

The Teacher and Priorities

“During this time, as the disciples were increasing in numbers by leaps and bounds, hard feelings developed...So the Twelve called a meeting of the disciples. They said, ‘It wouldn’t be right for us to abandon our responsibilities for preaching and teaching the Word of God...choose seven men from among you...and we’ll assign them this task. Meanwhile, we’ll stick to our assigned tasks of prayer and speaking God’s Word’”

(Acts 6, *The Message*).

Objectives

At the conclusion of this lesson the participant will be able to accomplish the following:

1. Explain the “accomplish more; do less” leadership concept taught in this lesson.
2. Demonstrate one’s understanding of the meaning of “main thing.”
3. Identify the characteristics of overload, stress, and burnout.
4. Develop a personal plan of how these can be avoided in one’s life.
5. Organize the work week to facilitate accomplishing one’s “main thing.”
6. List weekly activities and classify them according to the four major groupings advocated by H. Dale Burke.
7. State three blessings of rest.
8. Recall three gauges one needs to routinely check his/her life. Adopt these gauges effectively into one’s lifestyle.
9. Name three characteristics of one’s “main thing.”
10. Outline five things a teacher can do to protect and achieve the “main thing.”

Do the Main Thing

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The early church experienced success, and a few things that go along with it: the need to reevaluate, simplify, specialize, and delegate as an organization grows. People were griping, “Our needs are not being met.” The twelve quickly realized they couldn’t do everything required to sustain the church. It was necessary to stop, reflect, and refocus on what God had called them to do. They did and came up with the best solution, “We’ll stick with the main thing.” The church continued to grow. The apostles unveiled an important leadership concept: *to accomplish more, do less*. What an irony. Want to accomplish more? Do less.

Well, that is an interesting story from archives, but what about the here and now? Today, it looks more like this. I need to balance the checkbook, do the monthly financial report, preach twice this weekend, spend two days at the Bible school teaching, wash the clothes, help my wife with the cooking, visit the sick, in-laws are coming for a visit, the church is in the midst of a building project, my senior son needs to get off to university, and the list goes on. I’m exhausted just writing out the partial list. Excuse me while I go for a nap!

Handling weekly ministerial responsibilities is a lot like football. The week is off with a powerful kick, and you spend hours—even days—breathlessly chasing the ball. How can you find time to teach your classes, not to mention the time to prepare for them? It all comes down to *priorities*. What is important? What is your calling? What is your “main thing”? Find that and everything else organizes around it.

If you’re perceptive you probably noticed that it would be nearly impossible to eliminate anything from the list of personal responsibilities provided above. Perhaps, you could cancel the in-laws coming? Just joking! That would not be a good idea! Not only do we need to recognize our main thing, but we need to juggle carefully planning our week. Stagger activities so they don’t all come together. Notice what happens when two or three people sit at one end of the bench, and no one sits on the other end. People splatter on the floor. That’s what occurs when you overload, you fall, and the bench (we’ll call it your work week) flies up and knocks you in the head.

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“Besides the noble art of getting things done, there is the noble art of leaving things undone. The wisdom of life consists in the elimination of nonessentials.”

(Lin Yutang as quoted in Ready for Anything by David Allen.)

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Many are involved in making “to-do lists” but we also need to make “not-to-do lists.” This is also called “planned neglect.” We plan to neglect certain tasks so we can accomplish important ones. The *Daily Walk Bible* defines “specialization” as “the art of learning more and more about less and less.” If we want to accomplish more in life we must specialize.

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The apostles knew if they focused on their “main thing” it would make a significant difference in advancing the church. Lesser goals make little difference in the health and growth of the ministry and can be delegated to others. What do you do when faced with the need to do more? Right. Do less. D. L. Moody once said, “The trouble with a great many men is that they spread themselves out over too much ground. They fail in everything. If they would only put their life into one channel, and keep in it, they would accomplish something.” Someone has rightly said that if we try to do a little of everything, we will end up doing a whole lot of nothing.

Jesus often referred to His purpose. Jon Walker in “Did Jesus Rush through His Week?” explains, “It’s not about getting everything done; rather it’s about doing the most important things!...Timing is everything. It means saying ‘no’ to the urgent in order to stay focused on the important. Think about Olympic athletes. They have just as many hours in the day as you and me, but they sacrifice constantly to press toward their goal. They don’t allow their day to be filled with busy-ness because they have a larger purpose in mind.”

Your “main thing” should be in alignment with your unique gift mix, calling, purpose, mission, and vision. It’s a humbling revelation but one person cannot do everything. In fact, Jesus does not expect any one person to do everything. He wants each to do the right things; and to do them right. God has equipped us with gifts, unique abilities, and a rich reservoir of experiences. There is no one just like you. He expects us to use these resources to advance His kingdom. However, we must understand we have limited resources. To minimize pride and to maximize team ministry, not all perform the same function nor possess the same gifts. Working together, operating in our areas of strength, propels the church forward. “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us” (Romans 12:3-6, *NIV*).

