

Focus Hebrews 12:2

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In the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, the United States Women's Softball team won the gold medal. They lost only one game but from that loss comes a remarkable story. It was the fifth inning in their game against Australia. Danielle Tyler hit a home run over the center-field fence. She buzzed around the bases full of excitement. As she ran toward home plate she was greeted by a swarm of celebrating teammates. She let the celebration distract her focus and she did not touch the base. When all of the yelling subsided, the Australian team quietly appealed to the umpire-- who dramatically called Tyler out.

Rather than scoring the run, Tyler's blast over the fence netted her team an out. As it ended up, had Danielle stepped on home plate, her team would have won 1-0. Instead, after seven innings of regulation play the game was tied at 0-0. In extra innings, Australia emerged with a 2-1 win over the U.S.¹

The goal was to win the game. But the game was not won because somebody lost focus—not just Danielle but the team members who were jumping up and down at home base. It was not a time for celebration—that would come in due time. It was a time to score runs.

Four reasons people lose focus.²

I. They have never learned the value and discipline of having focus.

Some people grow up in families pretty much doing whatever they feel like doing. If I want to lounge on the couch and watch TV, that's what I do. If a video game sounds good, I do that. If I happen to feel like taking out the trash, then the trash gets taken out. Have you ever met a family like that? The sad thing is they are just as tired as people who develop a good work ethic. They wonder why everybody else seems to get all the breaks. Of course, there are and always will be inequities in life. But sometimes people are suffering simply because they don't understand the power of disciplined focus. Prov. 20:4 says, "*The lazy man will not plow because of winter; He will beg during harvest and have nothing.*"³ The Living Bible puts it this way, "*If you won't plow in the cold, you won't eat at the harvest.*" The child who grows up understanding that has a big advantage of the one who grew up just doing whatever he wants to. Teach a child to envision the harvest and discipline himself to have one. Teach him that the way he invests his time will determine much of the results he enjoys in life.⁴

Let me go back to athletics for a moment and illustrate the value of focus. Any MMA fighter who gets in the ring with his attention on the girl in the first row will get knocked out and probably won't get the girl! A professional fighter knows that he has to keep his focus on the opponent and on his own fight plan. Any NFL player has to be focused on winning games. He has to discipline his life so that he is ready for the game. Once he gets in that game his mind has to be directed toward what he is doing.

¹ Autoillustrator.com, PERSEVERANCE as quoted by Darren Ethier in sermon entitled "Focusing on What Matters" accessed 8/1/15 at <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/focusing-on-what-matters-darren-ethier-sermon-on-discipleship-46457.asp>

² Of course, this list is not exhaustive. People lose focus because of fears (Matt. 14:30), because bored (2Sam. 11:1-5), because offended (Gen. 4:3-7), because of unwise comparisons (John 21:19-22), etc.

³ All Scripture quotes are from New King James Version unless indicated otherwise.

⁴ Eph 5:16 NIV "*making the most of every opportunity....*"

Does anybody here want a surgeon who doesn't understand the value of disciplined focus? Anybody want a dentist who gets distracted and pulls the wrong tooth. Those people succeed in their field of expertise not only because they know their medical field, but because they have learned how to stay focused on the job at hand.

How easily are you distracted from what you're supposed to be doing? My great uncle told a true story of a man who was replacing a large window in a two-story house. He had a helper who helped him carry the new window up their ladders to put it in place. As they lifted the window into the opening they realized they did not have a crow bar to pry it into place. The boss told his helper that he would hold the window while the helper ran to get the crow bar. The window was in an awkward position and difficult to hold up. As the boss got more and more weary he wondered what happened to his helper. He yelled his name and got no response. He held the window as long as he could and it finally toppled to the ground. When he came down and found the helper, he asked him why he didn't bring the crow bar back. The helper had encountered an ant bed and started killing ants and forgot what his mission was. Of course, that was his last day on the job.

It's a ridiculous story; but it raises two questions. Has your Boss, Jesus, sent you on a mission? Have you stayed focused on the task He gave you to do?⁵ For some reason, somebody here needs to ponder those two questions.

