

**THE
BON AIR
PULPIT**

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Scripture: John 14:1-3

Sermon Title: *Good Things Instead of the Best Things*

Fitted to the teachings of the Old Testament that He said, *that not a jot or a tittle would ever pass away until everything about it is fulfilled*. But as much as Jesus was committed to the truths that God has given, he was one of the greatest critics of how people had taken that truth and misused it for their own purposes. In fact, as you know it was the religious people who ultimately wanted to take Him out and crucify Him because He was so critical of how they had twisted what the Father had said. And the very depth of that criticism is found in Matthew, Chapter 23. I have often said every Christian leader ought to know and read it and certainly every church member ought to understand what Jesus is saying and I wanted to read one of the seven statements that He made about how we twist and misuse that which He has given and how he was unscathing in his criticism of people who do it. This is Matthew, Chapter 23, Verse 23 – Wow to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You give a tenth of your spices, mint, dill and cumin but you have neglected the more important matters of the law: justice, mercy, faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former. You blind guides, you strain at gnats but you swallow camels.

One of the common strategies of Satan is to keep good people busy with things that don't really matter. Many times Satan does not tempt good people to do bad things but rather to get them to do good things instead of the best things. And as you know one of the greatest enemies of the best is the good. And sometimes we can get so involved in doing good things that we neglect the important and eternal things. Let me give you the illustration Jesus gave. Jesus talked about tithing, Fred Dunning said that a moment ago. The Bible is very clear from the first of the Bible to the end of the Bible that all people should give a tenth of what they make to God. Now if you are not there you ought to be heading that way and for many of us the tenth is not a ceiling but a floor to go on and do other things. But every person ought to be obedient to scripture and every person ought to be moving toward the tithe. Now what Jesus said these people did however, was that as they would bring their primarily produce and the animals from their flock. Some of them began to wonder about their little herb gardens. Now an herb garden is probably no bigger than the size of this top and they would go out and pick the leaves as you do if you have one and you would put them in your stews and in your cooking. And some of those people began to wonder well I am picking these leaves and I am using them, surely I ought to take one of these ten leaves and I ought to take it down to the temple. Now what Jesus said was this, *some of you are so busy counting leaves that you miss seeing the bigger things of God and he listed them*. First of all you missed justice, justice is giving people what is due them, justice is being fair to people, justice is making sure that other peoples dignity is respected, He said, *"You miss, mercy"*, *mercy is reaching with a helping hand to the person who has fallen, mercy is reaching out with love to people who don't deserve it* and He said, *"You have missed faithfulness"*, faithfulness means I am not going to sell you out, you can always count on me and I am not going to sell myself out because I want to be true to you. So notice what Jesus is saying. You are over here busy counting little leaves and here is all of these great truths that are not a part of your life. And Jesus then taught us that one of our greatest weaknesses is that we will focus in on things that don't really matter and miss becoming more and more like Him. Now what is so dangerous about good people just doing good things instead of the best things is we all think we are okay. I mean if you do these little small things that don't really matter you don't think you are doing anything wrong and so everything is bound to be okay.

I love the cartoon of Joe McKeever who does so many cartoons in religious magazines and a teenage boy is trying to convince his girlfriend that you know his character is okay. And at the bottom of the picture of the boy talking to the girl the words are penned, *what do you mean I am not okay, I am a*

Christian, I play on four church softball teams. Well you see, if good people are around other good people and doing good things, then we think we are okay. And what Jesus says is, *“But you are sitting here counting little leaves and you are missing seeing the big picture.* And listen, if you just do good things instead of the best things then ultimately good things become bad things. I am going to give you some illustrations of how that works in our life. One of the ways it works is that sometimes we confuse Bible knowledge for building a relationship with Jesus Christ.

There is a story in one of Max Lucado’s books about the Prince of Granada. The Prince of Granada was the heir to the Spanish throne but he was sentenced to a life in solitary confinement, he was taken to Madrid, put in prison, and it was called the place of the skull which meant that once you went in you never came out alive. But the Prince was given one book. He was given a Bible. And for thirty-three years he read the Bible hundreds of times and he kept notes of what he learned. Here are some of the things he learned. He learned that the middle verse of the Bible is Psalms 118:8, he learned the Ezra 7:21 has all of the letters of the alphabet except J, he learned that Esther 18:9 is the longest verse and he learned that there is no word in the Bible that has more than six syllables. But he did not ever write a word about the glory of God, the testimony of Jesus Christ, or his personal faith in Him. He became an expert in Biblical trivia and probably died and went to hell.

