

# What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do # 4: Clear Away the Clutter

Sermon for Sunday, February 28, 2010  
by Bruce Fraser

**Scripture:** Hebrews 12:1-2

## 1) **The Potential: great things for Christ**

Do you know the story of Mother Cabrini? She was the youngest of 13 children, born to a poor family in northern Italy. Her parents died when she was two. At the age of eight, she announced, "I am going to be a missionary to China when I grow up." Her brothers and sisters laughed at her. "You can't be a missionary," they said. "The church only uses men, not women. Anyway, you are too sickly." But she was determined, and when she finished her formal education, which would have qualified her to become a teacher in an order, the Catholic church refused to take her. "You are too weak," they said.

And she was. She didn't even weigh one hundred pounds, and she spit blood all the time. But her strong will more than compensated for her weak body. "I'll take my case to the Pope," she declared.

"Sister Cabrini." The Pope's voice was firm as he looked down on this frail, determined nun. "The church does not send women to be missionaries to China or any place."

"Then, Holy Father," she responded, "I shall start an order for women only."

"Agreed," the Pope replied, "providing you will go as a missionary to Italians in New York City." Sister Frances Cabrini accepted the compromise.

For months she waited at the compound for immigrants on Ellis Island, while the church and the state of New York tried to figure out what to do with her. She was still spitting blood. Finally, frustrated with the senseless delay, she appealed to the hierarchy of the Catholic church in New York. "Frankly, Sister," she was told, "You're too sickly. Go home!"

Righteously indignant, she stamped her foot and rebuked the archbishop. "Sir, I will not go home. I am at home here now." With that, the archbishop gave in and let her stay.

Few people today know what New York City was like 100 years ago. Poor and homeless immigrants were wandering lonely, unloved, and lost in a new land. To

them came this angel from God, and by 1916, through her beautiful love, over 60 houses had been founded, providing homes for the orphans and hospitals for the sick and the dying. (Robert Schuller, *Reach Out for a New Life*, pp. 155-156.)

This is what a single individual can accomplish. It doesn't happen just by accident or by luck. Mother Cabrini was a person who was driven by the love of Jesus Christ, devoted to her cause, and determined to let no one — not the Pope, not the devil, and not anyone in between — stand in her way!

She showed how powerful this scripture can be when someone takes hold of it and believes it:

**"... let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus..."** [Hebrews 12:1-2].

I believe God's Word tells us that our lives have incredible potential to bring joy and love to others, when we are focussed on our mission, and we are powered by the love of Jesus Christ.

## 2) **The Problem: too much clutter in our lives**

I left off the beginning of that verse when I quoted it just above. Here's the rest of it:

**Hebrews 12:1, New International Version:**

**"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."**

It begins with some incentive: think of all the great heroes of the faith who have gone before us, what an honour we have to carry on their work.

But then it gives a warning: watch out for the things that will trip us up. It mentions sin, of course; but also "everything that hinders." Sometimes very good and worthwhile things can cause trouble for us. How? They distract us away from the things that are our top priorities. There's an old saying, "The good can be the enemy of the best."

Here's an example from the Scriptures. In Acts 6, the apostles were supposed to be preaching and teaching the word of God. But they were getting bogged down by the details of looking after distributing food to the poor. That's important, all will agree, but it was even more important that people hear the good news that will give them everlasting nourishment. So they appointed a separate team to look after the needs of the poor, while the apostles could get on with the primary work of the church.

### **Read Acts 6:2-4**

Now here's another example, that you might identify with. It's common to hear people complain about the cost of living, and how couples need to both be working full-time at jobs, in order to make ends meet. That is certainly true in some cases, but here's something else to consider. The statistics used here are for the USA, but it still applies in Canada.

Ralph Keyes makes this comparison in his book *Timelock*: "Many working couples feel that two paychecks are essential to support a minimal life style. This is often the case. But compare what's considered "minimal" for a middle-class life today with one just a few decades ago. A wartime house in 1950 measured 800 square feet. By 1990 the median size of a new American home was 1,850 square feet, more than double. That's a lot more home to pay for, even if housing prices and mortgage rates hadn't gone up. It's also a lot more space to furnish, clean, and maintain.

