

The Main Thing

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[0 : 00] Well, I'd like us this morning just to turn back to Romans chapter 10, and I'm going to read! Again, verses 8 to 11. But what does it say? The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart.

That is the word of faith that we proclaim, because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For Scripture says, everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame. Our title this morning is a bit long, and it's a bit odd-sounding. Our title is The Main Thing is that The Main Thing is The Main Thing.

Now, that might sound a bit funny, but it's actually a massively important statement for all of us as individual Christians, or as those who are maybe not quite sure where we stand in terms of our faith, and it's immensely important for us collectively as a church. It's reminding us that it is so crucial that we always keep focused on the things that matter most.

I recently read, a few months ago, I read a book, and in the opening page of the book, the writer was recording an incident where they'd been at a funeral, and a woman came up to speak to them at the funeral, and they were chatting, and they got to speaking about failure. And the woman said to the minister who wrote the book, do you know what failure is? And he said, well, no, what would you say it was? And she said, failure is being successful at things that don't matter.

And I thought that was really striking. And it's reminding us how important it is to keep focused on the things that matter most. And this actually has a very important implication for us in terms of trying to learn about the Bible. This whole issue is described by theologians as theological proportion or theological priority. And what theologians mean by that is that within everything that's revealed in the Bible, there are some things that are more important than others. So everything in the Bible is important, but not everything is equally important. There are some things that are more important than others. And we know that that's true, because the Bible itself says that. So to give you an example, Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 says to them, I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures. He was buried, and he was raised in the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and he appeared to Cephas then to the twelve. Here Paul is saying the death and resurrection of Jesus, his appearance to eyewitnesses, and the fact that all of that fulfilled what the Old Testament had prophesied, all of that is of the highest importance. Likewise, Jesus himself, when he was asked to identify the two greatest commandments, he didn't hesitate to do that. He says the most important is this. Hear, O Israel, our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord with all your heart, your soul, your mind, your strength. The second is this. You shall love your neighbour as yourself. No other commandment is greater than these. And so the Bible gives priority to certain things, and our understanding of theology needs to be shaped by that sense of proportion. The Bible presents us with what we could call a framework of theological priority.

[3 : 31] And one of the reasons why it's so important for us to think about this is actually because every single one of you has a framework of theological priority as well. Whether you realise it or not, everybody has this framework. In other words, we all hold to certain things that we regard as more important than others. Now sometimes that will show itself explicitly in theological convictions, so you might have a very high view of the Bible, recognising that it's the Word of God. You might feel that evangelism is really important. You might have a really strong emphasis on the value of coming to church. You might hold very tightly to the positive benefits and obligations of observing the Sabbath. So sometimes our theological convictions will have this sense of priority, the stuff that's really important. Sometimes, though, our theological priority will show itself ethically.

So we might have very deeply held moral convictions on certain topics, and that's true of everybody. So that might be in regard to helping people who are poor. It might be to do with

protecting unborn children. It might be to do with welcoming asylum seekers, advocating for authority. We can all identify ethical issues that we would regard as particularly important. So our theological priority can show itself in our actual theological convictions, in our ethical, what we hold to as ethically important.

But I think most importantly of all, our theological priority will show itself in how we actually live. So I might say that I have a really high view of the Bible. But if I hardly ever read it, then it's probably not as important as I say it is.

I might say, I don't think that money matters. But if I actually spend a heck of a lot of time thinking about it and worrying about it, then actually it is more important to me than I want to let on.

And I might insist and say, look, my family are the most important people in the world. And yet I actually might spend more time trying to impress my boss or my colleagues or my friends at school.

[5 : 51] In all these ways, our sense of theological proportion can be revealed. We've all got it. And that raises a massive question. Is our sense of theological proportion the same as the Bible's?

Or another way to look at this is to ask two questions. For any particular issue, we need to ask, do I care about this as much as Jesus does? Or do I care about it less than Jesus does?

Sorry, no, I said that wrong. Do I care about it as much as Jesus does? Or do I care about it more than Jesus does? So sometimes we might not care very much about something that's actually very important to Jesus.

