

## Few things are needed.

**Opening prayer:** Please, Lord, let these be your words, not my words, and spoken with the power of your Holy Spirit, not in my strength.

The idea for this sermon came from a biography I was reading about the missionary David Livingstone, and I am going to begin with two stories about Livingstone.

Probably most of you know the story about when Livingstone was somewhere in the middle of Africa, around 1870, and he went off the radar completely. For six whole years. During that time, no one knew if he was dead or alive. The New York Herald newspaper sent Henry Morton Stanley to look for Livingstone, and Stanley finally tracked him down, and is said to have greeted him (tongue in cheek, because he was probably the only other white person within tens of thousands of square miles) with the now famous words: “Dr Livingstone, I presume?” Picture 1

Some of you may also know an earlier story, about when another African missionary, Robert Moffat, went back to Scotland to raise support. When he arrived to give one particular address, Moffat was hoping to find the pews packed with young men avid to hear how they could help in the work of furthering God’s kingdom in Africa. Instead, he found an audience comprising elderly women, and in those days women did not go to the mission field unaccompanied. I don’t know what hymns Moffat had requested, but we do know that he requested at least one hymn, and I expect it was the nineteenth century equivalent of “Men of faith rise up”, which is why I asked Catherine if we might sing that this morning. And I’m sure you can picture those grey-haired ladies putting down their knitting and standing to sing the men’s parts in their high voices. Moffat must have been bitterly disappointed. But he gave his sermon anyway, and what he did not know was that in the organ loft was a young lad named David Livingstone, pumping the bellows. He was listening to every word, and in particular he was haunted by the statement Moffat made [get a young person to read this aloud]:

Every morning when I get up and look at the horizon, I see the smoke from a thousand villages where the name of Christ has never been heard.

The rest is history. Livingstone studied medicine and went on to become an even more famous missionary than Robert Moffat.

Great stories, but the Tim Jeal biography of Livingstone paints a much more complex story of a highly complex man. Yes, Livingstone was daring and resourceful, but he was also unscrupulous, egotistical, domineering and at times rather economical with the truth. And although Greg Anderson told us so clearly a few weeks ago that our Christian work is not “performance based”, if we do look at the numbers, Livingstone is said to have converted only one person to Christianity and that person turned away again from the faith. And yet, Livingstone believed strongly that Africa would benefit from increased European trade and commerce, and he certainly pursued this objective fervently. His map-making – which is the main reason I was reading the book – was extraordinary, and his maps and his books did in fact help to open up Africa – both for better and for worse.

When I read about Livingstone, I found that I was reminded of some of the more passionate and unscrupulous characters in the Bible. Jacob, for instance, who infamously diddled – cheated – his brother Esau out of his birthright, worked seven years so he could marry Rebekah, and then was diddled in turn by her father, Laban, who foisted his older and far less attractive daughter on Jacob in a deception worthy of Jacob himself. It was also Jacob who wrestled with God all of one night, and

had a permanent limp to show for it, but the following morning still had the effrontery to say, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

Or Peter, cutting off the ear of the High Priest’s servant, or Abraham, twice telling fibs about Sarah being his sister not his wife. These characters knew what they wanted and they weren’t too picky about how they got it. Some of the characters God used did things they bitterly regretted afterwards, and repented for. Now, I know that at Musselburgh we meet as people who haven’t got our lives perfectly sussed out, but we’re rank amateurs compared with some of these biblical characters. They really hadn’t got their lives sussed out.

And it wasn’t just men, either, it was also women. Single-minded, highly focused, even downright unscrupulous women. Naomi, a widow with no husband to provide for her, in survival mode, instructing her daughter-in-law, Ruth, to wash, put on perfume, get dressed in her best clothes, and sleep at Boaz’s feet when he had just enjoyed plenty to eat and drink and was in good spirits. Jael, altering the course of history with what must be one of the Bible’s crudest killings: with a tent peg and a hammer. Rahab, a woman of ill-repute, hiding the Hebrew spies because she saw through to the essential issues – she wanted to save her family and she recognised that only God had the power to accomplish this. And finally, Mary, who [in Luke 10: 38-42] “sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said”. And when Martha, her sister, was “distracted by all the preparations that had to be made” and asked Jesus to tell Mary to jolly well help her, Jesus said:

... few things are needed – or only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.

