

ONE

Finding Spiritual Focus in a Chaotic World

Introduction

“Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus”

(Php 3:13-14)

Paying special attention to the phrase “one thing I do,” we begin our series of lessons about gaining spiritual focus in a chaotic world. Each and every one of the lessons that we will ponder will focus on specific and practical ways for each and every one of us to either begin or renew within us a fire for the Lord and the fundamental practices of firmly founded faith.

Similar language is used throughout the scripture to draw attention to the need for us to focus on some aspect of our spiritual enterprise. The man born and healed by Jesus stood before the religious leaders of his day and, cutting through all the nonsense with which they attempted to inundate him, he says, “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see” (John 9:25). In His conversation with the rich young ruler, Christ, after the young man had affirmed his strict adherence to the law, narrows the focus even more to reveal the man’s fatal flaw, stating, “This one thing you lack; sell all you have and distribute it to the poor...and follow me.” In yet another incident Christ is visiting the home of Mary and Martha. Martha is busying herself with housework while Mary is sitting at the feet of Christ learning. Martha becomes frustrated with Mary because she is not helping prepare the meal for their honored guest and even asks Christ to rebuke Mary. Christ, drawing Martha back to the reality of what was happening, says, “Martha, Martha, you are troubled and anxious over many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion” (Luke 10:41-42).

The apostle Paul, having sat at the feet of the Savior, though in a very different way than the other apostles, understood this all too well, just as he understood what it meant to be distracted. Paul, while still wearing the name Saul, had lived that distracted and chaotic life, failing to see the reality of spirituality that was playing out before him in the very people that he was persecuting. Of course he did not want those he taught to follow in a similar path; to suffer from the same spiritual blindness as he.

Of course, lack of spiritual focus is equivalent to spiritual blindness. Some of us might be too near to the things that just don’t matter that we miss out on those things that do. This was Paul

as he focused his ignorant energies on destroying the body of Christ. On the other hand we can remain so aloof from everything that we see nothing with a great amount of clarity. Everything looks perfect from a distance. In Mt. 13:22 we learn about Christians who are distracted by things of this world and it chokes off their spirituality. Both, however, are forms of blindness that comes as a result of not focusing. As Christ said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind" (John 9:39).

Perhaps then the best place for us to begin our discussion is with a man who once was blind, but learned what it truly meant to have spiritual focus – Paul. At length Paul deals with this very issue in Chapter 3 of the book of Philippians. As the late commentator Albert Barnes noted, "This chapter Phil. 3 consists in the main, of exhortations to holy living, and to an effort to make great attainments in the divine life. It is full of tenderness and affection, and is one of the most beautiful appeals which can anywhere be found to induce Christians to devote themselves to the service of the Redeemer."¹ If ever there were a man who would have reason to put his trust in the flesh it would most certainly have been Paul. Indeed, many of the men in his same position as a leader among God's people who had received the best in training, had the grandest of pedigrees and was no doubt listed among the social elite, had chosen the flesh over the spirit.

Yet, Paul, while he reminds the Philippians of just how well off he was (3:3-6), reveals to these brothers and sisters in Christ that those things, because he was spiritually minded and bent on holy living, counted these things but dung or rubbish (3:7-8). He understood very clearly that life was not about some fleshly attainment, but spiritual discernment and divine demonstration through his very life.

On the surface it sounds like a relatively simple task and yet, we ought to understand very clearly that we are not simply talking about cognitive function and the discernable imperative of holy living as given in scripture. Rather, we are talking about your will, desire and ability to actual perform the task. The gospel message is a wonderful message that can be reduced to a number of wonderful facts. Yet, if these facts fail to ignite within us a fire of zeal and burning to do His will then something has gone wrong, for this is scriptural intent.

It is our belief that for most spirituality is much like building a fire. They gather their wood, dry it, shave the kindling, place it on top of their paper and sit down to enjoy the warmth, having never taken to final step to get the actual fire going. They never set the match to the wood and if they do, for some reason they fail to continue to stoke the fire with more fuel. Similarly, zeal never really ignites to full burn because we never really make an effort to engage in the tasks we read about or set in place a system designed to move us forward with regard to our

¹ *Barnes Notes*, e-sword, Philippians 3 overview.

practical application of godly principles. That is why in so many places men and women, brothers and sisters, for years will persist in doing the same things over and over, even when these things produce no immediate or long term results for the kingdom of Christ.

We must make the determined stand today to make a difference. We must find that “one thing” that is lacking. We must seek that one better part, creating habits that will last and encourage spiritual growth and focus.

One of ONE – Spiritual focus requires letting go of the past

What will determine the course that you take tomorrow? Will it be the things left over from today? Will it be your failures or success of yesteryear? Someone once said that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. While this may be true for the mass populace, it is out of harmony with the will of God and thus the Christian's life. Of course we are not saying that Christians are unpredictable or "flaky." Certainly all Christians should be dependably and predictably righteous. However, their behavior and lifestyle is not and must not be guided by their past failures or success or circumstances.

Right after Paul says, "This one thing I do" he references this topic saying, "Forgetting what lies behind." Paul did not perceive his life as the summation of the things that he did or things that he owned or even his failures (though he was very aware of them). The word "forget" in this context means to "lose out of mind" or "neglect."

What was Paul referring to? What things did Paul see as detrimental to his spiritual focus? He lists them earlier in the chapter and generically refers to them as "confidence in the flesh." This list includes his successes in Judaism, his failure in persecuting the church, his own righteousness, his intelligence and more. He goes so far as to say that he counted these things but loss so that he could attain the spirituality found only by daily living in Christ.

To help focus Paul's attention away from these things, God gave him a thorn in the flesh to keep him humble. "So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited" (2Co 12:7)

Perhaps our issues are different than Paul's, but I would dare say that each and all of us have something within us or in our behavior that keeps us from focusing on the spiritual. Maybe it is self-esteem issues, poor attitude, and addiction of some sort, poor listening skills, and pride due to overwhelming success, fear from overwhelming failure or more.

One Assignment

You will never find spiritual focus by looking backward. We may not understand what Paul meant by "Thorn in the flesh," but we can duplicate the affects. First, for the next week I encourage you to wear one of the rubber bands given to you at the beginning of class. Wear it on a finger or wrist where it is readily accessible. Second, make a list of those things, thoughts and behaviors that hold you back. Just stick to the big ones for now. Third, each time you begin to stray into these areas, find the rubber band, snap it and repeat the phrase, "Forgetting what is behind and pressing forward" three times. Don't worry about looking odd. You are creating a habit of being in the here and now. Finally, be prepared to share how things went.