And other times we might care a heck of a lot about something and Jesus is like, that doesn't matter. And so sometimes our priority and our proportion can be wrong. And the place where we want to reach is for our sense of theological proportion to be more and more like Jesus's.

In other words, the main thing is that the main thing is the main thing. And so we're going to think about this a little bit more just now. And we're going to do it under three headings. We want to think about the main thing in terms of what we believe, the main thing in terms of how we live, and the main thing in terms of how we respond.

[7 : 06] So first of all, the main thing in terms of what we believe. And here we're recognizing that there's certain things in the gospel that are of primary importance, and there are other things that are of secondary importance.

And again, you can see this in the Bible, and you see it in Paul. So Paul, I referred to his letter to the Corinthians. I'm going to refer back to it. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he was facing opposition for people who were saying, well, we're not sure if he's a genuine apostle.

They were questioning his credentials, and they were basically saying, well, why do we really need to listen to Paul? And so they were quite critical of him. And Paul writes to defend himself to a certain extent, but at the same time, he's not actually bothered what people say about him.

And he's quite happy to say, look, I'm one of the least of the apostles. I'm not worthy to be called an apostle. And so he's like, you can call me what you like, because I don't deserve this anyway.

And back in chapter 1, one of the issues in Corinthians was that there was kind of divisions, and some were like saying, oh, well, I'm with Paul, I'm with Peter, I'm with Apollos. And, you know, were they baptized?

[8 : 15] I got baptized by them, I got baptized by them, and it was creating divisions. And Paul is like, I don't really care who I baptize. I'm thankful that I didn't baptize anyone except Crispus and Gaius. Oh, well, I also did the household of Stephanas.

But beyond that, I don't know, and I'm not interested, because that's not what mattered. Whether or not the people acknowledge Paul, whether these opponents, what they say about Paul is like, that doesn't matter.

And who I actually baptized, that actually doesn't matter. These things are of secondary importance. But what is absolutely crucial to Paul is that these Corinthian Christians recognize that everything depends on the cross, and that that's what Paul preached.

He came to them, and he preached Christ crucified. Everything depends on the cross, and everything depends on the resurrection. In chapter 15, he says, if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain.

These truths and others are of the highest importance. Now, all of that raises a question, okay, well, if that's true, if there's some stuff in the Bible that's more important, if there's some stuff that's of the highest importance, how do we know what is the main thing in terms of what we believe?

[9 : 30] Well, there's loads that we could say. There's lots of important things that we could highlight. What I want to give you is just three helpful things to remember in terms of assessing the

importance of something.

And these three things are classified under these terms. Necessity, clarity, eternity. Let me explain what I mean by these. Necessity is referring to the fact that there are certain things that we need to know.

And here, theologians have thrown a distinction between what they call fundamentals and non-fundamentals. A fundamental is something that we need to know in order to know God. Certain things that if we're going to have a relationship with God, we need to know this. And then non-fundamentals are things that God has revealed to us, and so we want to know them, and we want to learn them.

But we could still know him, even if we didn't know these specific things. So let me give you a couple of examples. It is impossible to know God except through Jesus.

[10:36] The Bible makes that absolutely clear. No one has ever seen God, the only God that's referring to God the Son, who's at the Father's side. He's made him known. And Jesus himself said, and as we saw this with Gordon a couple of weeks ago, No one comes to the Father except through me.

So you don't need to know everything that the Bible reveals about Jesus in order to believe in him. But you have to believe in him. So you can have saving faith in Jesus, even if you don't actually know that he was born in Bethlehem.

And even if you're not actually sure, and you can't remember how many loaves and fish he used to feed the 5,000. And even if you're not actually sure exactly how he instructed us to observe the Lord's Supper. Those things are important, but they're not of fundamental importance.

They're not as important as the cross and the empty tomb. And this is something that I can say from my own experience. I became a Christian when I was about 14, and I knew pretty much nothing. There is so much that I did not know, so much that I did not understand. And I have learned so much in the 30 years since then, 29 years since then.