So my **first point** today is that those words, “Few things are needed” seem to be one common denominator between all of the people I have mentioned so far, from David Livingstone through to Mary. They all saw through the clutter and the detail that make our lives so complicated, to WHAT was important in life, WHO was important, and they acted in a very focused manner. It looks very much as if God finds it easier to use energy and passion, even if it is sometimes a little misdirected, than apathy. In fact, in Revelation 3:16, God’s message to the church at Laodicea was:

... because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth.

So maybe God is looking for people who are prepared to think and to pray and to try to cut through all the unimportant detail to discern what is really crucial in each season of their lives, and who don’t try to “hedge their bets” with lots of options, but rather go all-out in pursuit of those few things that are needed. Paul’s metaphor seems apt, of life being like a marathon, with the runners oblivious to everything except that finishing tape:

Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. [Philippians 3: 13b-14]

For years, one of my prayers for the family has been for “Godly goal posts” for each one of them. That they know where God wants them to head for in each season. We are all happiest if we have a clear idea of what our task is, and are able to get stuck in. Even before the fall we read in Genesis 2: 15 that God “took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it”. Work is good, so long as we can focus on just a few jobs, and they’re not piling up faster than we can finish them (that’s what it sometimes feels like). But we do have some control over that, as I will come to in a minute.

So point one, is that God uses people with the ability to cut through the unimportant detail to the few really important things in life, and to pursue these few things without getting too distracted by all the clutter that life throws at us. I think that extreme busyness, over-commitment and various degrees of burnout are very real issues for many of us in this century, and there are sometimes negative side-effects like when people serially over-commit and these commitments become unsustainable and each time, the only way they can honourably extricate themselves is to move churches or move jobs. Which may not be the most helpful way. Maybe we all need to spend time in thought and prayer clarifying what the few really important things are in each season of our lives, and to try drawing a firm line at these.

### **An important spin-off**

My **second point** is that if we do manage to identify what few core tasks are important for each season of our lives, one spin-off is that it is actually easier to say “no” to the huge number of worthy or fun or interesting tasks that constantly try to add themselves to our list. It will always be difficult for anyone with half a conscience to say NO to anything inherently good, but if we have identified our key tasks for a season, then we can hold each new request against these and say, “is it furthering those few core tasks?” And if not, say “sorry, not this time”. But if we have only a fuzzy idea that we are kind-of wanting to go in a sort-of good direction, then we are going to feel bound to say “yes” to kind-of everything, and that is a recipe for burning out. There have been a few requests in this church that I have said a reluctant “no” to, and I have felt wretched every time, and I’ve only managed to stick to my decision when it is clear that those requests conflict with some other task that I feel God has given his seal of approval to. If I had not had those core tasks clear in my mind, I would have felt obliged to say “yes”, and I think this would have negatively affected those other important tasks.

### **Just Christian work?**

**Third point:** when we talk about those “few important things,” are we just talking about “Christian” work? No, I don’t believe we are. A key task for most people is the work that buys the groceries, and early on in any job, at least, we probably want to become the best operator in the business, and that is right and good and glorifying to God. Livingstone saw his job as exploring and making excellent maps, and he felt he had God’s approval in this. Jacob probably wanted nothing better than to become the best herder in the Middle East, who could provide well for his extended family and his servants. And he recognised that to do this he needed both his father’s blessing and God’s blessing, and he went all-out to get those. Julian Doorey spoke some months ago about putting in really good water systems. Johannes Balzer from Interserve spoke about a Christian putting in a really good solid-waste disposal system in the Middle East. Our revenue earning jobs are important. Later on we will need to be careful about workaholicism – jobs taken to excess – and our priorities will evolve for different seasons of our lives.

I have had a quote up in my wee study for many years now, to remind me that for this season of my life a top priority is to be a good father. The quote is from the biography of New Zealander, Ruth Park, whose husband, D’arcy Niland, wanted to be a great novelist, but he recognised that for a particular season it was more important to be a great father. This is the quote I’ve got up in my study): **Posterity might judge that being a father was more important than being a novelist.**

Such is the power of the internet, that when I was preparing for this sermon I thought I might just look for a picture of D'arcy Niland, and I was absolutely delighted to find on the internet this picture of the author with his girls. [Picture 2.](#)

Fast forwarding to still later seasons in life, we may have different but no less important jobs then, such as taking care of nieces and nephews or grandchildren or foster children, or perhaps speaking and writing to distant friends and family, and praying for them. These are key jobs! I think that if Satan sees a bunch of grey-haired people – like George at a church – who feel that prayer is their calling for a particular season, he probably shudders.

