

July 1, 2012 - There is One Thing

We're in the first part, getting into the middle, of a series called "This I Know" and we're just looking at different things in the Bible that God tells us, no matter what else happens, this is something that you can count on in life. So that's what we've been looking at each week and this week we're going to continue on in that vein.

In the 1991 movie names City Slickers, it's about a man named Mitch Robbins and he and two of his middle aged friends from New York City, they're each kind of going through their own mid-life crisis and so in a desperate search for solution, the three friends decide to sign up to be ranch hands. Their task is going to be to drive a herd of cattle from New Mexico to Colorado. Shortly as they begin this journey, they are introduced to Curly. Curly is a cowboy whose personality is as prickly as his spears and whose face is as leathered and worn as his saddle. Along the ride Curly decides to offer Mitch a little bit of advice and the conversation goes something like this: "You city folk are all alike. You spend 50 weeks getting knots in your rope then think two weeks out here will untie it for ya'. None of you get it. You know what the secret to life is?" Mitch says "No, what?" "This". "Your finger?" Mitch asks. "No, one thing, just one thing, stick to that and everything else doesn't matter." Mitch thinks for a moment and he says "That's great, but what's the one thing?" And curly says "That's what you've got to figure out." And so for the rest of the movie, Mitch tries to figure out what his 'one thing' is. And we think he's figured it out but then they made a sequel so I'm not sure how that works. But anyways, Mitch is trying to figure out what his one thing is and I think if we're honest, we all have our one thing.

Some people might argue that they have more than one thing, they have several 'one things' but to discover what your one thing is, complete the following statement: If I could only just get, or be, or do, or have, _____ then I would be happy and content and fulfilled and successful. Then life would be good. And whatever you filled that blank with, that is your 'one thing'. Most of us likely don't have to think too long or too hard to figure out what goes into that blank for us. Could be things like: If I could only just get married; or get that promotion; or get a raise, or get out of debt; then life would be good. If I could only just be a little slimmer; a little younger; a little healthier; a little richer; then life would be good. If I could only just buy a house; pay off my mortgage; find the man of my dreams; or solve the rubics cube, then life would be good. If I could only just have a flat screen T.V. or season's tickets to the Blades or the Riders or the Symphony or whatever. If I could only just have my boss' respect; if I could only just have fame and fortune; if I could only just have a fresh start, then life would be good. And whatever it is that is your one thing, you are without question or equivocation convinced that it is the only thing standing between you and the life that you've always dreamed of having.

Well if anyone had a clear idea of what their one thing was, it was the man in our story out of Mark, Chapter 2. Let's take a look at it again, Brad read it earlier Mark 2:1-5:

"When Jesus had returned to Capernaum, a few days later, the news spread quickly that he

was back home. Soon the house where he was staying was so packed with visitors there was no more room, even outside the door. While he was preaching God's word to them, four men arrived carrying a paralyzed man on a mat. They couldn't bring him to Jesus because of the crowd so they dug a hole through the roof above his head. Then they lowered the man, on his mat, right down in front of Jesus. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralyzed man "My child your sins are forgiven."