[11:47] And I'm still learning so much. There is so much that I did not know. But when I was 14, the one thing that I did know was that I needed Jesus. I needed him more than anything else.

And so there's that sense of necessity. Is this something you need to know? And if it is, then it's extremely important. Second category here is clarity.

And by this, we're referring to the fact that in general, not necessarily all the time, but very much in general, the most important aspects of what the Bible teaches are revealed clearly.

And you see that in the passage that we read, that Mary read for us from Romans 10. In verse 6, you can see how easy it is to gravitate towards super complicated questions.

So, you know, Paul's saying the righteousness based on faith doesn't say, you know, who will ascend to heaven? That's to bring Christ down. Or who will descend into the abyss? That's to bring Christ up. That's to kind of, you know, start wrestling with questions that are intricate and complex and difficult over which we can never clearly get an answer.

[12:54] And it's so easy to do that, to kind of look at theological questions and to start asking things that are just going to tie ourselves in knots and leave us confused and uncertain and chasing a question that is never going to be able to fully answer.

And Paul said that's not what faith in Jesus is about. It's not about answering super complex questions. And in verse 8, he pulls them back to the main thing, and that main thing is crystal clear. The gospel's near you. It's in your mouth. It's in your heart. And all that Jesus is asking you to do is confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead and you'll be saved.

We need to believe. We need to confess. It's that simple. And it's so important that we do not overcomplicate these things. It's unbelievably easy to make the gospel way more complicated than it needs to be.

And verse 6 and 7, Paul's talking about people who are doing that, making it super complicated, trying to find answers to everything. And he's saying, that's not what it's about. It's actually about a very simple truth.

[14:07] A very simple message. And this is where we need to remember that in the gospel, priority is given to simplicity. So yes, there's lots of things in the Bible that are revealed that are just astonishing in how profound and beautiful and majestic they are.

And we can spend years and years and years reflecting on them, looking at them, thinking about them. Some of the things in the Bible are just, they're stunning and wonderful, fascinating, intricate, and it's brilliant to think about these things.

They'll stretch your mind, they'll captivate your heart. But never, ever, ever, ever forget that the main things are simple. The main things are beautifully simple.

We are sinners and Jesus has come to save us. And he accomplishes that salvation by dying on the cross and rising again in our place.

And all we are asked to do is believe in him in our hearts and confess him with our mouths. The important stuff is clear.

[15:16] And then the third category that's helpful to think about in terms of figuring out our theological proportion is the category of eternity. So in terms of making sure that the main thing is the main thing, one of the crucial things we need to recognize is whether this particular issue that we're discussing is going to change someone's eternity.

So Christians disagree on loads of things. So we disagree on baptism. We disagree on which version of the Bible to use. We disagree on what to wear at church.

People disagree about what to sing at church. People disagree about how the church should be governed. People disagree about what we should or should not do on a Sunday. Christians disagree about whether or not you should drink alcohol.

Christians disagree about how the church should relate to the state. Lots of different things. And these are all important issues. None of them are going to steer you from hell to heaven.

None of them are going to determine your eternal destiny. There's a famous Scottish theologian who lived a couple of hundred years ago. His name was William Cunningham. He wrote a lot about this idea of theological proportion.

[16:30] And he said one of the ways to determine a matter of primary importance is to ask one question. Does it save? Does this issue save you?

And that tells you how much it matters. The whole gospel is grounded and directed towards settling out eternal destiny.

That's the stuff that matters most. So in these categories, necessity, clarity, eternity, these are helpful for us.

So please make sure you focus on the things that you recognise the things that you need to know. Please don't get bogged down in stuff that's unclear. There's loads of things that are never going to be clear to us.

That's okay. The important stuff is clear. And please set that in the framework of eternity. Because that's what Jesus cares about.

[17:30] So we want, in terms of what we believe, the main thing is that the main thing is the main thing. But this also applies to how we live. Our sense of theological proportion should influence our day-to-day lives.

I think this is part of what Paul is emphasising when he speaks about confessing with your mouth that Jesus is Lord.

