

Ed and Jane had been married for 50 years. But during most of that time, they were not happy. After yet another difficult period in their marriage, they finally decided it was time to get help. They made an appointment with a counselor, and went weekly for two months. Little changed. After another unproductive session with the counselor, Jane burst into tears. Not knowing what to say, the counselor gave her a hug. Jane stopped crying. And for the first time in years, Jane smiled. “*Did you see that?*” the counselor asked Ed. “*That's what she needs! What do you intend to do about it?*” “*Well,*” Ed replied, “*I could bring her back Tuesday for another hug.*” While fictitious, that story illustrates how easy it is to mistakenly believe that our relationships magically take care of themselves and don’t require work and effort on our part to be healthy.

The same reality is true in our relationship with God. God tells us in Genesis that He created us “*in His image.*” This means that He patterned our character, our personality, and our soul on Himself. As Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, He is being of community. This means that we are also meant to live in community. But living in community is not easy. It requires us to spend time with other people. It requires that we not only speak to other people, but listen to them. And it requires that we participate in the give and take of life with people - saying and doing only that which is loving, and forgiving them when they do not behave that way toward us.

Unfortunately, while God is perfect at doing this, we are not. We hurt people, offend people, and do all sorts of things we shouldn’t do. As a result, while we desire to be in relationship with other people, we often mess up. We do the same thing in our relationship with God. Which is why God made sure the story of Adam and Eve was included in what we label as chapter 3 of Genesis. For there we are told how Adam and Eve chose to do what they pleased, believing their actions wouldn’t harm their relationship with God. But they were wrong. And when we pull imperfect people together in the entity we call the Church, this reality does not change. In fact, it can get worse. As a result, churches also hurt people, offend people, and do things they shouldn’t do. In this series, we have been looking at some of those things. The reason is simple.

When churches do things they shouldn’t, they are often NOT doing “*the 1 thing*” they should be doing (helping people enter into - and deepen - relationship with God). That is because when we concentrate on rules and not the Being whom the rules help us know, we go astray. When we concentrate on facts about God instead of the One whom the facts help us know, the same thing happens. And when we can’t see past our meeting house to see the God it is meant to help us worship, confuse being committed with being sour, and use earthly political practices to get our way rather than bring about God’s kingdom “*on earth as it is in heaven,*” the one thing that is necessary gets pushed to the side. We see this in the words we heard from Revelation.

They are part of a vision God gave the Apostle John, and involve messages the Holy Spirit wanted him to share with two churches: the church at Ephesus and the church at Laodicea. Both churches had come into being through the Apostle Paul, and had been about the 1 thing of inviting people to enter into - and deepen - relationship with God. But something happened. They got distracted. They began to pay attention to other things. And they forgot to make sure the 1 thing Jesus said was necessary was the 1 thing they were most fully about.

To the church at Ephesus, the Holy Spirit therefore said *“I hold this against you: you have forsaken your first love.”* And to the church at Laodicea, the Holy Spirit said *“you say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”* But then to each of the churches, as well as the other 5 churches in between, the Holy Spirit said *“he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”* Which may seem odd because John tells us the Holy Spirit was speaking to the church at Ephesus, singular, and to the church at Laodicea, singular. Then suddenly, the Holy Spirit speaks in PLURAL, saying *“he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to THE CHURCHES.”*

When we dig into it, the wording really isn’t odd at all however. That is because while the Holy Spirit was speaking to individual churches, He was also speaking to the whole church. We see this in that the Holy Spirit told John to write to 7 churches. 7 is the number of completion. 7 is the number of perfection. And the number 7 is therefore used in scripture to speak of the entirety of something. By having John write to 7 churches, it was therefore a message of *“what the Spirit says to [ALL] the churches,”* including ours today.

As we see in what was said to the church at Ephesus that message was not only that *“I hold this against you: you have forsaken your first love,”* but also *“repent and do the things you did at first.”* And as we see in what was said to the church at Laodicea that message was not only that *“you say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing,’* but also *“buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.”* And the reason for those messages is that such repentant action is what it takes to be about the 1 thing.

We see the importance of this when we return to the passage from Luke that we heard on the first Sunday of this current worship series. In Luke 10, we are told that Jesus told Martha, *“You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed.”* That phrasing comes from the New International Version of the Bible. But in the New American Standard Bible, the words that tell us what Jesus said to Martha are translated a bit differently. The NASB phrases Jesus’ statement as *“you are worried and bothered about so many things, but only a few things are necessary, really only one.”* The difference is more than semantics, however. In this second way of translating what Jesus said to Martha there is an important statement made to us by God. And that important statement is that there is not just one important thing in life.