### Supporting roles

My fourth point is that not everyone is called to be a *leader*. The boss. Some of us are called to be in supporting roles. In 1 Samuel [10:26] we read that when Saul was anointed king, he was

[...accompanied by valiant men whose hearts God had touched.](#)

Whoa! Even if we are not called to be a leader ourselves, it would certainly be no disgrace to be a valiant man or woman “whose heart God had touched” to accompany the leader and support them. So our various leaders in this church need to be supported by valiant men and women whose hearts God has touched. Growing God’s kingdom is all about teamwork – Paul says:

[“I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow”.](#) [1 Cor. 3:6]

That’s teamwork at its best.

### Chores

Fifth point. Chores. Distinct from the greater tasks God may call us to be part of, are the small day-to-day jobs where we can serve and help to keep our homes and churches and communities and cities running smoothly. Greg Anderson suggested perhaps aiming for one thing each, and so sharing the load, and I think that is excellent advice. Perhaps we’re called to help clean the church, or pour the teas, or be on welcoming, or mow the lawn, or help Alison with the garden, or come early on a Sunday and help David Bathgate and Mike Jowsey with the sound system, or library duties, or giving people a lift to church, or praying at 6.30 on a Monday morning – that’s also a hugely important duty. But whatever it is, an important part of feeling that you belong to a family is getting to help with the chores. It’s even more important than getting your name added to the address list (although please do that as well). Dianne and I, after several occasions of letting needy people stay with us, in complete idleness, for long enough to begin driving a wedge between us, started saying, immediately someone arrived and before we could give offense: “for the first couple of days, you will be our honoured guest, but thereafter we will do you the honour of treating you as one of the family – and these are the chores that you’re going to be rostered on”. One minister said the same to us – once we had been going to the church for only a couple of weeks, he came round to visit us, and he had barely had one sip of tea when he said: “looks as if you’re going to be part of the family – what jobs would you like to do?” So, if you desire a stronger sense of belonging at Musselburgh, a good way is to look for a job you can help with. You probably won’t have to look that hard.

### The link with wisdom

My sixth and final point: In Proverbs 4:7 we are commanded to:

Get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding.

And more and more, I think wisdom is not just about possessing knowledge and facts, it relies on understanding what connections exist between facts. And building those connections is time-intensive. If we live with information-overload coupled with too little processing time to meditate on facts and build meta-links between them, we are following a recipe for knowledge not wisdom. We need time, and that relies on not clogging up our days with things over and above those few important things Jesus speaks about to Mary. I know the leaders every year go on a retreat to get away from all the busyness, and they pray, “God, where are we going as a church? What should we be doing?”, but perhaps the rest of us should also be doing this. Perhaps, even weekly. I think we need to take note of the high importance given to the Sabbath in the Bible, and not fill our Sundays up with activities in the same way we do every other day of the week. I also think the bible teaches us that feast days and holidays are an important biblical principle. And I’m not preaching here. I get this wrong the whole time. My family know that I’m very bad about working during my holidays and not resting. But I’m trying to change that, because I do believe we all need unstructured time every week and spread throughout the year, in which we can hear from God about what few things are important for each season of our lives.

### Conclusions

Looking at those points again in order. First, a common denominator between at least some of the people whom God uses – we can’t generalise – seems to be the ability to cut through the unimportant detail and focus on a few really important things and to pursue these single-mindedly.

Second, it will always be difficult to say “no”, but we stand a better chance of doing so if we have really thought through and prayed through what our core tasks are, and can judge whether taking on something new will further those tasks or get in the way of them.

Third, we’re not just talking about Christian work, here, we’re also talking about income-producing jobs and voluntary work as well.

Fourth, not everyone is called to be a *leader*. Some of us are called to be “valiant men and women whose hearts God has touched” who are in supporting roles.

Fifth: Distinct from the greater tasks God may call us to be part of, are the small day-to-day jobs – the chores – and ideally these will be distributed among many willing people, not just a few.

Sixth: The bible says we should all be trying to gain wisdom, and not over-committing permits us to be quiet regularly and build connections and meta-links between facts, and also to listen to hear what “few things are needed” in each season of our lives.

Let’s pray: Please Lord, give us all wisdom to see what is important, and who is important in life, and to graciously say no to any clutter that gets in the way of the key tasks you have assigned us for each season of our lives. Please give us all clear “Godly goalposts” to run towards with passion and energy. Please “teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” Amen.