Matthew 25:14-29 tells a story about investment. Three servants served their Master. Each was given a gift to invest based on his unique abilities, and delegated responsibilities. Two servants invested their talents; one played it safe and did nothing. The Master was not happy with the third servant and threw him out. We are servants. Our assets are limited but need to be invested wisely.

Confused? You thought the Bible said, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Philippians 4:13). Exactly! We can do everything the Lord wants us to do, but He does not want us to do everything. He has a specific work in mind for us. Besides, the setting of this scripture refers to how God supplies the financial resources necessary to accomplish ministry. We are limited. He is unlimited.

H. Dale Burke’s excellent book, *Less is More Leadership* proved to be a priceless resource in the groundwork of this lesson. He said, “You have only a certain amount of time, energy, giftedness, resources, and money. You’ve got only so much to give, and when it’s gone, it’s gone.” He went on to say, “Leaders, as limited resources, must learn to simplify, reduce, and in fact ‘do less’ in order to

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accomplish more.” When Burke asked leaders to describe their feelings about their lives they used three words: I am busy, buried, and behind.

Okay! It’s time for a few word building exercises. Three new words:

- Overload
- Burnout
- Stress

Avoid these three culprits. They will rob joy, creativity, and productivity if given half a chance. Overload may be easier to describe than to define. Steve and Mary Farrar in *Overcoming Overload* explain, “Overload reminds us of the weight of everyday life. We are overwhelmed, overworked, overcommitted, overanxious, overmatched, and overextended. Our tanks are on empty and we are running on fumes.”

Burke feels we need to make choices to pursue our dreams. It is necessary to off-load (responsibilities not in line with our “main thing”) before we can reload (responsibilities in line with our main thing). Otherwise, we risk overloading. Do you know what happens when you overload electrical circuits? The lights go out, and power failure is experienced.

Burnout comes from unrealistic expectations. According to Robert Trapani, “It occurs when well-intentioned people try to reach unrealistic goals.” We cannot accomplish everything, and need to focus on what God would have us accomplish.

Stress occurs when there are strong emotional demands made on the nervous system. It is when you have more problems than you can handle. Stress is a close cousin to “overload.”

How do we prevent overload, burnout, and uncontrollable stress in our lives? Find the main thing, the one thing you do best in life, and stick with it. Once you have found it, stay focused. “But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal...All of us who are mature should take such a view of things” (Philippians 3:13-16, *NIV*).

Finding the Main Thing

Your “main thing” is your area of specialization; your unique God-given ability. Jesus described it this way, “For this is what I came for” (Mark 1:38).

H. Dale Burke in “How to Overcome Overload” says that our “main thing” includes three characteristics.

1. My main thing is “mission critical” essential to the growth of the ministry. Done well it moves the organization forward.

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2. My main thing is “top priority.”
3. My main thing grows out of my unique abilities.

Organizing the Work Week

H. Dale Burke in *Less is More Leadership* groups activities into four major categories, and sets time aside for each in order to keep his work balanced. This requires planning your week in large blocks of time, either full or half days. Focus on one objective at a time.



Rest time—focus on your health, spirituality, and marriage. “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates” (Exodus 20:8-10, *NIV*).

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly” (Matthew 11:28, *The Message*).

“Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, ‘Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest’” (Mark 6:31, *NIV*).

Mary Southerland in “How to Deal with Stress” tells the story of a tourist taking a safari in the jungles of Africa. He hired locals to carry his supplies and to serve as guides. On the first day they walked rapidly and went far. The tourist was thrilled with the progress, rose the second day, eager to get on the journey again. The locals refused to budge. They insisted that they needed to sit and rest. They explained to the tourist that they had gone too fast the first day. Now they were waiting for their souls to catch up. She concludes, “The more responsibility we carry and the busier we are, the more we need regular solitude!” A Greek proverb says, “You will break the bow if you keep it always bent.”

God is willing to help us if we will obey His Word, rest, and spend time in His presence. Rest accomplishes three things:

It Renews: “But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint” (Isaiah 40:31).

It Restores: “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake” (Psalms 23:1-3).

It Refreshes: “The times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19).

Cecil Murphey in *Live Ten Years Longer* encourages ministers to do three things.

1. Find a regular exercise you will enjoy.
2. Change the way you eat and drink. He doesn’t recommend a diet (which implies taking things away) but suggests a balanced diet. He also urges us to drink more water. During the night bodies lose the equivalent of two glasses of water in moisture.
3. Get more rest. Getting plenty of sleep is essential to the body. The body repairs the wear and tear of the day through sleeping. When you don’t take time to sleep your immune system suffers. He also encourages ministers to rest their mind by laying aside the stress they carry within.

“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Corinthians 6:18-20, *NIV*).



Results time—focus on the “main things” that advance the mission. Time needs to be spent focusing on the unique role God has for you personally. Use the portion of the day or week when you do your best work. Structure your schedule around the “main things.” Tackle priorities one at a time and in order of their importance. It may help to break a project down into chunks and approach the work one chunk at a time.

Burke finds that when he tries to fit more than one of these needs into a block of time he experiences frustration and defeat rather than fulfillment.



