitch, along with his two best friends, Ed and Phil, are confronted by the tough-minded, never-smiling ridin', ropin', wrangler named Curly. Played by Jack Palance, Curly teaches them to ride, and he teaches Mitch the most important thing (which is what he really came for in the first place).

Throughout their two-week adventure, at various opportune moments, Curly approaches Mitch with a stern, downright frightening face, and says to him, "There's just one thing that's important..." Each time, after speaking his evasive truth, he turns without another word, and rides away. Each time Mitch is left more and more confused. "One thing? What one thing?" He has left the city with his wife's perplexed blessing, "Go find your smile," and something is telling Mitch that Curly has the key, but he just can't figure it out.

Finally, exasperated, his trip about to end, Mitch pleads desperately with Curly to tell him what the One Thing is. Leaning on the horn of his saddle and looking over his

¹ Quoted in a review by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat:
<http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films/films.php?id=5058>.

horse's mane, Curly looks at Mitch and says to him soberly, "There's just one thing – but it's up to you to find out what it is."

There is just one thing. And our lives, lived happily, are dependent on us finding that one thing which fulfils and satisfies. In the "City Slicker's" sense of the meaning, there is one passion, one calling, one purpose to which we must dedicate our lives. For Mitch, that one thing was his family, whom he had been neglecting for the sake of his lackadaisical career and his personal life.

Have you found the one thing in your life? The one overriding purpose that gives your living a sense of meaning? A satisfaction in living? A completeness? The theologian Soren Kierkegaard once wrote,

What I really lack is to be clear in my mind what I am to do, not what I am to know . . . The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wishes me to do . . . to find the idea for which I can live and die.²

Have you found that idea, that one thing, for which you can live and die? I think it is important in this conversation to speak of this in purely personal terms, not just in "spiritual" terms, to which we will turn in a moment.³ What thing are you really good at? What thing gives you pleasure? What vocation or pursuit, what avocation or hobby really "floats your boat"? You need to find it, to know it, to embrace it, and to live that thing with all the unapologetic gusto that your life can muster. For I believe that God gives us the passions and the callings, the talents and

² This is one of my many quotes, collected over the years from some secondary source, so I have no direct citation.

³ I did not have time to make this clear, but it is my deep conviction that the lines between the "personal" and the "spiritual" (or the "secular" and the "sacred" as we might also name them) are quite thin – if they exist at all. This will be clear, by implication, in what follows in this sermon, i.e. as I make the emphatic point that we cannot "put God first" in any direct way, and that only in giving focused emphasis to the "one thing" (personal/secular) can we find God. God is that which makes the "secular" to be "sacred," the "personal" to become "spiritual."

the inclinations that lead us in one direction or another. And that only in finding that thing can we really find ourselves.

And only in finding ourselves can we find God.

In his book called *The Beatitudes for Today*, James Howell summarizes it this way:

The human predicament is that we let ourselves get frittered away in multiple directions, trying to be and do everything, when we were made for just one thing, for *the one* thing that finally matters...⁴

That “One Thing,” as Curly knew so well is of utmost importance, and our life’s ultimate quest, not just the quest of our mid-life crises, should be to find it. What is that One Thing?

Jesus says, pure and simple, the One Thing is God.

When asked what is the greatest commandment, Jesus answered: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, all your strength...* (Mark 12.30). God is the One Thing.

When asked about the worries of today, all the legitimate worries of today, Jesus answered: *Seek first the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and everything that really matters will be taken care of...* (Matthew 6.33-34, my paraphrase). God is the One Thing.

James Howell finishes his quote with the same answer: “for *the one* thing that finally matters [is] God,” and he goes on to say, “If purity of heart is [as one of

⁴ Howell, p.69.

the great theologians of the past has said⁵] ‘to will one thing,’ then focus is everything.”

Focus is essential, because focus brings the personal (that thing about which we are most passionate) and the spiritual (the God who gives the passion) together. (It should be obvious, and enough to say in one simple sentence, that if the personal and the spiritual cannot be reconciled, then the passion is misplaced. If, for example, your passion is child pornography or gambling or making a profit at the expense of your neighbor – you need to look for a new passion!⁶)

But the focus is important because without it, people can too easily believe that God alone should be the focus of our lives. Now let me explain that odd statement...

As an active member of a Baptist youth program, a frequent discipleship tool was one of the various forms of that exercise designed to help us see where we have placed our priorities in life. In itself, this is not a bad thing. It’s basically what I’m asking you to consider this morning. But in that exercise, the top spot (for faithful, Baptist youth) was always to be occupied only by “God.” (Usually: God, others, and then self came down the line somewhere.) Though I understand the emphasis, I have come to believe that this emphasis is misplaced, for too often seeking to put “God”

⁵ “Soren Kierkegaard wrote a duly famous book entitled *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*.” Howell, p.69.

