



# Auburn Presbyterian Church

*Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual*  
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## **“Keeping the Main Thing, the Main Thing” Isaiah 43:16-21; John 12:1-8; Philippians 3:4b-14**

(Prayer for Illumination)

Even as a little child, I would be on the first floor of our two-story house in Detroit, think of something I wanted from the upstairs bedroom I shared with my brother Dave, run up the stairs, and by the time I walked into my bedroom, I could not remember why I went in there to get in the first place. I guess the fun of running up the stairs—even then I could take them two at a time—distracted me from the point of the exercise.

These days, my wife Sharon knows how easily I am distracted when the TV is on. If a program is running, she’ll try to talk with me, and I don’t hear her very well. My attention is divided; I am distracted.

When you add in cell phones, it gets far worse. I’ve watched kids talking in the mall; one gets a cell phone call, pulls up the phone, and literally turns her back on the rest of her friends to talk out loud to someone who’s not there. Maybe all her friends accept this as normal, but I would feel put down when someone I was talking to turned their back on me to talk to someone else. (Isn’t that why God created “voice mail”??) And we have clear evidence that cell phones distract drivers—so much, apparently, that the accident rate for cell phone users is much higher than for those who abstain while driving.

What distracts you? Today we’ll look at what the goal of life is, and how to keep that main thing *the main thing*, on a day-to-day basis. Let’s begin by opening our Bibles to Paul’s warm letter to the Philippians, chapter 3, starting at the last part of verse 4. Paul seemed to have a special spot in his heart for these people. He feels close enough to them that he has no fear about revealing a lot about himself and his mistakes. Let’s see how Paul does this. Listen for God’s Voice addressing US, in these words from Philippians 3. *[text]*

Paul was a very confident man. He had been raised by the elite of Jewish culture in a couple of different schools of rabbinic teaching. He had a clear grasp on the Law of Moses, which is what made the Jews God’s Chosen People. And he was devoted—he had made that Law the Rule of his life. “Blameless”, he says—“Faultless”. That’s quite a claim, when you realize that by Paul’s time some 630 rules had been deduced from the commandments and statutes of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. So he’s the *crème de la crème*, the top of the heap—both in his upbringing and his adult religious life. Paul was so confident and devoted, he was leading vigilante groups to round of people who had been following the dangerous teachings of that blasphemer from Nazareth, named Jesus.

But then, Jesus got hold of him, and all of this changed. Now he regards all his status and achievement as “dung”—that’s the word he uses. (“Dog dung” is how Eugene Peterson renders it in his “Message” translation.) Read the story that starts in Acts 9—it’s quite an account.

By the time Paul writes to the Philippians, has a very different goal—verse 10: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him [even] in his death.” That’s a radical change in a life’s direction. At last, Paul has a firm grasp on God’s plan, and—corrected by Christ—is going to spend all his days and nights telling people about Jesus, and the plan of God’s love. The goal makes all the difference. Or, as we say, “If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will take you there.”

What’s your goal in life? Why do you think you’re alive? About three years ago, together we studied Rick Warren’s book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Rick pointed to five purposes for which we are here on this planet: we were planned for God’s pleasure (that’s *worship*); we were formed for God’s family (that’s *fellowship*); we were created to become like Christ (that’s our *spiritual gifts and discipleship*); we were shaped for serving God (*in the church, with and for each other*); and we were made for a mission (that’s *taking Jesus to everyone*). But all of these are ways of living out a higher purpose that is above all these activities we do. As our Westminster Shorter Catechism says it in Question 1, “What is the chief [purpose of people]? The chief [purpose of people] is to glorify God and enjoy [God] forever.” It’s not primarily an activity; it’s a relationship with the Living God who created us and loves us. We perform all those purposeful activities for God, but also *with* God. The Bible calls this, “Walking with God.” This moment-by-moment relationship with God is “the main thing” in life.