So let's just set the scene for a moment. The miracle worker is in town. The house is packed. The Rabi is teaching. The paralyzed man is desperate. The four friends are determined. The doorway is blocked. The roof is torn open. The mat is lowered down and everyone is waiting for Jesus to say the word and for the crippled man to jump up to his feet. But then, Jesus begins to speak, but then says 'My child, your sins are forgiven'. The crowd holds it's breath but then exhales. The four friends peering into the room from above start to cheer but then are struck speechless. The paralytic attempts to spring to his feet, but then realizes his legs still aren't working. What has happened here? What has gone wrong? It's obvious what this man's 'one thing' was. It was to walk. But that's not what Jesus offers, at least not first and foremost. Now, to really understand what's going on here. We must first understand fully the situation that this man was in. The text says that the man was paralyzed, some older versions like the King James, identify his ailment as palsy. But whatever the cause of this infirmity it had taken away at least the use of his legs, perhaps affected the use of his arms or his face or even his speech. Unlike today, there are no medical options for him. There is no social safety net other than sitting on the corner every day, begging for coins. Beyond that, this ailment or ailments such as this branded people with a social and religious stigma that could not be shaken. At this point in history in some circles, if parents gave birth to a defective infant they were instructed to drown the child in the river. There's a Roman code from 500 B.C. that instructs parents to kill quickly a deformed child. Aristotle, who is known as a purveyor of great wisdom, he once wrote "with regard to the choice between abandoning an infant and rearing it, let there be a law that no crippled child be reared. Even among the Israelites, in whom God had instilled a great respect for life, there were some dominating cultural opinions in regard to people like this man. The opinion was that if you were good, God would bless you. And if you were bad, God would punish you. And therefore, as you looked around at the people around you, if you saw someone who was blessed, they were obviously a good and godly person and if you saw someone who was having bad things happen to them, they were obviously a sinful person. Now that's not true and that's not God's opinion, but that's what people at that time believed.

Some of you may be familiar with the story of Job in the Old Testament. Job starts out as a man who really has everything. He is wealthy and he has family and he has possessions and he is very blessed. So people believe that he was a very godly man, which indeed he was, but as the story progresses, those things begin to get taken away from him. He loses his possessions and even his family and his health. One by one even his closest friends start to lose their faith in him and they begin to counsel him that whatever terrible sin it is that he is

hiding, he should confess so that these bad things will stop happening.

Of course, we have the behind the scenes look at this story and we can see that Job is just as godly and faithful in the bad times as he was during the good times. But nonetheless this opinion persisted that, if bad things happened to you, you must be sinful.

Jesus meets another man in John, Chapter 9. This man is blind and when he comes across this man his disciples ask him this question. They say “Rabi, why was this man born blind? Was it because of his own sin or because of his parents’ sin?” And Jesus’ reply is: “Neither, but there is an opportunity here to show you something about the heart of God.” And so he makes some mud and puts it on the man’s eyes and sends the man to the pool of Siloam. The man washes and once he washes the man can suddenly see. Now, even Jesus’ disciples had somehow bought into this idea that an illness was due to sin. They even expected Jesus to agree with them that the blindness was caused by sin, they just weren’t sure whose sin it was.

Which brings us back to our friend in Mark, Chapter 2. He would have born a similar stigma for his illness. People would have seen him and thought “That’s a terrible illness. He must have done something really bad. He must have some terrible hidden sin. God must really be mad at him.” And that’s the kind of stigma that would stick with you. Perhaps if Jesus had just healed his legs, some of that stigma would have remained. Perhaps people would recognize him as the lame beggar they used to know sitting on the street corner and they would say to themselves and each other “Sure he can walk now, but that was a miraculous healing so that doesn’t really count.”

Some of you may recognize this man. His name is Roger Clements, he is a baseball player, a pitcher. He actually has some of the most impressive stats in major league baseball history. He’s also a long-suspected steroid user. He was recently found in court ‘not guilty’ of lying to Congress about his steroid use. However, those following the case said the prosecution was fairly inept in their handling of it and following the verdict, all the sports commentators unanimously agreed that, although Clements was technically found not guilty of lying about his steroid use, he was still undoubtedly guilty of taking the steroids in the first place. Most people believed that the stain of his steroid use will tarnish the memory of his career and prevent him from ever entering the Baseball Hall of Fame. It’s kind of like if you were charged with some terrible crime and everyone knows that you did it, the evidence is insurmountable, you’ve all but confessed to it, but due to some legal technicality with the way the police or the prosecutor have handled the case, you get off scot free. So technically you may be innocent, but we all know what kind of person you really are.

That’s where the paralytic was at. Even if Jesus had healed him, people would have said “Okay you got lucky, that Jesus guy healed you, but we all still know that you were a dirty rotten sinner which was why you were paralyzed in the first place.” Even our story of the blind man in John, chapter 9, his parents of all people, shied away from him because they

knew, even after he was healed, that people still would have strong prejudices against him. Listen to the way this story ends. It ends with these words:

“You were born a total sinner” the Pharisees answered. “Why are you trying to teach us?” and they threw him out of the Synagogue.