Now, obviously there's this kind of very literal, direct, obvious interpretation of that that we want to just publicly acknowledge to others, I am a believer, I'm trusting in Jesus.

But the reason why that's important is because it's recognising that a relationship with Jesus isn't meant to be a secret thing. It isn't something to be hidden or kept to one side. And this is where it's very helpful to remember that the relationship between Jesus and his church, between us, is one of the great images that the Bible uses to describe that, is the image of a marriage, the relationship between a husband and a wife.

Christ is the bridegroom, the church is the bride. And if you think about, you know, a couple were going to get married and you said, well, yeah, I'm going to love you, but I'm never going to tell anyone that you're my wife.

[18:39] So, well, that makes no sense. And you're like, well, let's keep this entirely secret and I don't want anybody to know. Like, it makes no sense at all. And that's the kind of pattern that's been emphasised here, that a relationship with the Lord is something that, yes, is grounded on our faith in our heart, but that should lead on to a public acknowledgement, both in terms of what we say and in terms of how we live.

There's a helpful way to remind you of this in the Westminster Confession of Faith. It speaks about how we're justified by faith. And I'll just read this little paragraph to you because it emphasises something so important.

So, it's saying that we're saved by faith alone. So, faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification.

So, that's saying, look, we're not justified by the stuff we do. We're justified by faith. It's the alone instrument of justification, yet it is not alone in the person justified, but it is ever accompanied with other saving graces.

It's no dead faith, but faith that worketh by love. In other words, when we believe in the Lord Jesus, that's what saves us, but it never stops there.

[19 : 55] Our faith leads on to other saving graces, to living a life shaped by the fact that we love the Lord Jesus and we are following him. And as part of that, there's certain patterns of behaviour that are of primary importance for our lives as Christians.

Jesus himself makes that abundantly clear. Most important thing of all is that we love God and love one another. And it's really important that we don't ever kind of play down the significance of that. That is the thing that Jesus cares about most in terms of our day-to-day conduct, that we love God and that we love one another.

That's echoed in the rest of the New Testament. I'll just whiz through it. But basically, Paul in Romans 13, Peter in 1 Peter 4, John in 1 John 3, are all saying the same thing, that we are to love one another, echoing Jesus' words.

Within that, there's specific issues that are highlighted as important. We want love to, Paul says, let love be genuine, abhor to what is evil, hold fast to what is good, love one another with brotherly affection, outdo one another in showing honour, don't be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord, rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer, contribute to the needs of the saints, seek to show hospitality.

These are the things that Jesus wants us to do. James has another great example. He says, religion that's pure and undefiled before God is visiting orphans and widows in the affliction, keeping yourself unstained from the world.

[21 : 19] These are all patterns that we want to follow. Equally, the New Testament also teaches that there are some sins that are more serious than others.

Now, all sin is serious, all sin leaves us condemned, but even Jesus himself speaks about greater sins. And so you can see that when he speaks to Pilate, Pilate says, you know, why won't you answer me?

Do you not know about the authority to release you and the authority to crucify you? Jesus says, you'd have no authority unless it had been given to you from above. He who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.

This is something, I'm running out of time, so I'm going to have to skip something. It's a really interesting question there. It's huge. It's huge. Larger Catechism 151. Google it when you get home. Read it. It's got a fascinating paragraph about the ways in which some sins are more grievous, more heinous than others.

I would have read it, but I'm running out of time. The key thing is that whatever stage we're at in our journey of faith, if you're a believer or not yet a believer, it is so easy for us to live our lives in a way this week where our priorities are all muddled up.

[22 : 36] And here we have to recognize that the devil will constantly try to get us to think that some unimportant thing matters more than anything else.

And that happens so easily. And there's lots of examples of that. So losing your temper is a very clear example of misplaced theological proportion.

So in that moment when you lose your temper if someone drives badly or whatever, in that moment you think that this is the most serious thing that I'm confronting at this moment.

this is overwhelming to me to the point where I am not going to withhold my rage. I'm going to let it pour out and I'm going to shout or be aggressive or whatever because this thing matters so much. And I'm sure very quickly you realize that was a total overreaction.