II. Another reason people lose focus is they get seduced toward something else.

Samson got seduced by Delilah. God had anointed him as a deliverer from the Philistines. He was doing that until he found something better to do—or at least it felt like something better to do. The distraction was a costly mistake for Samson. Last week we talked about the choice Moses had to make between the pleasures of sin for a season versus the call of God on his life. Moses understood the either/or choice had to be made (Heb. 11:24-25). Samson seemed to think he could have it both ways. How many have learned in life, you can't have it both ways? You can't walk in the lust of the flesh and the power of the Spirit at the same time. One path leads to death; the other path leads to life everlasting.

Eve enjoyed a rich relationship with God and with her husband. Life was good in Eden. Then she got seduced by the Serpent. She got deceived into thinking there was something to be gained in disobeying God. When her focus turned from God to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil she was already set up for the fall.⁶ The attention factor: whatever gets your attention ultimately get you.

When Israel was in the wilderness, Balak (king of Moab) hired Balaam to curse the nation. But every time Balaam tried to curse Israel, God turned it to a blessing. Nothing worked to bring Israel down (nothing except seduction). Balaam later counselled Balak to have the Moabite women seduce the Israelite men. Seduction worked. Israel was seduced into fornication and idolatry that brought on a plague and 24,000 were killed by the plague.⁷

Jesus described the Kingdom of God in the Parable of the Sower.

Look with me at **Luke 8:4-8**

"A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell by the wayside; and it was trampled down, and the birds of the air devoured it. 6 Some fell on rock; and as soon as it sprang up, it withered away because it lacked moisture. 7 And some fell among thorns, and the

⁵ 1 Kings 20:38-40.

⁶ Genesis 3:4-6.

⁷ Numbers 22-25; 31:15-16.

thorns sprang up with it and choked it. 8 But others fell on good ground, sprang up, and yielded a crop a hundredfold." When He had said these things He cried, 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear!'"

To emphasize the seriousness of what He was saying, Jesus cried out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" The Greek word for "cried" means with a loud voice.⁸ Why such emotion with this parable? Because eternal destinies are at stake! The seed is the word of God. Only one fourth of the hearers receive it in a way that produces fruit in their lives. Luke 8: 13 says "*But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away.*" They start well but they do not have the discipline and constitution to stay with it. Most things that are worthwhile take some perseverance. If you want to break a habit, it takes perseverance. If you want to build a business, it takes perseverance. If you want to raise a family, it takes perseverance (the discipline of not only beginning well, but continuing in well-doing).

Luke 8:14 '*Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity.*' Notice Jesus give **3 key distractions** in that verse.

(1) The cares of life. We can lose focus in life simply by getting busy with all the things we have to do. It seems to me our society has become very complicated. There was a day that signing up for medical insurance only took a few minutes. Now it is a major project. Which one do I get? Do I really have time to read all the fine print? But if I don't read all the fine print will I regret it? I got side-traced a couple of weeks ago about what bread to buy. Some bread spoils in two days; other brands don't spoil in three weeks. But why? Is it because the one has real wheat in it and the other is not even natural stuff? Is it because one is made fresh and the other is old when it goes on the shelf? How much of my life do I want to invest in order to get an answer to those questions? But there is so much marketing deception, I can't just grab a loaf of bread and go with it. During the last four months my Visa card has been hacked twice. It takes time to clear those up. How do you spend your money wisely on entertainment? Which cell phone service is best? I got one I thought was a good deal until they started charging exorbitant fees for going over on data. I share that to say, I understand the frustrations of our time. The cares of life seem to encroach on our time from every direction. It can become all-consuming if we don't take charge, simplify our lives, and work our priorities.

When your life is all said and done, you will only have done one thing: your priorities. For every one of us, there will be a whole lot of things left undone. Each of us only have 24 hours a day. But each of us have 24 hours a day. The crucial question is what will we do with those hours? And the answer always relates to the priorities we choose and the discipline we exercise in working those priorities. I will say this: the urgent is not always the important. We can spend our lives chasing our tail, putting out one fire after another if we're not careful. We have to be very purposeful about what is really important in the long run and what is screaming for our attention. The cares of life have to be addressed wisely.

