

Are You Focused?

Philippians 3:8-15a

I. INTRODUCTION: I

1. **2** When a highly talented athlete or musician performs at a very high level of proficiency we say that he/she is “focused” or “they are in the zone.” Examples:
 - A. Eric Heiden won 5 gold medals in speed skating at the 1980 Winter Olympics (Won every race, 500-10,000 meters). He was the first American male to win any gold medals in speed skating since before the turn of the century.
 - B. Jack Nicklaus won 18 major golf championships. The very first tournament he won as a professional golfer was the U.S. Open (also in major championships he placed second 19 times and third 9 times; he won his sixth Master’s championship at the age of 46).
 - C. Recall the circumstances of my best competitive round of golf.
2. Many that fail to achieve do so, not due to a lack of talent, but rather because of an inability to focus; they simply fail to keep trying!
4. When an athlete or musician loses their “edge” it is because they are no longer able, for whatever reasons, to focus 100% of their concentration on the task at hand. Their attention begins to wander, even if only momentarily. Extraneous thoughts enter their mind and they can no longer perform at a proficient level and achieve their goals.
5. The same principles apply to the achievement of any goals (e.g., education).

***“Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan ‘press on’ has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race.” (Calvin Coolidge)
6. **3** Focus is also essential for the Christian: **Phil. 3:8-15a**
7. Christians may also become distracted. Distractions come from many sources:
 - ✓ Some persistent sin,
 - ✓ Hustle and bustle of everyday living (jobs, family, weddings, funerals, graduations, recreation, etc.),
 - ✓ Neglect of personal Bible study, prayer, and regular attendance (Heb. 10:24-25),
 - ✓ Bible study (losing sight of the forest by focusing on the trees, e.g., spending too much time studying “minute details or trivia”...”who were Cain and Abel’s wives”).
8. **4** Our lesson of the hour is very basic, yet very important. It is designed to get us back to the basics; to briefly consider the Christian’s focus. Three main points:
 - A. What we need to be focusing on,
 - B. How can we maintain our focus (keep our attention from wandering),
 - C. How can we put Paul’s admonition to “...press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” into practice.

II. DISCUSSION:

First, it is impossible for us to properly focus our attention unless we know what we should be focusing on. So let's first look at...

I. **5** *Things upon which the Christian should focus:*

First, we must focus on...

A. **Who we are:** 3 important considerations:

- (1) We are more than flesh and blood, we are eternal spirits: Gen. 1:26-27 But how can that be? Jn. 4:24; Lk. 24:39; Matt. 10:28 So what? Matt. 16:26
 - (a) When we stop and consider our true nature it should motivate us to focus on serving God. **Eccl. 3:11:** "...He has put eternity in their hearts,"
 - (b) When we stop and consider the overwhelming value of our soul it should help us deeply focus our attention on preserving our soul.
- (2) We are, without God's grace, **LOST**: Mankind's greatest **equalizer** is...**Sin!** (Rom. 3:10-12, 23; Rom. 6:23)
 - (a) Without Christ we are...aliens...strangers...no hope...without God! (**Eph. 2:11-13:** "Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh — who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands — 12 that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.")
 - (b) Without Christ we are **ENEMIES** of God! (**Rom. 8:7:** "...the carnal mind is enmity against God..."; **Col. 1:21:** "And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works...")
 - (c) When we consider our true position with God (sinners, enemies, aliens, hopeless, etc.) it should motivate us to focus on changing and/or strengthening our relationship with Him.
 - (d) It should help us focus on the humility we should exhibit in our **DAILY** lives. (2 Cor. 5:10-11a; Lk. 9:23-25)
 - (e) What happens if we forget who we are? **2 Pet. 1:9:** "For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins."
- (3) We are saved in Christ:
 - (a) **Reconciled:** **Rom. 5:10:** "For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life."; 2 Cor. 5:18 (*katallasso*: KJV-NT Greek Lexicon: to receive one into favor. Webster: to restore to friendship or harmony)(cf. **Col. 1:21-23a:** "And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled 22 in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight — 23 if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard,").
 - (b) **Redeemed:** **Rom. 3:24:** "being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,"; **Col. 1:14:** "in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins,"; **1 Pet. 1:18-19:** "knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, 19 but with the precious

blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.” (Intro: KJV-NT Greek Lexicon: to liberate by payment of ransom. Webster: to free from captivity by payment of ransom)(cf. Eph. 1:7: “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace...”).

- (c) What more could one ask for? Reconciled!! Redeemed!! But, notice what God gives us:

Col. 1:12-13: “giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. 13 He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love,”

2 Pet. 1:3-4: “as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, 4 by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.”

Rom. 8:16-17: “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs — heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.”

1 Pet. 2:9-10: “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; 10 who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.”