Jesus walked with God, moment by moment, and his purpose was clear. Let me share with you one incident from the last days of his ministry that teaches us an important point about keeping the main thing, the main thing. This is from John’s gospel, chapter 12, verses 1-8. Listen with me to God’s Voice in these words. *[text]*

Now, there’s a conflict here, isn’t there? Jesus is about to go to Jerusalem for the last time—the *last* time. Crowds have been following him. He’s done miraculous things—how about raising Lazarus from the dead?! Now, in this moment of “down time”, a woman comes to him and washes his feet. It’s not just any woman; here she is identified as Mary, the sister of Lazarus himself. Brother and sisters living on their own in that culture suggests their father has died, and these single gals are being looked after by their brother. He has been the wage-earner for this remainder of the family, and when he died, the fortunes of these single gals died, too. Mary is so grateful to Jesus for the resurrection of her brother that she has spent a fortune on this fragrant ointment to pour on Jesus’ feet. She’s got about a pint of the stuff, and the fragrance is so strong, it fills the whole house in a flash. And just as extravagantly, she wipes his feet with her hair. I can hardly think of a more sensual act. She’s giving herself to Jesus, through this action. He’s given her back her brother, the income-earner of the family, restoring her life in a very real way. She’s saying, as I get this, that her life is his.

But not everyone is moved by this incredible show of gratitude. One of Jesus’ own disciples, who’s been with Jesus for about three years, barks out his criticism—it’s a frivolous waste, he says, when there are so many poor people who can’t afford their next meal.

Jesus doesn't argue Judas' point. But he puts Judas' observation into a larger frame. First, you always have the poor with you; there will always be human need, and you should address it whenever you can, he says. But you will not always have me with you—in fact, you won't have me very long at all. If that's true, then let's make these last hours precious. Think of it this way—just as I gave life to her brother by God's power, so I am giving my life away, to bring you all to God.

No one had been thinking about Jesus being crucified at this time. When Jesus makes this turn of phrase, it shows a decisive turn in his ministry, in his life, and in the lives of his disciples and other followers. John's gospel is especially good at showing multiple layers in every act of Jesus, every teaching, every miracle. And that's true here. Is this just a “thank you” from Mary? Is it just a waste when there are so many poor people? Or is it more? Is it the first act of the last act, so to speak?

Judas was right. And Mary was right. But Jesus was more right. Jesus had his eye on his “main thing” that lay ahead. And when you have your eye on the prize, it gives you a freedom to respond to surprises without being distracted. Keeping the main thing the main thing lets you take everything in your life and either fit it into that purpose, that frame, or to discard it. Keeping the main thing the main thing gives you a freedom to say “no” to otherwise good requests, great ideas, wonderful opportunities—without regret, or guilt. We see Jesus throughout his ministry live with a freedom that no one else around him seems to have. That's because he kept the main thing, the main thing.

So Isaiah wrote in what we call chapter 43 of his book:

<sup>16</sup>This is what the LORD says—

he who made a way through the sea,

a path through the mighty waters,

<sup>17</sup> who drew out the chariots and horses,

the army and reinforcements together,

and they lay there, never to rise again,

extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:

<sup>18</sup> “Forget the former things;

do not dwell on the past.

<sup>19</sup> See, I am doing a new thing!

Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

I am making a way in the desert

and streams in the wasteland.

<sup>20</sup> The wild animals honor me,

the jackals and the owls,

because I provide water in the desert

and streams in the wasteland,

to give drink to my people, my chosen,

<sup>21</sup> the people I formed for myself

that they may proclaim my praise.

Jesus was the “new thing” God had in mind, Christians understand, spoken through this prophet some 8 centuries before. Even people of Jesus’ time who loved God did not “get” him, in large part because they had forgotten why they were doing what they did. They were trying to “hold on” to what they had, in a time when Rome was crushing them with taxes and threats of war. “If we can just follow the law of Moses, if we can just show we love God like that, then God will keep us in the Land He gave us, and not throw us out again like He did when the Babylonians walked all over us. So we must follow those 630 rules!” They had forgotten what the rules were for. And since Jesus did not think the rules were the most important thing, but that relationship with God was—the God who wants to save all people and not just the Jews—Jesus was a real threat to the religiously-observant senior pastors and Bible teachers and denominational officials. And even Judas would soon be working for Jesus’ opponents, driven by his own motives.

God gave us “the new thing” so that we would have a clear vision of “the main thing”—walking with the God who looks like Jesus, acts like Jesus, loves like Jesus, and wants us to do the same, for the sake of the world He made and still loves, despite everything. Doing religious things for God but without God is like this (snail). Doing things with God that keep our focus on “the main thing” is like this (rocket blasting off).