(2) The riches or material things are the second distraction Jesus talks about. We have things in America—lots and lots of things. We accumulate things, try to find places to store them, have garage sales. Then we still have things. Things take time. It takes time to set up that new computer and get familiar with the operating system and get the right software working on it. It takes time picking out colors for carpet and installing it or getting it installed. Everything takes

⁸ Luke 8:8 (from Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament, Electronic Database. Copyright (c) 1997 by BibleSoft & Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament. Copyright (c) 1985 by Broadman Press).

time, energy, and money. The more things we want, the more time we have to spend working to get them. So we have to be careful that things have not captured our time and attention with little left for God. God really does not like being given the leftovers. How many people today across America are physically in church; but they spent all their energy on other things all week. So church for them has become a place to chill out rather than a place to be equipped to do the work of the Lord. Israel tried bringing God the leftover sacrifices and God told them in Malachi to not bother (1:14). Your earthly kings wouldn't receive it and neither will the King of Kings. The Rich Young Ruler walked away from Jesus sorrowful because he would not give up his things. What will a man give in exchange for his soul?⁹ Things are not important enough to forfeit eternity with God just to have them in this life. *The cares, riches, and*

(3) The pleasures of life: One of the interesting things about Israel's history was the fact that the more abundance God blessed them with, the more they forgot God and went into idolatry.¹⁰ America is an affluent country; even the poorest of us are rich by the world's standard. And with that affluence comes temptation. We can overeat and go into gluttony; whereas there are other places in the world where that is not a problem. Alcohol, drugs, and pornography are readily available. For Christians the temptation is more about how we will invest our time. The pleasures of sports, movies, vacations, theme parks, etc. (things not bad in themselves) can choke out the fruitfulness of God's word in our lives-- simply because of the time it consumes—simply because it takes us away from prayer and time in the word. So we have to keep all that in proper perspective if we want our lives to count for Christ. *The cares, riches, and pleasures of life* can distract us from the eternal—can distract us from the central purpose of life.

III. Some people lose focus on God and His purpose for them because they have become absorbed with themselves:

absorbed with their own hang ups and problems, absorbed with what others think about them, absorbed with their own desires and ambitions. So when they should be worshipping God, when they should be giving thanks for His goodness in their lives—instead they are fretting about why it isn't all better for them. Me, me, me, me is the preoccupation that takes their attention away from even God. We sang earlier “Now is the time to worship...” That's a good way to open a service. It clearly states what our focus is going to be. There is a time for counseling, there is a time for teaching, there is a time for making our requests known unto God in prayer; but there is also a time for turning the focus entirely on God and worshipping Him. We don't worship Him as a maneuver to get our needs met; but ironically, when we invite the presence of God through sincere worship—a lot of things can happen in a short time that meets our needs. If we want the presence of God to be manifest in our services in a powerful way, we have to give Him enough respect that He has our attention during worship. I know that the American church culture is not that. In most churches in America worship is not worship at all. The band is entertaining and the people are being entertained and worship is not happening. When I was in transition into and out of Kansas City I was in a number of churches. In most cases, people are not even singing, let alone worshipping. I mention that to say this: that is not the standard we are pursuing. We intend to respect God and honor Him in our worship at a level that invites Him to manifest His presence in our midst. Some of you may have never seen that, so it's hard to imagine. We have a nice presence of God during our worship time, but we're only scratching the surface at this point. Yes, we can improve musically, vocally, etc. but that's not the heart of the matter. The heart of the matter is our collective attitude toward God and toward His presence. Just saying, there's more if we want it!

⁹ Luke 18:21-24; 12:16-21; Mark 8:36-37.

¹⁰ Jeremiah 5; Ezekiel 16.

