

November 1/2, 2014

Staying Focused in a Land of Plenty

2014 Global Outreach

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So here's the question of the morning: *How do we stay focused on what really matters while living in a land of plenty?* I would suggest to you this is very difficult. We, as Americans born and raised here, just come to expect that this is the way life should be, and maybe we fail to realize how much this has shaped what I think matters.

I mean, just stop and think about this for a minute. Today there are children all over the world literally starving to death, and we have the luxury of choosing whether or not I will eat that chicken based on how much square footage that chicken had to roam. Now think about this for a moment: While children around the world are starving to death, we pick and choose what we will or won't eat based on how many square feet that chicken had in which to roam! While children around the world are starving to death, we have so much selection we can choose how our food was grown. We can choose whether it's organic or not. We can choose whether it's in a grocery store or in a farmer's market, or we can grow our own. We can decide if it should have been picked on a Thursday or a Wednesday. What we have is unimaginable to so many people in the world, yet we just take it all for granted. It's like we stand at a buffet with more food than any one person could possibly imagine, yet we grumble and we complain that they don't have *exactly* what I want, cooked *exactly* the way I want it cooked, failing to realize that there are children all over the world that would be glad to eat what is scraped off the plates and thrown out in the dumpster every day.

Our environment dramatically affects what we think matters. It is equally true then for us as Christians. No Christians in the history of Christianity have ever grown up with a buffet like we have made available to us. There are over 300 churches in Lincoln alone. You can go to a big church; you can go to a small church; you can go to a house church; you can stay in your pajamas and go to an internet church. You have more resources available to you than any Christian has ever known in the history of Christianity, and you would think that would make us more spiritual. But actually what happens is that it turns us into spiritual consumers. We stand at the buffet, and if everything isn't *exactly* the way we want it, we're not interested. We grumble and we complain; some even protest and walk away because, "It isn't exactly the way I want it," when thousands of Christians around the world would give anything to have a small percentage of what we enjoy every day. So how do we stay focused on what *really* matters while living in a land of plenty?

This weekend and next weekend are our annual global missions' weekends. If you're new to Lincoln Berean, every year during November we have two weekends set aside to talk about global missions. Normally I don't preach on those weekends. I mean, you hear me all the time. As a matter of fact, I don't think I've ever preached on one of these weekends. But Jeff and his Missions' Team asked if I would just share my own heart for why this matters to me and why it matters to us as a church.

Now if I was going to pick a text and drive this theologically right out of the text—which is what we normally do—it simply would have been the text that we studied two weeks ago out of Ephesians in chapter 3. As a matter of fact, at the end of that service, Jeff and I looked at each other and said, "Well, there it is right there. You know, let's go replay it and call it good." (Laughter)

So, rather than just doing that again, in essence I want to approach this a little bit differently. This isn't going to be kind of the typical sermon driven by a text. Rather, I just want to share my heart. I want to refer to a number of passages. We'll only take the time to look at one of those, and I want to frame this around three areas of focus: that this matters to *God*...that this matters to *others*...and why this matters to *me*.

First of all, it matters to *God*. It's helpful to go back and remind ourselves of this. Genesis 1 and 2 remind us that what God wanted for people made in His image is that we would live in relationship with Him in a place called Paradise forever. Sin enters into the picture in Genesis chapter 3 and it all falls apart, and literally the rest of the Bible is the story of what God was willing to do to make it possible once again for sinful men and women to have a relationship with a holy God and live with Him in Paradise forever. Who could have imagined that God, Himself, would give up His own Son to make it possible?

Philippians 2 talks about Jesus existing in an environment for all eternity that was fitting for who He is as God, an environment more spectacular than any of us could begin to imagine. And yet, rather than hold on to that—grasp that, He set it aside in order to enter into an environment that was fitting for sinful men and women, that He would actually be born of a virgin. He would enter into this world as the God Man, knowing that when the story ended He would be rejected; He would be mocked; He would be tortured and ultimately executed for the sins of the world. Knowing all of that going in, that's the option He chose.

I think about Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, agonizing over what was to come and realizing the physical suffering of the torture and the crucifixion was great, but it was not the greatest suffering. The greatest suffering was that a holy God would take upon Himself the sins of the world—a moment so grievous to the world that the world became dark in those hours when the Lamb of God hung upon a cross and took upon Himself the sins of the world! And He did that so He could offer to you the forgiveness of your sin and a relationship with a holy God that you might dwell with Him forever in Paradise.