I guess this is the time to tell you about one of the cards I pinned on the “God In My Life Banner” at the back of the hall. About a week and a half ago, one of the Lotteries had grown really big. Every so often I buy a ticket—you know, I’ll pay off the church’s debt, set up a foundation; I’ve got a fairly detailed plan. Well, this day I was sitting in the left turn traffic lane to turn into a 7-11 in my end of town to buy my ticket, when I got this clear word from God—“No!” I was not talking with God at the time. I was not thinking of God at the time. So the clarity of this “no”, and the surprise of it—two marks that this is indeed God’s voice—caught me up short. And then the sweetest part—God told me why. He told me that if I won, I would be so consumed by the responsible use of this money, and safeguarding it from taxes—“good stewardship”, you know—that I would neglect the focus He has given me for moving our church into Act Two, as we’ll see in our Church Family Meeting after worship today. And as soon as

God told me this, I knew from the top of my head to the soles of my feet, He was absolutely right. So, still in the left turn lane and before my light turned green, I looked, pulled back into the through lane, and continued on home. I was ready to throw overboard “the main thing” in order to do something else for God—a good thing, by all accounts, but not the best thing.

In our busy lives, how can we keep this “main thing” primary? The Jews were told to wear the Law upon their arms and before their eyes, so they made little boxes that contained tiny scrolls like the Torah scrolls in the Temple and in their synagogues. They would tie these little boxes called phylacteries on their arms and foreheads, as if that was the purpose of the command. No, the purpose of the command is to live the Law, to walk with God—not to play “dress up”. And there is the additional danger that what has become familiar ceases to command our attention.

Take our “God In My Life Banner” in the back of the hall. We have had some new cards pinned on that banner recently, and we read some this morning. But until I called attention to it, I’m confident that most of us had ceased to notice it—and it’s hard to miss, as we head toward the back of the hall, wouldn’t you say? And the purpose of that banner, too, is not to accumulate cards so it looks like it’s got “purple warts” all over. It’s to demonstrate that God is showing up in the lives of people like you, people sitting in this same room! And then, it’s displayed and the cards are read in the hope that you might look for God to show up in your life, too. Yes, we all can lose sight of “the main thing”—this connecting with God—if it becomes an ornament, a memorial, a work of art.

We are to LIVE the Jesus life, not debate it or learn about it. We are already “educated far beyond our obedience”, as one of my professors used to say.

So if it’s not a string on our finger, a box on our forehead, or a banner on the wall, how can we keep the main thing the main thing? Here are some ideas.

Start some new habits—which will take at least six weeks to anchor into our lives. Yep—at least six weeks. When you roll out of bed in the morning, immediately stop. Put your feet flat on the floor, and feel it through your feet. Let the floor “ground” you at the start of this new day, and draw your mind to God who has just given you a new day to live with Him, walk with Him, meet Him in all that will happen in the hours to come. How might you meet with Him today?

Another idea: note how you spend your time during the day. What are some of the distractions you allow into your life as you go along? What other choices could you make? How might you leverage your time behind the wheel, your time standing in line, your time with the TV aimlessly on just for “companionship noise”?

Another idea: early in the day, sit down with your “Day Runner” or PDA or calendar. Imagine the people you are schedule to meet that day. Picture them in your mind, and remember the usual things you talk about. How might you introduce God into the conversation—the God whom you are coming to know, not “God” as a topic of conversation”. You might say, “I was thinking about meeting you today, and God seemed to put into my head to talk with you about your family, whom I never hear you mention.” (Of course, that has to be truly the fruit of your

time with God before, not something you make up on the spot just because you remember this might be “a God opportunity”.)

Start with God. Track your distractions. Pre-plan your seed-planting. These are just three ideas for helping us keep the main thing—walking with God—*the main thing*, day by day, moment by moment.

Now, who will you talk with about making these changes, should you want to? Is there someone in your Life Group you could ask to call you at 6 p.m. every day, to ask how it was when you hit the floor that morning, or with whom you got to talk about God in your life that day? Is there anyone in this church you trust enough to help you grow closer to God? If not, it's a sad comment on how shallow our relationships are—or, said positively, how much deeper our relationships can be, helping each other walk with God.

And that's the point of life, the main thing. Please don't miss it!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on March 25, 2007, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]