- (d) When we consider our lost condition and the salvation God provides in Jesus Christ how can we fail to focus on serving Him?
- (e) Failing to be motivated to focus our attention on serving Him, in light of all that He has done for us, is the pinnacle of ingratitude! (1 Jn. 3:1-3)

Second, we must focus on...

B. 6 Where we are: We are in 3 places:

- (1) We live in a dangerous place...the world! (Jas. 4:4; 1 Jn. 2:15-17; 1 Pet. 5:8-9)
- (a) When we fail to focus on how dangerous the world is to our soul, we will soon succumb to its siren call. Mark it down!!
- (b) A Christian who loses focus, doesn't study regularly, doesn't pray regularly, doesn't attend services regularly is headed for trouble!! (2 Pet. 2:20-22)
- “Most people give up just when they're about to achieve success. They quit on the one yard line. They give up at the last minute of the game one foot from a winning touchdown.”

-H. Ross Perot

- (2) We are in a called out relationship with God: **1 Pet. 2:9:** “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;”; **1 Cor. 1:9:** “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”
- (a) The Lord's church are those “called out” of the world! (**Col. 3:15:** “And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.”)
- (b) We are not members of a “glorified Rotary or Lion's club” we are members of the body of Christ! (Col. 1:13; Heb. 12:22-23; Dan. 2:44)

- (c) We must always realize the special relationship we have with God...we are His own special people! We are saints of God! We belong to an elite group, not on the basis of our own worth, but because we have been washed in the blood of Jesus Christ. If this doesn't help us focus our lives on serving Him, God help us!
- (3) We are in a finite and fragile state that has *definite* and *infinite* consequences: Jas. 4:14; **Eccl. 12:1**: “Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, before the difficult days come, and the years draw near when you say, ‘I have no pleasure in them.’”
 - (a) Our short life here will determine our eternal destiny!
 - (b) We all will one day face judgment...and receive an eternal sentence.
 - (c) If that does not motivate us to focus on serving God, nothing will (2 Cor. 5:10-11a).

Third, we must focus on...

C. 7 Where we are going: We are all going to 3 places...

- (1) We all have an appointment; not just any appointment, but an appointment that is *inevitable*, *inescapable*, and *inalterable*: Heb. 9:27.
- (2) We will all appear before the judgment seat of Christ: 2 Cor. 5:10; **Rev. 20:12-15**. Shouldn't these things cause us to focus? It caused Paul to focus! **2 Cor. 5:11a**: “Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men;”
- (3) It is very simple...we all are going somewhere...heaven or hell. Where will your “focus” take you?

Jn. 5:28-29: “Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice 29 “and come forth; those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.” (cf. Matt. 13:24-30; wheat and tares)

Our second main point: It is impossible for us to maintain our focus unless we have some strategies that help us maintain focus...

2. 8 How does the Christian maintain focus? Paul said he did 4 things:

A. First: “I do not count myself to have apprehended...” (Phil. 3:13)

- (1) We must remain focused, otherwise it is easy to get overconfident (self-righteous).
- (2) Need to keep our perspective...we are lost sinners doomed to a hell prepared for the devil and his angels **unless** we remain diligently faithful (**Col. 1:21-23**).
- (3) What should be the Christian's response to Paul's admonition? Focus on the goal; put the trivial things of life and the vicissitudes of life into their proper perspective (e.g., jobs, health, finances, earthly relationships, recreation, sickness, death, setbacks, etc.) and continually strive to grow in Christ (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

B. Second: “Forget those things which are behind...” (Phil. 3:13)

“Far better is it to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs even though checkered by failure than to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat”

-Theodore Roosevelt

(1) The past cannot be changed. Consider the apostle Paul:

Acts 26:9-11: “Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received

authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them.” (1 Tim. 1:15: chief of sinners, NIV: “I am the worst”; NASV: “I am the foremost of all”).

- (2) We must learn from our mistakes but cannot carry them...they are excess baggage. Dwelling on our past mistakes is of no value (**1 Tim. 1:16**: “However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life.”).

“Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow.” -Anonymous

C. **Third**: “reach[ing] forward to those things which are ahead...” (Phil. 3:13)

- (1) Christianity is the most optimistic of all religions! It is all about redemption...all about having another chance...all about forgiveness...all about a new birth!
- (2) No matter how low we have fallen, God is there to accept us **IF** we turn back to Him!

1 Tim. 1:13: “...although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy...” (cf. **Matt. 11:28-30**: “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”; Eph. 3:20)

D. **Fourth**: “press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13)

- (1) The idea Paul is conveying is that he is constantly pursuing a goal that he has firmly fixed in his sight...eternal life through Jesus Christ.
- (2) Isn't that what “focus” is all about? Constantly pursuing a goal that is firmly fixed in your sight? (Eric Heiden's practice area in the entryway of his parent's home).
- (3) Furthermore, the grander the goal, the more focus is required (Jack Nicklaus and the Masters).
- (4) We must constantly remained focused on the grand enormity of the Christian's goal. A goal so wonderful that words can scarcely describe its grandeur (**Rev. 21:1-22:6**).