This is not a game to God. This cost Him His own Son! This matters to God! And if it matters to God, then it needs to matter to us.

Luke chapter 15 records some very familiar stories: the story of the lost coin, the story of the lost sheep, the story of the prodigal son. Those stories are preceded by a question that the Pharisees asked Jesus. They asked him, "*Why do you hang around with sinners and tax collectors?*" And the answer to that question was the story of the lost coin, the story of the lost sheep, the story of the prodigal son. Jesus Himself said, "Because I came to seek and to save those who are lost."

Think specifically about the story of the lost sheep. Ninety-nine are safe; there's one missing. How would we understand that, living in a land of plenty? Ninety-nine will do...that seems pretty good! But the whole point of the story is *one is missing, and one matters!* And as long as there is one missing, the shepherd will not stop seeking to find the lost sheep. Why? Because it matters to him...it matters to him!

We have great neighbors where we live. Across the end of our driveway the neighbors have a little pre-school boy; his name is Grant. He's the sweetest little boy, and Grant and I are buddies. So let's imagine that one evening his parents come knocking on the door and they're quite frantic.

“Grant is lost! We don’t know if he’s down at the pond. We don’t know if he’s down at the tracks. We don’t know if he’s lost in a field. We don’t know where he is, but he’s lost! Would you help us look for him?” What do you think I would say?

“Well, I’d love to but I just dished up a bowl of ice cream and if I don’t eat it, it will melt, and that’s bad stewardship. It’ll go to waste. So I really can’t right now.” Or maybe, “You know, I was just getting ready to wash my brand new vehicle.” “I was just getting ready to check my stock portfolio on the computer.” “I was just getting ready to take a nap. If I don’t get my nap I am really crabby.”

Now stop and think about this. What could I possibly say in that moment that would make sense to them as to why I’m not willing to help them search for their lost little boy? Or maybe the conversation goes a little bit more like this:

“You know, I really would like to, but I happen to notice that you have a flashlight that was purchased at Wal-Mart, and I’m boycotting Wal-Mart. So I’m sorry but I cannot participate.” Or, “I happened to notice that you were driving a 4-wheeler. Those are really bad for the environment and I just feel like, in good conscience, I can’t really cooperate with you.” “I happened to notice you were doing an east-west search, and I really believe it’s more appropriate to do a north-south search, so I really feel like it’d be better for me not to participate.” “I happened to notice there are some other neighbors you asked to help you, and they happen to have a different political affiliation than me, and I really feel like I don’t wanna help because, if we find little Grant, they’ll probably take credit for that, and I just don’t feel like I should be a part of that.”

What could I possibly say to them in that moment that would make sense as to why I’m not willing to help them seek and to save that which is lost? The reality is: every single person in this room this morning, in that moment would drop absolutely everything to help. Exactly!

This matters to God. And when Jesus ascended, He said, “This is your assignment, that you carry the message of the gospel to seek those who are lost, that they might be saved.” This matters to God! If it matters to God, how could it not matter to us?

Second of all, it matters to *them*! Do you realize there are people next door; there are people around the world who have no idea, “*This is what God did for you! I know your soul is empty and it’s longing and it’s hurting. And by the way, I know what you’re looking for, and this is what God did for you!*” How can that not matter to us? How can *they* not matter to us—that they might know that this is what Jesus did for you, and it’s what you’re looking for!

One of my favorite stories in the gospels is found in Luke 8. It’s the story of the demoniac. Jesus lands on the shore and they are greeted by a wild man, a lunatic who is out of his mind. The text says that he is possessed with demons, that he has not worn clothing for years, that he lives in the tombs, and he is shackled with chains because he is completely out of his mind. When he breaks loose from the shackles he flees into the desert. When he comes back, they capture him and they re-shackle him in the tomb.

Now, stop and think about this. What if this was your son? What if this was your brother? What if this was your dad? What if this was your closest friend? Day after day after day you live with the despair and hopelessness of this situation. Think how that would break your heart day after day after day?

