

FOCUS

Sometimes we find ourselves thinking a lot about what's wrong with the world, what's wrong with people, even what's wrong with us ourselves. Some people get sick of hearing me say that it is a broken world. But like it or not, it truly is. That is, of course, good news. If the world were not broken, estranged from God, alienated from the power and purposes of the Creator, then indeed we would despair. If this is as good as it gets – if we are experiencing things in their full potential; if all the mayhem, disease, betrayal, cruelty, suffering, false goals, and foolish values are inevitable and we are all at the top of our game – then indeed there is no hope. So we get to thinking sometimes about what's wrong, because what if there really is room for improvement? What if we really can change? What if there is some genuine hope for a better life? Maybe even some hope for us?

And always, *always* we can see how things might improve, and we imagine how it would be if we did some things differently. That often leads us into the category of “advice.” From self-help books to friends giving us suggestions, advice is a huge category in life. Every advertisement on earth is a piece of advice. Every doctor's prescription and every consultation with a lawyer, financial advisor, coach, or counselor of any kind are ringed with some kind of advice. It simply is not true that advice is always resented or that it does no good. We are frequently grateful for good advice. We often benefit from good advice. It's not at all unusual to talk to a friend and hear them tell about an experience they had years ago when somebody told them something important that has stuck with them ever since. And they are still grateful, all these years later, for that advice.

I don't know who started the rumor that “advice is cheap,” or that advice is always scorned, or that nobody likes to receive advice. At two or three hundred dollars an hour, advice is not always cheap. Sometimes friends give us advice without cost, but they give it out of experience that has cost them dearly. We might even claim that good advice is *never* cheap.

And despite our occasional jaundice toward the foibles and failures of humans – despite all their imperfections – they are also frequently amazing and incredible. I caught parts of the Wimbledon tennis championships last year. I saw Rafael Nadal and Maria Sharapova play

incredible tennis – tennis better than any human being should be able to play. And they both lost! I know; sports is big business for those directly involved. For the rest of us, sports is a metaphor. But that's the point. In every area of life, some humans are amazing, incredible, disciplined, and highly skilled. The metaphor also shows us all the problems and personal pitfalls of the far more familiar hordes who strive, but never gain, fame or fortune for their striving.

Paul gives lots of advice in his New Testament letters. Does he think we will be able to receive and keep such advice? If we took away all the advice and all the admonitions from the passage in Colossians we just heard, there would be maybe two sentences left. (verses 24b and 25)

In many Christian circles, we are constantly reminded that Jesus is our Savior, and that we cannot save ourselves, convert ourselves, or find our way into grace or love or true forgiveness by our own striving. As you know, I deeply and truly believe this. It is not just a theory I happen to like; it matches my experience and it matches what I observe going on all around me. As far as I know, the presence and grace of God is not something we can control or manage. It is not something we can demand or turn on whenever we want it. On the other hand, neither is it optional. The reconciliation and forgiveness of Jesus is not something I can do without. I know what happens to me when I try to get along without it, and I see what happens to others who try to get along without it.

God's grace and love is a mystery, and it comes as a gift. It is not something we could ever have invented or imagined. But while that is the big truth, it is not the full story. God is also our Creator. There are gifts and abilities and resources built within us that are also part of our reality. Moreover, there is no relationship unless both parties participate, and all authentic Christianity is relational. All authentic "faith" comes from a love-bond between us and God. God does not convert us against our will. Jesus invites but does not coerce. It is one of the most startling things about His story. So, Jesus saves indeed! But I still notice that Peter, James, John, Paul, Origen, and so many others are amazing – we might even say strenuous – in their response and in their obedience and in their desire to be faithful followers once they have awakened to the Spirit's presence in their lives.

Paul is literally full of advice for the people he knows who have come into the fellowship of the Christian WAY. He is eager to help them find the fullness of the new Life they have chosen. It does not seem to

occur to Paul that they cannot respond to this advice or keep it with eagerness or patience or consistency. Of course, we know that not everybody did. Paul knows that too, and with sorrow. *“Demas forsook me, having loved this present age.”* (II Timothy 4:10) And there is a whole string of people Paul knows who have dropped out of the Christian Life, and another whole string of people who are Paul’s enemies – that is, they work to undo his efforts and to bring his name and his leadership into scorn and disrepute. So we are not talking about Pollyanna here. But the reality is that Paul had a long list of friends who appreciated his advice, and who benefited from it greatly. And they bent their efforts toward staying faithful and prayerful, toward inviting others into the faith, and toward building the bonds of Christian love and faith and fellowship in the churches that they formed and were part of. We know and claim this with confidence because we know something of the history of the two hundred years that followed the Resurrection. It is not just somebody’s opinion or hope or wishful thinking. The Christian Faith spread across the Roman Empire with amazing speed and impact, and against all odds.