Our third main point: It is impossible for us to maintain our focus unless we have some strategies that help us maintain focus...

3. **9** How to put Paul's admonitions into practice:

A. Study the word:

- (1) A strong faith is essential in order to maintain focus (Matt. 14:25-31: Peter's failure to walk on water; “O ye of little faith, why did you doubt?”).
- (2) Permit me to appeal to your logic:
 - (a) How important is faith? Cannot be saved without it! (Heb. 11:6; Eph. 2:8)
 - (b) But what is faith? “A feeling better felt than told?” No...**Heb. 11:1**: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”
 - (c) Where do we find “the substance of things hoped for”? and “...the evidence of things not seen”?
Jn. 6:68: “But Simon Peter answered Him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.’”

Heb. 1:1-2: “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, 2 has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds;” (Jn. 14:26; 15:26; 16:13; Eph. 3:1-5)

- (d) Thus, God bases faith on logic, on evidence...all provided by the revelation of His mind in His word: Rom. 10:17.
- (e) The athlete or musician cannot maintain focus without a deep knowledge and understanding of the techniques of their sport or the instrument they play. This knowledge, once gained, must be constantly renewed in their minds. This involves studying over and over again the correct techniques necessary to perform their sport or music...we call it practice.

Example: Vladimir Horowitz, (1903-1989 American, Russian-born) pianist; widely regarded as one of the preeminent pianists of the 20th century was reported to have said:

“If I fail to practice one day, I notice it. If I fail to practice two days in a row, my agent notices it. If I fail to practice three days in a row, my audiences notices it.”

- (f) Similarly, the Christian cannot maintain focus unless there is a deep knowledge and understanding of God...who God really is...God’s wants and desires...God’s nature...God’s plan for us. And that knowledge must be constantly renewed *day by day* from the word (**Col. 3:10:** “*And have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him,*”; **Rom. 12:1-2a:** “*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...*”).

(g) **How much “practicing” have you been doing lately? Remember Horowitz!**

B. Pray:

- (1) Of all men, no one knew God better than Jesus. After all, He was sent by the Father (Jn. 1:1-3).
- (2) Jesus was God (divine). Yet, there is no one that prayed more than Jesus.
- (3) Every relationship is maintained by communication. When communication ceases all relationships ultimately die.
- (4) Failure to focus on prayer (communication with God) will cause our relationship with Him to die! (**Jas. 5:16:** “*The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.*”; Eph. 3:20; Lk. 18:1-8; esp. v. 8: “*when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?*”).

C. Meditate:

- (1) The well-trained athlete is able to clear the superfluous from his mind and gives his complete attention to the task at hand (e.g., Jack Nicklaus envisions the desired flight, bounce and roll of each shot.).
- (2) It is as if he were watching a movie. By his thoughts he programs himself to succeed.
- (3) The same is true for the Christian:

Prov. 23:7: “*For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.*”

Phil. 4:8: “*Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy — meditate on these things.*”

“To accomplish great things, we must not only act, but also dream; not only plan, but also believe.”

-Anatole France

III. CONCLUSION: 10

I. Are you focused? Do you know:

A. **Who you are?**

- (1) Eternal spirits (created in God's image),
- (2) Lost without God (sinners, enemies of God),
- (3) Saved in Christ (reconciled, redeemed, joint-heirs with Christ).

B. **Where you are?**

- (1) Dangerous environment...the world!
- (2) Called out: chosen generation, royal priesthood, God's own special people, translated into the kingdom of His dear Son.
- (3) We are in a finite and fragile state that has definite and eternal consequences.

C. **Where you are going?**

- (1) To an inevitable, inescapable, and inalterable appointment!
- (2) To an appearance before the "*judgment seat of Christ*"!
- (3) All of us are going somewhere...our "focus" will determine where that "somewhere" will be...heaven or hell.

2. **II** How the Christian maintains their focus:

- A. "*I do not count myself to have apprehended...*" (avoid overconfidence, salvation conditioned upon faithfulness, GROW!)
- B. "*Forget those things which are behind...*" (past cannot be changed),
- C. "*reach[ing] forward to those things which are ahead...*" (optimism),
- D. "*press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*" (constantly remain focused on the grand enormity of the goal).
- E. Putting Paul's admonition into practice...HOW? Study God's word, prayer, meditation.

An original sermon by Craig V. Thomas, February 20, 1999
(Revisions: 3/11/2001; 6/16/2001; 4/5/2003; 10/4/2015).