Inside our larger homes we consider far more items 'standard' than our parents did. A second bathroom (or more) is a given. It used to be a luxury. So was air-conditioning, wall-to-wall carpeting, and a remodeled kitchen. When it came to conveniences, our parents may have had one vacuum cleaner, a toaster, a blender, a washer and dryer, a refrigerator, and perhaps a freezer. The average house had one, or at most two, phones (which were seldom used to make long-distance calls). Most middle-class Americans owned a single black-and-white television set, a record player, and a radio or two. Wardrobes were far more limited. And if they included sneakers with a name on them, that name was usually Keds.

Now look about your own home. Most likely it includes more than one color television set, and they may be staggeringly huge compared to the 19" set which used to be standard. Sound system with CD player, MP3 deck, multiple speakers. Several radios throughout the house. A few telephones, at least one of them cordless. An answering machine. Probably more than one vacuum, including a Dustbuster. Coffeemaker. Microwave. Perhaps a Cuisinart. Computer. Garage door opener. Power tools. Disposable diapers. Substantial wardrobes (including many items that need dry cleaning). Designer clothing."

Do you see what I mean? There's nothing wrong — sinful — in having these things. But their very presence can hinder us from enjoying the truly good things of life: time with our loved ones, and our partnership with Christ.

I've entitled today's message "Clear Away the Clutter." Maybe you're already thinking about things that clutter up your life — even good, worthwhile things. Most of us wouldn't be hurt by having a simpler lifestyle.

That's true for our possessions; it's also true for our schedules. What about families where your schedule consists of driving the kids four nights of the week to different activities, clubs and classes, not to mention the weekend rush! Again, none of this may be wrong. But what is it doing to your cherished ideal of being a family together?

### **3) The Prescription: keep on towards the goal**

Let's put this verse back together now.

**Hebrews 12:1, New International Version:**

**"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."**

Look at that last part: "let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." Can you imagine entering a race, and not knowing which way you're supposed to run?! Sounds pretty silly, doesn't it? But I'll bet a lot of people live exactly like that.

I mentioned above how we get into the rat race of taking kids here and there and everywhere, not to mention our own involvement in community affairs. Have you ever sat down and asked yourself, "What are my priorities? What do I really want my life and my family to count for? And how am I organizing my life and my family to make that happen?" A lot of people are racing madly off in all directions, but have no idea where they're going.

In the Christian life, we have a goal. We are not tourists viewing life pass us by; we are on a journey, with a destination in mind. Every day we can ask ourselves, "Have I come any closer to the goal today?"

Just about everything I've said until now, I could say in a speech to the Lions Club or the Chamber of Commerce. What the Scriptures are telling us is plain common sense. There's nothing particularly religious about this. The next verse changes all that.

### **4) The Power: focus on Jesus**

This Bible passage goes on:

**Hebrews 12:2, New International Version:**

**Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.**

I've said this many times before, but I'll never tire of proclaiming this: at its heart, Christianity is not about being religious, about believing a certain doctrine, or about common sense. It's about a person — Jesus Christ, God come to live among us, and to give us the power we need.

Take Jesus out, and we are left with a nice philosophy of life: harmless enough, although maybe a bit idealistic. Take Jesus out, and you also take the power out. It's like trying to drive a car without the gasoline.

But with Jesus alive and at work within us, with him as the focus of our lives and our church, we have the power to bring all these things to pass.

*Theme for today:* **Q:** When is something good, bad?

**A:** When the good blocks us from the best, then it's not so good.

Example: Just about everyone likes chocolate. It's good! But if our meals are based on chocolate — start with chocolate soup; then chocolate-covered broccoli for a vegetable, and chocolate-marinated chicken for meat; then chocolate ice cream for dessert, all washed down with chocolate milk — then it has robbed us of the best food.

Can you spot anything similar in your life?