Now let me tell you what Jesus said. Jesus in John 5:29, talking to the people of his day, said, *“You search the Bible.”* Boy did they search it. I mean some of these people had memorized the first five books of the Bible. Punch a button and a CD ROM began to go and they could tell you about it. Listen to what He said, *“You search the Bible but you do not know that the Bible speaks of me,”* Do you understand that Jesus says you can be so busy counting leaves and becoming an expert in Biblical trivia but you never build a relationship with Jesus Christ. I know lots of folks in my years of ministry who are good Bible students, but dear friend if you disagree with them on a policy, or you disagree with them on an interpretation they are as mean as a junk yard dog. And I know a lot of folk who have taught Sunday School, their kids hate to see them come home because they are so mean and their wives wonder about their faithfulness. Do you understand that Jesus would say some of you are so busy doing little good things and all that you got is Biblical trivia, but you have missed the most important thing, you have missed the relationship with me.

The second illustration I give you the way the principle works, is that sometime you and I can get so busy doing church work that we forget to do the work of the church. I like what Will Rogers said about Baptists. He was down in Texas, he said, *“I understand the state legislature has just raised taxes in Texas.”* He said, *“Let me tell you why they had to do it. They had to get more money to repair the roads that all the Baptists wear out going to meetings at church.”* I have been a Baptist all of my life and I love the little doggerel that is written about us. Mary had a little lamb, she didn’t have any sheep, the lamb joined that Baptist church and died for lack of sleep. We are great meeting folk. If I had a dollar for every committee meeting I’ve had, I could have retired at 39. This doesn’t have anything to do with my sermon but I have to say it anyway. LSU beat Alabama yesterday, it doesn’t have anything to do with what I’m going to say, but I just wanted you to know that. We haven’t beaten them in Baton Rouge since 1969. I think it had been 12 presidents and never have beaten them. But we beat them yesterday. So I watched the game yesterday afternoon. Let me ask you, suppose the Crimson died and the Tigers for 60 minutes they just met in their huddles, never ran a play, never kicked a field goal, never threw a pass, they just huddled and then after 60 minutes game over and they went back to their room. You say Pastor that is absolutely foolish, about as foolish as a lot of Baptist churches. We come to church in our little huddles and we huddle and we huddle and we huddle, we just never play the game. And what I wanted to remind you about today, is that God did not call us to huddle, God called us to very specific tasks, one of the first of which, is God called us to help people everywhere to come to know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Through the years I have had people to come to me and say, *“Oh Pastor, we are so behind in our budget.”* I can put on this many fingers how many people have come to me and said, *“Pastor my heart is broken, we are not winning enough people to faith in Christ.”* And we have had lots of folk, who through the years have been more interested in doing things right, than in doing the right things.

So let me remind you of a fact that you need to know. A person came to see me the other day to see our new facilities and he looked at that and he said, *“Oh my goodness.”* He said, *“How many worship services do you all have?”* I want to tell you what I told him. We have two on Sunday morning in the auditorium, we just voted to start another one that will be held out in the commons and that will start the first Sunday in December and I need to say to you about that, that is not about how we worship but it’s

about who we are trying to reach. So we've got three. We have another service going on at this very moment at Bon Air Elementary School so that's four. We have one at our mission at Woolridge Road so that's five. We have one at South Hampton this morning that's six. On the first Sunday in January we are going to start the Community Hills Community Church and so that's seven. We have six services during the week, in retirement homes and in apartment complexes and this week you sponsor twelve services in prison, if you ask me the question how many services do we have, I want to give you the answer, you've got twenty five. Why do we have twenty five services every week? Because God called us to go everywhere we could to win as many people as we could to faith in Jesus Christ. Our job is God called us to raise people up and to develop them into mature disciples for Christ and then after they are raised up then to send them out into the world where they, with their gifts, can have a place of service back in this world. That is what He called us to do. And God help us in the middle of all the great challenges that we have if you and I are sitting here counting leaves. The third illustration I give you the way it works, is sometimes you and I count leaves by refusing to minister to a changing culture. Satan does not mind us ministering to a culture that no longer exists.

Let me give you a story out of history, 1919 Vladimir Lenin conquered Russia, he took his red army, he stormed Moscow and he took it over. At the time that the battle of Moscow was going on the National Convention of the Russian Orthodox church was taking place. Let me tell you what they were arguing about at the Russian Orthodox Convention, how long should the fringes be on the robes of the Priest. And while they were arguing about how long the fringes ought to be, Lenin was in the streets changing the world.

