

Stuff

As they continued their travel, Jesus entered a village. A woman by the name of Martha welcomed him and made him feel quite at home. She had a sister, Mary, who sat before the Master, hanging on every word he said. But Martha was pulled away by all she had to do in the kitchen. Later, she stepped in, interrupting them. "Master, don't you care that my sister has abandoned the kitchen to me? Tell her to lend me a hand."

The Master said, "Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it—it's the main course, and won't be taken from her."

Luke 10:38-42 The Message

IT HAPPENS FROM TIME TO TIME. Not every day, but once in a while I stop what I am doing and look about me. Perhaps I am in the overcrowded storage room, or the workshop, or the garage. I stand there and look around, and suddenly I am struck by all the *stuff* we have accumulated in thirty-six years of marriage.

The sheer weight of it is certainly exacerbated by the fact that we throw little away ("No, wait! I may *need* that some day!"). Sixteen years ago we paid to move from California items that were obsolete and unnecessary years before that. We moved shirts that hadn't fit me since junior high, towels that were threadbare, books that would never be read.

But our stuff today includes, as well, the perfectly normal artifacts of contemporary living—tools, clothing, linens, dishes, shovels and hoes, books, television(s), garden hoses, car(s), washer and dryer, spare light bulbs, computer(s), printer(s), chairs, tables, pictures, telephones, plants, beds, toiletries, lamps, video tapes and CDs and DVDs. All perfectly useful, and used on a regular basis. More is the pity, since all of these accoutrements have been deemed—in this society, at least—essential. They have insinuated themselves into the modern, western lifestyle—part of the warp and woof of our societal tapestry.

And so goes the church. The typical church body today has accumulated the sheer weight of centuries of its own evolution, and combined with it the "stuff" of the modern ecclesiastical paradigm. We heap program upon program, committee upon committee, outreach upon targeted outreach. We extend ourselves with missions and evangelistic meetings, we rekindle our passion with revivals, we expand our knowledge with sermons and Sunday School and weekend workshops.

God's gifts now take the place of God, and the whole course of nature is upset by the monstrous substitution.

A.W. Tozer

All of this is the perfectly normal stuff of the modern western church. Certainly most of it is useful and used. Some of it is even biblically mandated. And almost all of it has been deemed "essential."

Very often, after I have panned around a room in our house, noting with embarrassed awe the bulk of our personal holdings, my next thought is that were all of it to vanish—if a huge Midwest twister were to track across our land and utterly pulverize everything in its path—I would still count myself wealthy beyond measure if I still had my good wife. For, you see, of everything in this house, she is my one, irreplaceable treasure. Everything else is just "stuff."

And as we enter the church house and scan the bulletin board for service opportunities, and the list of committee and board meetings, and the map showing the locations of our missionaries, we marvel at all that is being done in the Lord's name. It is good. It is biblical. It is essential.

But too often the expression of our gifts in service becomes the stumbling block to the one, truly essential thing. If that same twister entered the church parking lot and continued on through the building, destroying the sanctuary, the pastor's office, the nursery, and every Sunday School room down every hallway; if it tore out the phone lines we use for the Prayer Chain, the closet containing all the toys and Bibles to be sent to the mission field; if everything we use for "ministry" had been destroyed, what would we have left?

God.

One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."

Matthew 22:35-40

The programs and ministry of the church are useful. Some are even essential. But they cannot be permitted to overshadow the One in whose name they exist.

Jesus gave us the priority. Before and above everything else is to be our devotion for, and adoration of Father God. He is our source. He is our life. He is our one irreplaceable treasure.

All the rest, in comparison to Him, is just "stuff."