At least on some level Jesus knows that if he heals this man’s legs, he will still carry the stigma and self-doubt about how God truly views him. So let’s just clear that up first and then we’ll work on the legs.

But that’s not how the story ends. It goes on. Some of the teachers of religious law who were sitting there thought to themselves “What is he saying? This is blasphemy! Only God can forgive sin.” Jesus knew immediately what they were thinking so he said to them “Why do you question this in your heart? Is it easier to say to the paralyzed man “Your sins are forgiven” or “Stand up, pick up your mat and walk. So I will prove to you that the Son of Man has authority on Earth to forgive sins.” Then Jesus turned to the paralyzed man and said “Stand up, pick up your mat and go home.” Then the man jumped up, grabbed his mat and walked through the stunned onlookers. They were all amazed and exclaiming ‘we’ve never seen anything like this before.’”

Jesus asked the question “Which is easier to say to the paralyzed man? Your sins are forgiven. Or ‘Stand up, pick up your mat and walk.’

I recently read a book where the author stated that the answer is obvious. ‘Pick up your mat and walk’ is the easiest answer. His logic was, only God can forgive sins, so pretty much anything else has to be easier. But I disagree. It all depends on the question. If the question is “Which is easier to do?” well you look at that and say ‘Only God can forgive sins and to make that possible, Jesus, God’s only Son, came to earth, was born in human form; lived a perfect and sinless life; was tortured and killed on the cross; was buried in the grave; rose back to life on the third day.’ Now, compare that to actually healing a man’s legs. Today we have doctors and surgeons, we have researchers who are discovering new treatments and medicines all the time. We have physiotherapists who can do incredible things with rehab, although it’s definitely not easy, and in some cases we still haven’t figured out how to do it, we still kind of live with this sense today that most things can be done and those things that can’t currently be done, we have this sense that we’re going to figure out how to do it in the future. Now obviously, medicine wasn’t as advanced in the First Century, but compared to the alternative, healing crippled legs would have seemed easier of the two options to do. But Jesus question wasn’t ‘Which is easier to do?’ His question was “Which is easier to say?” If I say “Your sins are forgiven” there’s no verifiable way to know if I actually did what I said. When your sins are forgiven you don’t change colour. You don’t radiate a glow; you don’t grow six inches; you don’t gain the ability to fly. There’s really no litmus test for ‘forgiven’. However, if I say “Your legs are healed. Stand up and walk.” It’s pretty easy to know if I’ve actually healed you. If you stand up and walk, I’m legit. If

your legs still don't respond to your brain's request to move, I'm a liar. Jesus says, 'The part I'm most concerned about is getting rid of the sin in your life, but so that you and everyone else knows that the invisible portion of this plan has worked, let me give you something tangible to hang on to. Go ahead. Stand up and walk.' Jesus knew what the paralytic was yet to realize, that his 'one thing' wasn't big enough. And that's really the problem isn't it. Whatever your 'one thing' is, in the end, it's just never quite big enough.

I read a story this week about an author named Guy de Maupassant. I'm going to use his first name because it's much easier for me. Guy was an extremely talented short story writer in the 1800's. He quickly rose to fame and wealth. It is said he owned a yacht on the Mediterranean, a large house on the Normandy coast; and a luxurious flat in Paris, which for those days, was an abundance of things. It is said that the critics praised him; men admired him and women worshipped him. But in 1892, Guy tried to take his own life. He was committed to an insane asylum where he spent the last year of his life. At age 42 he had written his own epitaph which said: "I have coveted everything and taken pleasure in nothing."

The writer of Ecclesiastes comes to a similar conclusion. He spends his whole book reflecting on his search for meaning and purpose and happiness. When he gets to the end he says: "I've tried it all and here is the verdict. Everything is meaningless. Completely meaningless."