A friend of mine recently was invited to one of the most modern advanced cities in America, he spoke to eighteen Baptist pastors, he asked them this question, "In what year is your church living?" and not one of them could say that our church is in the nineteen nineties. Let me give you an illustration of sometime where we are. A military officer came back from a years assignment overseas, his wife said, "Why don't we spend the first weeks or so that you are home, why don't we go to one of the Baptist encampments and we can be there and we can be together and take our teenagers and we can grow together in the Lord and so they went. They learned that they had a swimming pool and so the man came into the apartment and he said, "Before supper tonight, it's hot why don't we go over and take a dip." So his wife and two teenage daughters got on their swimsuits you know and they went over and he was met at the fence around it by a young man who said, "I am sorry, but I can't let you in." And he said, "Did we come at the wrong time." He said, "Oh no, it's the right time but I just can't let you in." He said, "Why can't you let me in." He said, "Because we don't believe in mixed bathing." Sometime people have come to me and said, "Do you believe in mixed bathing" and I said, "No I really believe you ought to take a bath by yourself." But you see in the South what they mean by mixed bathing is that a boy and a girl ought not swim together. So the man said, "Well you don't understand, I am a military man, I've been gone for a year, I've come back and this is my wife and these are my daughters and the guard said, "I am sorry sir the policy is, I can't let you in." And then he said, "We are different here." And what I am saying to you is that there is a difference between being different and being odd. But we are over here measuring how long the robes ought to be and the world is going to hell in a hand basket all around us. You see this is the kind of world that one out of every two marriages is in trouble. We live in a world that says, there are no absolutes, you believe what you want to believe and I believe what I want to believe and I'm sure not going to tell you and you don't tell me and every body does what they want. We live in a world that every eighteen minutes a little baby is aborted, we live in a world that telling people it doesn't make any difference if you are homosexual or normal sexual or bi-sexual, it doesn't make any difference. We live in a world, in a country that is number 24 of all the industrial nations in the world of giving to help people in need. And that though we are the richest country in the world, the average American gives less than 2% to all religious, charitable and educational causes. We are a greedy materialistic group of folk and you cannot help but believe that the judgment of God is going to come upon us. But you see it is easy to sit in church and deal with things that were thirty and forty years ago and don't deal with things that are today. We are so busy counting leaves we can't look up and see the world is changing all around us. No wonder Jesus was so angry. Good people doing good things that don't matter, no eternal difference, no change in the culture. I mean when they died they said, "All they did was count leaves." God help us.

I guess this passage of scripture became real to me when I read a story years ago. There was a man who used to love to walk. He was walking in a park and he looked down and somebody obviously had had a hole in their purse or their pocket and he found a quarter and a dime and a nickel. He spent the next thirty

years of his life walking at least five days a week through the park. At the end of his life, he had kept a record of what he had found. He found sixty seven pennies, he found forty two nickels, he found thirty one dimes, twenty four quarters, two dollars, seventeen broken buttons and four yards of twine. But what he did not see were the leaves glistening in the sun, what he did not see was the ducks swimming on the pond, what he did not breath was the clean air of God, he didn't see the boys over playing ball, he didn't see the mother pushing her little kid in a stroller and he didn't see the senior citizens still holding hands after fifty years and he died, all he saw was trivia and he missed life. Wow to you, people who ought to know better, wow to you, you are so busy counting leaves you have missed what it is all about. Let me ask you. Which one of those categories are you in? Good person doing good stuff, but not the best stuff or people who are captured by the great qualities of God and saying, "Dear God, enlarge my spirit and enlarge my soul that I can become a person who can see a world in which I live and give me hands to be able to reach out and minister to it."

There are some people in this room today that didn't know it maybe when you came to church this morning that you were going to feel a touch of God and you've realized that you need to make a decision for Him. You might need to come to give your heart and your life to Christ. You see you will always live in a corner of life and not in the fullness of life without Jesus. Some of you are Christians, you are probably doing a lot of good things, but you are saying I want to do the best thing and I want to come and move our life and our membership and become involved in what the church ought to be about. You feel like today you need to come to be a part of our fellowship. You know our tradition is to stand and sing a hymn of invitation and then on the authority of God and the invitation of this church I invite you to come and to make your decisions for Christ, "Will you"? Let's stand together and let's sing.