And so losing your temper is muddled priorities. So is addiction which is a desperately difficult thing to face, but it is where you think actually getting this thing is the thing that matters most right now.

[23 : 49] Even though it actually is going to destroy my family, my friendships, my well-being, the things that really are more important. Unforgiveness, greed, gossip, it's all the same.

And very often I have gone through a week in my life where my main things are not my main things. So prayer would be a main thing for me. I forget to do it so often.

Same with Bible reading. Time with my family is a main thing for me, but yet so easy for me to just work a little bit longer pastoral visits is a main thing for me and yet it's so easy to think I just need to get a few more emails done.

I just need to get a little bit more office work done. Exercise is supposed to be a main thing. Sitting on the sofa, eating is the real main thing. And being like Jesus absolutely is a main thing, but it slips into the background far too easily.

I'm sure you can think of thousands of examples in your own life. And as we step into this week, our prayer is that God's priorities would be our priorities. In terms of how we live, the main thing is that the main thing is the main thing.

[25 : 00] So theological proportion is massively important in terms of what we believe. And it's crucial in terms of how we live our lives. For both of these areas, the main thing is that the main thing is the main thing.

And there's crucial lessons for all of us as we follow Jesus and as we think about this. But I think that the most important thing I'm going to say today is the final point.

And this especially applies to anybody who's not yet a believer or not sure or struggling with your next step. You need to think about the main thing in terms of how we respond right now.

If you go back to Romans 10, the passage that we read, as I said, Paul's speaking about his fellow Jews and in particular, he's agonizing over the fact that they're rejecting Jesus.

You see that in verses 1 to 3, that his heart's desire and prayer is that they might be saved, that they would realize what they're doing. And in the previous chapter, he even said that he would actually, that he longs for them to be saved, that he's unceasing in his anguish towards them.

[26 : 16] And he actually goes on to say, sorry, I forgot to put the verse on that I wanted. I think it's verse 3, where he says, I would actually, I would actually be cursed myself if it meant that my fellow Jews might be saved.

And the agony that Paul is experiencing comes from the fact that the very things that the Jews have been waiting for. The Messiah that they've longed for has come.

The King that they've wished for has arrived. The Saviour that they desperately need is right in front of them. And they're pushing him away. And the very last verse of Romans 10 captures this so powerfully where it says, of Israel, God says, all day long I've held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.

Everything that Paul's fellow Jews needed was right in front of them. And they said no. They said no to Jesus. And here is the absolutely crucial point.

Let me go back here. In terms of what we believe, getting the main thing as the main thing takes a lot of time. It does take time. We're always learning and we're always reassessing our priorities.

[27 : 32] That takes time. In terms of how we're living, ensuring that the main things are the main things, that also is a long process. It's a lifetime's journey to just try and align our priorities.

It's a constant battle. But if you are not yet a Christian, the thing that matters most, the main thing that stands above every other main thing is what you do right now.

Right now, in this moment, Jesus is calling you to believe in him, to confess him, to follow him.

And in terms of how you respond to that, the devil will want to flood your mind right now, and he probably already is, flooding your mind with things that are absolutely not the main thing.

Things that think, well, I know I need Jesus, but I know I need Jesus, but I know I need Jesus.

Whatever you're finishing that sentence with is not the main thing. It is not the main thing.

[28 : 35] The main thing is that you say yes to Jesus. And the main thing for you is that that main thing is the main thing in your life.

And I know that taking that step can feel very daunting and very uncertain. And there's a whole ton of reasons, I'm sure, in your mind to thinking, I will mess it up or it'll go wrong or it'll change things or I don't know if I can do it.

There'll be a whole ton of things that will make it feel scary. But honestly, I can tell you one thing with all my heart that you will never regret it. You will never regret it.

And following Jesus, yes, it is the most main, main thing of all. It's also the most amazing thing of all.

And so I want you to take these words away and think about them. The main thing is that the main thing is the main thing. Amen.