There are many important things in life. Work is important. Cleaning our house, cooking for our family, and (especially in Covidtide) helping our children with school work is important. It is also important that we pay our bills, rake leaves, and care for numerous other responsibilities. But these things are not the most important thing in life! For while there might be *“many things”* that are important, and which we might be *“worried and bothered about,”* only a few of them are really *“necessary,”* and *“really ONLY one.”* And that 1, as we have been discussing in worship over the last few weeks, is to individually enter into relationship with God and deepen that relationship over time, and then work with all our *“heart, soul, mind, and strength”* to enable our church be about the 1 thing of helping other people to be about that 1 thing as well.

The Apostle Paul founded the churches at Ephesus and Laodicea. He also founded the church at Corinth, and wrote to them saying *“if I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and can fathom all mysteries and knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.”* In the book the 1 Thing, Thom and Joani Schultz illustrate this in the story of Anne and Jerry. One night Ann called, saying *“our marriage is over.”* Thom and Joani couldn’t believe it. *“Jerry’s great!”* they told her. *“We’ve never seen anyone so selfless. Whatever needs to be done at church, he does. He volunteers with the Boys Club. He even leads the mission trip each year.”* *“He’s a great guy,”* Anne interrupted, *“but he’s so busy doing good things [for everyone else] there is never any time for ‘us.’”*

Such danger exists not only in our individual walk with God, but also in the life of the church - as we saw in what John wrote to the churches at Ephesus and Laodicea. For in both churches, people had entered into relationship with God, but strayed from faithfully walking with Him. Not that it was intentional. They just became complacent. They became *“worried and bothered”* by other things. And they forgot how much work it takes to pay attention to the 1 thing.

To ensure that we don’t lose sight of what is MOST IMPORTANT, individually or as a church, there are things we can do however. We see what those things are in human relationships. When a person wants to establish a relationship with someone else, they introduce themselves. They then do things together. And they make sure that over time other important things don’t creep in to distract them from spending time with that other person. When it comes to relationship with God, the same pattern holds true. We must speak to God, initially to ask for forgiveness and then for help not only to walk with Him but also become more like Him. We must spend time with God, not only seeking to get to know Him but also to find out what He wills for us to be like. And we must make sure other important things don’t distract us from relationship with God.

When we began this current worship series, I shared a scene from a movie titled City Slickers. The movie was about three men who by all outward measurements had attained the American dream. They had successful careers. They had wealth. And they had loving families. But none of them were happy. Each one felt empty. Each one felt their lives had no meaning or purpose. As a result, they got up each day and merely went through the motions of being alive. I also told how they went on a cattle drive to find meaning and purpose for their lives. On that cattle drive, they met Curly. *“None of you get it,”* Curly told the city slickers. *“Do you know what the secret of life is? One thing. Just one thing.”* *“That’s great,”* one of the city slickers replied, *“what’s the one thing?”* *“That’s what you gotta figure out,”* Curly said.

Fortunately, we don’t have to figure out the secret of life on our own. Jesus told us what we need to not only have meaning and purpose in our lives, but also peace, love, and joy. And what we need, quite simply, is Him. So, if we want to find meaning and purpose if we do not currently have it, or if we want to continue to have meaning and purpose (even in a pandemic), we need to not only be seeking to walk with Him every day, we also need to make sure our church is seeking to be the entity through which others can enter into - and deepen - relationship with Jesus. For that is the Great

Commission He gave not only to His original disciples, but to each of us.

If you are not already doing so, I therefore invite you to begin doing so today. I invite you to begin speaking to God in prayer. I invite you to begin reading scripture, or better yet join Disciple Bible study. I invite you to begin worshiping God - at home, through FM in the parking lot, or safely distanced in the sanctuary. And I invite you to be in fellowship with other Christians, give generously of your time, talent, and treasure in God's name, and share Jesus' love in both word and deed.

If you are already doing such things, I invite you (as the Holy Spirit said through John) to make sure you do not forsake your first love or think you do not need a thing, so you might not only "*hear what the Spirit says to the churches,*" but choose the 1 thing Jesus said is necessary - now, and for all eternity.