IV. Some people lose focus because they're disappointed.

They have lost the anticipation that God will do something. Peter and the other disciples were very excited about the kingdom of God when they were following Jesus. James and John's mother even asked Him about letting her two sons sit on the throne with Him, one on the right and one on the left. Their concept of what God was doing was off track.¹¹ It got corrected when Jesus died on the cross. The disappointment of what seemed like defeat was beyond disappointing. Peter told the rest of them that he was simply going to return to his fishing job¹². The others followed. We know that the Resurrected Christ met with them and set them on the right course. But here's the point. What do you do when following Christ is not turning out the way you thought it would? What do you do when your hopes and dreams are shattered and you're left with a whole lot of disappointment? Do you just go back to your old life and forget about it? How can we do that once we've tasted the goodness of the kingdom? No, we keep following Jesus trusting that His wisdom is higher than our wisdom and His way is better than our preconceived plan.¹³ So instead of taking our eyes off the Lord, we follow even more closely.

The writer of Hebrews was talking to Jewish Christians who had become discouraged. The return of Christ had not happened. Their personal finances were plundered. They were suffering other forms of persecution and disappointment. Hebrews 12:1 says to them and to us, *“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.”*

The key phrase in that passage is at the beginning of verse 2, *“looking unto Jesus....”* That is the focus for our lives. We cannot let anything take our focus off of Him. Persecutions, troubles, disappointments, success, better jobs, worse jobs, kids being born, kids leaving home, nothing can take our eyes off Jesus. Troubles should cause us to look to Him more diligently for help. Successes and blessings should cause us to look to Him in thanksgiving for providing all that. Are your eyes on Jesus, this morning, and Monday, Tue., Wed. Thurs. Fri. Sat.? Is He the focus of your life? Is His calling and purpose for you paramount in your thoughts and actions? Christianity can be very disappointing if all we have of it is a couple of hours on Sunday morning. But when you sell out to Christ, your life becomes an adventure; each day is filled with meaning and purpose.

Paul described his focus in Phil 3:7-14

“But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. 8 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, 11 if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. 13 Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting

¹¹ Mark 10:35-45.

¹² John 21:3.

¹³ Isaiah 55:8-9.

those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, 14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Paul kept the prize in focus and let nothing distract him from that prize.

On Dec. 29, 1972 Flight 401 crashed in the Everglades of Florida. It was the second deadliest single aircraft disaster in the United States. 101 people died in the crash including the pilot.

As the plane approached the Miami airport for its landing, the light that indicates proper deployment of the landing gear failed to come on. The plane flew in a large, looping circle over the Everglades swamp while the cockpit crew checked to see if the gear actually had not deployed, or if instead the bulb in the signal light was defective.

When the flight engineer tried to remove the light bulb, it wouldn't budge, and other members of the crew tried to help him. As they struggled with the bulb, no one noticed the aircraft was losing altitude, and the plane simply flew right into the swamp.

While an experienced crew of professional pilots fiddled with a 75 cent light bulb, the jumbo jet airliner flew right into the ground.¹⁴

Why are we talking about focus? Because some people's lives take that kind of course. Eternity is at stake and they are fumbling with trivial things. The Bible doesn't say you shouldn't change light bulbs. In fact, that was something that should have been done at the proper time after the more important things were taken care of. What we must understand about life is this: if you don't get your priorities right, if you don't work those priorities and keep priorities right—life can crash on you. You may have been well-intentioned; but life can crash on you. “But *seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these other things will be added unto you.*”¹⁵

¹⁴ John Maxwell, *Developing the Leader Within You* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993) p. 32 and more details from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Air_Lines_Flight_401 accessed 8/1/15.

¹⁵ Matthew 6:33.

QUESTIONS

1. What distractions do you deal with most in your life?
What distractions have you dealt with this week?
2. Did you grow up in a family that taught the value and discipline of focus?
If not, has your life experiences taught you some things on this subject?
3. In Luke 8:14 Jesus mentioned three major distractions that can cause our lives to be unfruitful: the cares, riches, and pleasures of life. How have you kept those from undermining your effectiveness for God? Which one are you struggling with most in your life at this time?
4. What do you do to keep your focus on Christ and His purposes for your life?
Is there anything you would like to add that would help you keep focused?
5. How do prayer and Scripture help you stay focused? How do the cares, riches, and pleasures of life hinder your prayer and Bible devotions?
6. What other distractions would you like to discuss that have not been addressed? In what ways do conflicts and eyes on other people distract us?