Response time—focus on things that result from your results time or “main thing.” These are things not critical to the mission but still important. This is usually focused on others, processing things that flow out of your “main thing” including administration and follow-up.



Refocus time—focusing on how you adjust what and how you undertake projects. This is when you work on the mission, reflect, assess, adjust, and innovate for the future. Retreat to refocus. Refocus weekly, monthly, and yearly. An ancient Chinese proverb says, “Muddy water let stand will clear.”

Rick Warren in “Seven Secrets of Stress Management” says that “Preparation prevents pressure but procrastination produces it. You work by either priorities or pressures.” The old cliché “don’t put off until tomorrow what can be done today” goes a long way to prevent overload.

When involved in emotionally draining activities take time to prepare, and then to recover. Richard A. Swenson said, “Calendar congestion and time urgency have robbed us of the pleasure of anticipation. Without warning, the activity is upon us. We rush to meet it; then we rush to the next; and the next.” He

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advises that when the activity is over take time to reflect, evaluate, and remember. I think we should also celebrate our victories.

Reading the Gauges

Bill Hybels in a Leadership Journal article entitled “Reading Your Gauges” talks of three gauges that we need to routinely check in our lives.



Spiritual Gauge—How am I doing spiritually? The spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, Bible reading, meditation, sacrifice and others pump high-octane fuel into our lives providing strength for ministry.



Physical Gauge—How am I doing physically? Exercise, proper diet, and rest are important.



Emotional Gauge—How am I doing emotionally? Certain activities drain our emotional petrol tank. Bill Hybels calls these “Intensive Ministry Activities” which include confrontations, counseling sessions, exhausting ministry sessions, board meetings (to name a few). Refilling your emotional tank takes time. To maintain emotional resources use your spiritual gifts or unique abilities. Many times you will feel more energized after using them. Serving outside your gift areas tend to drain you. Remember Jesus at the well talking to the Samaritan women? When His disciples returned bringing food, Jesus said, “My food...is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work” (John 4:34, *NIV*). Doing what He was called to do was fulfilling, and energizing, rather than draining. You will receive strength from doing your main thing, and the church will be thrust forward.

Applying the Main Thing to Teaching

Let’s get a little more specific. Here are a few pointers in helping you do your main thing—passing the truth on to the next generation.

1. Plan in advance. Ask your Bible school administrator what courses you will be teaching next semester and begin preparing now.
2. Specialize. Try to teach according to your interests and gifting. Rev. Joseph Asare recommends teaching according to blocks of courses. For example: Hebrews and Tabernacle go together; Evangelism, Missions, Church Growth, and Church Planting are all interrelated.
3. Work carefully within deadlines. Turn your work into the administrative office on time. Why not surprise everyone and turn it in before the due date? When late, you cause others to be delayed in getting their work done.

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4. Allow ample allowance to make sure you'll be in class on time. Excuses like, "I was stuck in traffic" do not get your teaching time fulfilled. Leave early from home. Arrive early to school.
5. Block off times for preparation. John Milton Gregory said, "Many teachers go to their work either partly prepared or wholly unprepared. They are like messengers without a message." "Wherefore wilt thou run, my son, seeing that thou hast no tidings ready?" (2 Samuel 18:22).
6. Do not overload on the number of courses you agree to teach (or on other activities for that matter). You might need to adopt the "Just Say No" policy when the proposed activity does not align with the main thing or is not the best use of your time.
7. Taking on new responsibilities usually mean giving up some of the old ones. Delegate. Let go. The world will still go on. Remember to offload before you reload.

Christmas Evans, a British evangelist, once made the comment, "I'd rather burn out than rust out in the service of the Lord." I recently saw a taxi with the words "Rust in God" sprawled across the back windshield. The letter "T" would have made it "Trust in God." The letter had long been lost. It humored me. Many ministers operate on a similar principle. When they should trust in God they would rather rust in God. James Berkeley gives this alternative: "I admire the bravado. It sounds dedicated, bold, and stirring. However, when I view the burn-outs and the almost burn-outs who lie by the ecclesiastical road, the glory fails to reach me. I see pain and waste and unfinished service. Is there not a third alternative to either burning out or rusting out? In Acts 20:24, Paul stated, 'I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me.' Herein lies the model I choose to follow. I want neither to burn out or rust out. I want to finish out the race." (Taken from *Going the Distance: How to Stay Fit for a Lifetime of Ministry* by Peter Brain)

Lesson in Review

1. What did the apostles do when they realized they couldn't do everything to sustain the church?

2. What is meant by planned neglect? _____

3. How do athletes accomplish their quest for achievement? _____

4. What is meant by the "accomplish more, do less" leadership concept? _____

5. What is overload? _____

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6. How can one prevent overload? _____

7. What is meant by one's "main thing"? _____

8. List Burke's four major categories used in organizing the work week. _____

9. State three things rest accomplishes. _____

10. Why is getting plenty of sleep essential to the body? _____

11. What is the significance of results time? _____

12. Bill Hybels talks of three gauges we need to routinely check our lives. What are they? _____

13. What are four things you can do to help achieve your main thing (referring to your teaching)?