⁶ I thought of this often-quoted passage from Frederick Buechner on vocation: "It comes from the Latin *vocare*, to call, and means the work a person is called to by God. There are different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Super-ego, or Self-Interest. By and large a good rule for finding out is this. The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you've presumably met requirement (a), but if your work is writing TV deodorant commercials, the chances are you've missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (b), but if most of the time you're bored and depressed by it, the chances are you have not only bypassed (a) but probably aren't helping your patients much either. Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

first leads people to pursue only what they perceive to be God, and that God usually comes wrapped in the religious and political and national colors of one's own culture and personal biases. If you can follow me here, when "God" is first, our lives are too often lived as Clarence Jordan reminded us in recent weeks, toward the external mechanisms and the pious rewards of the religious system who holds that God.⁷

In other words, putting "God" first, often just means putting "God as I have defined God" first. In so doing, too often people end up worshiping the religious system of their choosing or the idea of their defining, and puffing themselves up with such piety in the process. "I've put GOD first."⁸

But God is beyond all religious systems, whether Baptist or Christian or Muslim. I believe it is undeniably true today that many in our world need pure hearts, and part of purifying their hearts needs to be a purifying of their own understanding and worship of what they believe to be God.

When we make our lists, I don't believe "God" should be first. I believe the One Thing which is our passion should be first, and all the other things which are important in our lives should come streaming after – but the whole list should be

⁷ "Two things in particular characterized religious life in Jesus' day. One, it was purely external. People kept the rules because they knew they were expected to, not because they really believed in them. Their righteousness was something like perfume – it wasn't a part of you but if you had it on, it made you smell real sweet. Of course, everybody recognized the odor, but that didn't matter, because they used it, too. Any child could see through the shallow pretense back of it all, but it was a terrible disgrace to let on that you could see through it. . . All this quite naturally led to the second characteristic: the motive was reward. Primarily the reward desired was the praise of people. To be well thought of was more highly desired than to be rich. In order to get and hold public approval, people would sacrifice their own integrity, or perhaps their own child, or their best friend, or even their God. Incredible as it seems, people would even pretend they were serving God in order to please others." *Clarence Jordan, Essential Writings*, "Blessed are Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness," p.112.

⁸ John Calvin said that the human mind is a perpetual factory for idols. Even "God" can become an idol.

immersed in the grace and presence of the God who gives meaning to every good pursuit.

The Greek word for “pure” is *katharoi*. It is the same word from which the English, “catharsis” is derived. A catharsis is most commonly understood as “the relief of tension and anxiety by bringing repressed feelings and fears to consciousness.” (At the Charlotte Knights’ baseball game last night, Amy and I suddenly looked at one another and said, “Where is Bennett?” Panic immediately set in. She ran one direction; I ran the other. Then I heard an announcement on the public broadcast system, “Will Bennett Dean please report to the Customer Service office.” [This was apparently their code language to parents, rather than inviting perhaps anyone to come pick up a lost child.] Katharsis!) But the basic meaning of catharsis is contained in its first dictionary definition, “purgation (to purge), especially... the digestive system.” To *purify our hearts* is to cleanse our lives – the imagery is stark – like the cleansing or evacuation of our digestive system, of all that would keep us from being who we really are.⁹

The one who knows herself as she really is, is free; the one who is confident of himself, strengths and weaknesses, is pure; the one who is focused on that One Thing which is most important for her or his own life – that is the person who is *Pure in Heart*.

⁹ Howell is even more graphic in quoting the Oxford English Dictionary which includes the phrase “evacuation of the bowels” in the entry for catharsis!

Blessed are those who have purged everything from their lives that does not give meaning. For that person knows himself, for that person is at home with herself and, therefore, is free, really free, to find God.

There's only one thing. And it's up to you to find it.¹⁰

May it be so!

¹⁰ At the door Sunday someone said, "Do you really believe that there's just one thing?" I have long been persuaded by the truth of Curly's words, but this stark question suddenly gave me pause. To clarify, I believe the "one thing" is the deepest sense of one's self. Who is the real me? What is/are my passion(s)? This is related to Buechner's words, above, about my "deep gladness." This "one thing" may manifest itself in various expressions, though all are related to the core of one's self, and without finding that "one thing," we are prone to wander through the world and through our lives without much satisfaction.