And here's why our search for our 'one thing' is meaningless. You may be familiar with the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list. It's the list of the ten people who the FBI consider to be the most notorious criminals that they are chasing. For whatever reason, whether their crimes were horrific or numerous, they have been added as "These are the people we first and foremost want to catch". Do you know what happens when the #1 criminal on that list is captured? He is taken off the wall and #2 moves up to #1. The same thing happens with our personal most wanted list. Perhaps you've experienced that in your own life. You've had for a long time your one thing and when you finally receive or achieve it, Yeah! Life is good. But not long down the road you realize that you now have a new 'one thing' and sure it's great that you now possess the old 'one thing' but if you could possess the new 'one thing' as well then life would REALLY be great. And so we find ourselves in this unending cycle looking from one thing to another in search for whatever it is will complete our life. God says "I have something better in mind for you. Instead of pursuing this endless succession of 'one thing' after 'one thing', God says 'I am your one thing. Pursue me and we will tackle life together with or without these other things.' Jesus tells his disciples 'Seek the Kingdom of God above all else and live righteously and He will give you everything else you need.'

The problem comes when I get conned into thinking that something else is my 'one thing'. When we believe that our one thing will fill the deepest longing of our soul because, in that moment, that one thing assumes God's place in our heart. And there are an infinite number of things that can become our 'one thing' and the tricky part is that, not all of those things

are bad, in fact, some of those things are very good. Being successful at work; getting out of debt; improving your health; gaining freedom from sickness; finding the man of your dreams; owning a flat screen; or taking a big trip; these are not all bad things and it's not wrong to desire them or even to ask God to help you to get some of those things, as long as the pursuit of that comes second to our pursuit of God.

Ironically, sometimes even spiritual things can become our 'one thing'. Individually we start to think things like: If I could just get into the habit of reading my Bible before breakfast every day. If I could just pray at night without falling asleep. If I could just give more; or attend more; or participate more; or sacrifice more; or sin less, then life would be good. Collectively we start to think things like: If we could just make our worship a little more dynamic. If we could find a preacher who was a little less boring. If we could support more missions. If our ministries were more vibrant. If our Wednesday nights were better attended. If our youth activities were more awesomer, then life would be good. These are all great and wonderful things and we should aspire to achieve them. We should work to reach all of those goals. We should pursue holiness and Christ-likeness, and we should never be complaisant in our spiritual growth as individuals or collectively as a church. But when we start believing, if I could just master one of these things, then life would be great. I'd be spiritually healthy; our church would be blooming; then we're aiming at the wrong target.

Jesus told his disciples "If you try to hang on to your life you'll lose it but if you give up your life for my sake you'll save it. What do you benefit if you gain the whole World but lose your own soul. Is anything worth more than your soul."

In other words don't hit the bulls eye on the wrong target. I remember watching a Flintstone's episode once where Fred was bowling and he was bowling and the ball bounced and went into the other lane and got a strike. That's wonderful, but it doesn't count because you want to hit the bulls eye on the right target. Don't make the wrong thing your 'one thing'. Don't count on anything else to bring you life. God says: "Count on me". According to Jesus, we could gain everything we ever thought would make us happy and we would still, never find contentment and joy. On the other hand, if we give it all up and seek Him first, we will find true life. Whatever else we gain will be icing on the cake. Whatever else we had hoped to gain but failed to gain, will be more bearable because Christ will be bearing it with us.

There's a missionary named Jim Elliott, who was actually killed and martyred by the tribe he was trying to reach out to and evangelize. In 1956, just before he died he wrote this in his journal: "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." And that's exactly what Jesus is inviting us into. Don't obsess and stress over the things you can't keep, the things that won't last. Instead, grab hold of the one thing you can't live without.

In John 17, Jesus is praying and he says these words: "And this is the way to have eternal

life, (this is the secret to life) to know You the only true God (and that's not just know about, to know facts, that's knowing in a relational, personal way) and Jesus Christ whom you have sent to earth." God says "this you can know, there is one thing that is the secret to life and that 'one thing' is your relationship with Me."