So I can go back to this passage from Colossians and take Paul’s advice if I really want to. I cannot be perfect, but I can do a lot to make this new Life my own, with the help and grace of God, of course. So can you. You realize that I am mentioning this because lots of people are saying today that we are helpless, that we cannot make any consistent or meaningful efforts toward being faithful, and that all advice is pointless. They made a New Year’s resolution once, years ago, and didn’t keep it for very long, so the whole Christian Life is about sitting around and waiting for Jesus to do everything for us. As opposed to our being in some kind of relationship with Jesus that honors and appreciates our efforts, our devotion, and our dedication. Jesus told more than one parable about people who did not respond – who did not put forth any meaningful efforts toward the Kingdom. And His opinion, if we want to notice, was scathing. Sloth was not His recommendation. Taking responsibility, keeping promises, and working hard for what you believe in with patient and consistent effort were not invented by the Puritans. This is part of the Christian Way, and the Puritans only reflect it.

Back to Nadal or Djokovic or any player, doctor, engineer, scientist, artist, or musician you have ever admired. Did any of them get good at what they do by accident? Certainly they were born with gifts and potential, but did it not take hours of focus and practice, over many years, to hone their abilities to such a high level? How long does it take

to get “accomplished” at the Christian Life? Three minutes to walk up the aisle and give your life to Christ? You think that’s it? Maybe that’s what it takes to decide to *play* tennis, but that’s not what it takes to get good at it. Thirteen years, remember, from Paul’s conversion to Paul’s first missionary journey. And he was not a slow study; rather, he was one of the best apostles we have ever seen.

Why am I bugging you with these musings? It’s simple to understand. We have churches full of some pretty poor tennis players. Almost all churches have a handful of pretty good players, but most church members have never learned how to keep their eye on the ball. Their practice, to put it kindly, is sporadic. Many of them have no coach, have poor equipment, and have little knowledge of the game beyond keeping score. And some of them only play a few times a year, never mind hours every day like any really good tennis player, artist, musician, or anybody else who is serious about any game, skill, or purpose. In other words, I think we all need to check our assumptions and stop pretending that sincere followers of Jesus can be good disciples, never mind apostles, by just doing what comes naturally, or hitting a couple of balls when it’s convenient or when we happen to feel like it.

Christianity has endless room for mistakes, blunders, failures – even big ones, serious ones, painful and damaging ones. Jesus is so adamant about forgiveness and new chances that it’s almost an invitation to be reckless, or at least very adventurous. But Jesus is not at all lenient or accepting of half-hearted commitments. *“The gate is narrow – the road is hard.”* There is only one price for the great pearl: all that we have. We must be willing to lose life in order to find it. If anyone is unwilling to give up father, mother, wife, children, even his own life, they cannot be a disciple. *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”* How did we get from what Jesus actually taught, to the bland and meaningless commitments that the church now teaches and accepts across the land?

The title of this sermon is “Focus.” In no way do I mean to imply that focus is simple for any of us. I just mean to imply that it is necessary – and for every one of us. Without focus, without concentration, without long-range and patient discipline, we cannot walk the Christian WAY. All my life I have heard people complaining that it is not easy. That is never surprising to me. What is surprising to me is that they thought it would be. Did somebody teach them that it would be easy? Apparently so. Even then, why did they believe it? Do we not pay any attention to The Story?

A couple of side comments and then we will get to one of the great principles that Paul lines out for us. When I was in fifth grade (East Whittier, California), our whole neighborhood became convinced that my mother was dying. My mother was plagued with ill health and was often incapacitated. At this particular time, however, she was no worse off than usual. But the neighbors saw that the doctor's car was parked in front of our house two or three times a week, and often for an hour or two at a time. His name was Dr. Payne, by the way, and he had attended my mother over the years and had become a special friend of our family. It happened that he loved to play chess but had not done so very much since he'd left the Navy. Seeing my chessboard one day, he challenged me to a game, thinking it would be simple and boring, but better than nothing. Of course, I loved chess, and to his amazement I kept winning. After that, at the end of an afternoon, when he could, he would stop by our house for a game of chess. The neighbors assumed my mother must be very sick because the doctor's car was there so much.

I mention this because I learned very quickly that if I did not keep my concentration, I could not win. On the other hand, if I could make myself really focus, I could win most of the time. Well, I very much wanted to win, and Dr. Payne was very gracious and complimentary when I did win. But one slip, and he was ruthless. I did win often enough to keep him coming back. Yet it was amazing to me how often I couldn't make myself keep focused for just one entire game of chess. I certainly had the incentive and the desire; still, despite all my sincere intentions, my mind would wander. As you know, chess is very lifelike. You don't have to lose focus for very long. You can play really well for most of the game and then get careless for just a few moments, and it's all over. Is that fair? Fair or not, is that not like real life?

Okay, so the Christian Life really isn't easy. Satan really is watching for the careless moment – at home, at work, at play, on vacation, even when we are relaxed because things seem to be going rather well.

The title of the sermon is "Focus," but focus on what? It seems to me that many Christians focus on vague generalities. That is an inherent contradiction. How can we focus on something vague or general? Can we focus on love in general, or on being good, or on doing the right thing, or on loving our neighbor? For bird-watching, I have a spotting scope that I like a lot. It works really great. But you know, I cannot focus on birds with it. I can only focus on a bird, one at a time. Even that can be tough enough, because the darned things have wings. But it is literally impossible to take my spotting scope out and focus it on birds in general.

Put another way: It is not uncommon to find myself in a situation where there are several birds I really want to see, and they are all present at the same time. It is still impossible to focus on birds in general. I have to choose one bird to focus on at a time.

The second thing I want to mention is that it is impossible to focus without a motive. The clearer the motive, the easier it is to focus. Often we don't like to know our real motives very clearly. But if we are not pretty clear about our motives, we cannot keep our concentration. It would be nice to have just one pure motive. "I love Jesus." Or "I want to serve God." Do you let yourself get away with things like that? In my case, and I suspect in yours, this is really true. I do have such motives. But never in my life have I had just one pure motive. My motives always come in groups. There is always more than one. If I think I have only one motive, I am kidding myself. I'm pulling the wool over my eyes, as we used to say. I mention this because Satan loves to confuse us by pointing out that there are some poor motives mixed in with our good ones. If that little ploy works against you, Satan will use it constantly. Of course, I have some poor motives. Do I not expect that by now? I like it when people compliment a class or a sermon. I like it when they think I am a good minister or teacher or counselor. If Satan had his way, he would confront me with my egotistical motives – my desire to be liked or appreciated – and drive me right out of the ministry because of them. The foolish motives are always there, but they are far from the only motives within me. It is important for us to know our own motives, before Satan can use them against us. Otherwise we will end up sacrificing the big ones in order to protect ourselves from the little ones.

Okay, enough fooling around. In quick succession, verse 17 and verse 23: *"Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the father through him."* And even clearer, if that is possible: *"Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men."*

"As for the Lord" is one of the great principles of the Christian Life. It is a true motive that can be applied to any situation, to any circumstance, and any time we remember it. Whatever I am doing, I am doing it for the Lord. Often when I remember the principle, it is not true yet. That is, it comes to mind and I realize that this is not what I have been doing. For the moment, at least, this has not been the reason for my doing whatever I am doing. But remembering the principle means I can switch to this motive if indeed this motive is genuine within me. And if I do, it will change the way I am doing whatever I am doing, and it will

change my motives, my reasons, and my methods. Remarkably, it will also cause me to realize that Jesus really can want me to do this *for Him*, and not for any of the outer or normal reasons most people would have for doing such a thing. And if, in fact, it is not possible to do it for Jesus, then I need to stop whatever I am doing immediately and entirely.

Many people have discovered that a menial task of drudgery or even of unpleasantness can be entirely transformed by this principle. Instead of doing it because I have to, because I need the money, or because somebody else needs it done – if I am a Christian and I do it for Jesus, the entire nature of the task is transformed. He is the Lord of Life. There is nothing in this world that Jesus is not interested in. There is no person I ever meet that Jesus does not care about. So it is not as far-fetched as we might at first imagine to realize that there is nothing honorable in life that we cannot do as if Jesus is our boss, the person we are working for, the one we are doing it for. Ordinarily I wouldn't fix something this well, or be so nitpicky about honesty, or clean something so thoroughly – but I am doing it for Jesus. I want Him to be pleased with it when I am done. That changes everything!

If you think this is a game – play it. If you think it is silly to pretend such a thing – we are told to be fools for Christ's sake. You will not do anything in this manner for very long without discovering that it is very real. And that it also changes your perspective in some very important ways.

Some people are rightly concerned about finding their vocatio. And of course we all think that once we find our vocatio, work will be easy and come naturally. But without this principle, there *is* no vocatio, and we will never find it. On the other hand, if we approach all our work with this principle, it will *lead us* to our vocatio.

Suppose you have found a profession, and you discover that it fascinates you and that you are exceptionally good at it. Then it begins to pay you really well, and you receive increasing acclaim and recognition for doing it. Oh my goodness, look at all the mixed motives suddenly trying to confuse the issue. How can we keep focused? Only by remembering the top and truest motive: I do this as unto the Lord. I like the money; I like the recognition and acclaim; I like it that people are finding benefit and help because of what I am doing and how well I am doing it. But that is all minor and secondary and beside the point. It will quickly

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throw me off track if I let any of this be my primary motive. I am doing it for Jesus. Therefore I will keep doing it, and keep striving to do it better and better ... as unto the Lord (and not for men or women or children).

You see, there is nothing grandiose here, no matter what the world may think about it. *“Whatever you do, grand or humble, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.”* In this way, we can keep focused and keep true to our task, whatever the challenges or the rewards. And we can always find the acclaim and approval we need – from our real Master and Lord – no matter what the world may think is going on, or why.

Often people ask me if I believe that other people, especially people in other religions, have an authentic way to God. But as you know, that is the wrong question. We cannot really know if others have an authentic Way. The real question is, “Do we?”