I actually don't have to imagine too far to see this picture because I saw almost the exact same picture years ago when I was in the country of Laos. There were a couple of us in Thailand. We crossed the river into Communist-run Laos, and we spent about three days there. We went up into the jungle, and there in a village we saw probably a 20-year-old young man who was shackled to a tree. He was completely naked and he was absolutely out of his mind. The villagers said he was just a maniac possessed with something, and he was so violent all they could do was shackle him to a tree. His mother's hut was not far from the tree but out of range of the length of the chain. They said three times a day she would bring out food. Sometimes she would set it on a stump and run because he'd come flying from the tree at her. Other times he was just too wild; she would just simply push the food in close with a stick. And then she would weep and walk back into her hut day after day, week after week. Think about how absolutely hopeless that would seem.

Yet in the story in Luke chapter 8, Jesus steps on shore and in a matter of minutes the demons are cast out and the man is suddenly in his right mind, clothed, sitting at the feet of Jesus. When it was time for Jesus to leave, he asked if he could go with Jesus, and Jesus commissioned him as a missionary of the gospel to stay and take the message to his village. Now just think about this: In literally a matter of hours, he went from a raving maniac with absolutely no hope to being commissioned as a missionary of the gospel!

What we're talking about is not a new fad diet. It is not a wellness program. It comes with the life-changing power of the God of the universe! There is no person that is hopeless, that is beyond the touch of the God of the universe to heal and to forgive and to offer Paradise forever. It matters to *God*. It matters to *others* that they might know that this is true.

One of the things I was doing this week was just going back through different texts that talk about the commitment of the believers before us to take the message of the gospel to the world. For example, in 2nd Corinthians there are 13 chapters. Roughly half of the chapters talk about persecution, talk about prison, talk about all the dangers and risks and pain and struggles that will be necessary to take this message to the world. They are not passages talking about trials in general that define life in this world. They're talking *specifically* about the cost to be paid to take the message of the gospel out into the darkness.

One of the texts I do want to look at this morning very quickly is found in Hebrews, Chapter 11. Hebrews 11 is often referred to as the *Faith Hall of Fame*. It's a story about great men and women of faith who trusted God and what God did. But it seems like oftentimes we don't read all the way through the chapter. In verse 35 there's a definite turn to remind us that just because people are people of faith doesn't mean everything works out. Sometimes there's a high cost to be paid to be a person of faith. Halfway through verse 35:

...and others (uh oh!) were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (*men* of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.

(*NASB, Hebrews 11:35-38)

It's good to remind ourselves as Christians living in a land of plenty, the majority of Christians over the last 2000 years have not lived as we live, and they were, by faith, willing courageously to pay the ultimate price that the world might know this is what God has done for you. Chapter 12:

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us... (12:1a)

Basically the imagery is those people that were just described in chapter 11 now sit in the bleachers of the arena. This is a relay race and they have handed the baton to us, knowing what it cost them to run the race. They have passed on the baton. They are the witnesses that now sit in the bleachers and cheer us on.

...let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy 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 has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Vs.1b-3)

The concern of the text is that when we get our baton, that we will get entangled in things that don't matter and not run our race well. Imagine those described in chapter 11. One day when we get to glory, sharing what it cost them to carry the message to a dark and dying world, and then looking into your eyes and saying, "*What did it cost you?*"

The reality is we don't run our leg of the race across a desert with no distractions. We perhaps have the most difficult assignment over the last 2000 years in the sense that we have *so many distractions*. We're not running our race across the desert. We're running around Memorial Stadium. We're running through the Haymarket. We're running through the mall. We're running through every place that has so many distractions. They're not bad things, but they just begin to distract us, and we start losing sight of what actually matters—that we would run our race to win!

One of the most emotional letters in the New Testament is 2 Timothy. Paul knows he's about to die; he is about to be executed. And he ends with, "*I have run my race; I have finished the course; I have taken the baton; I have run my leg of the race, and I'm passing it on and I'm ready to stand before Jesus!*"

For me growing up, probably the thing that I was most involved in would have been sports—athletics—and I am not a good bench-sitter. I am not a good spectator. I don't want to stand on the sidelines and watch. I'm still like that. I don't want to sit and watch. I want to be part. I want to be on the field. I want to somehow contribute to something that actually matters. For me, to have the baton passed from such faithful Christians who've counted the cost to run their leg of the race reminds me: I must be diligent to run my leg of the race well, and it's very difficult to do in the midst of a land of plenty, which gets me to the final area of focus.

Because it matters to *God*, because it matters to *others*, and for *me* personally in my own story, a big part of my own story is because of what I grew up with. You *do* cultivate a sense of what does and doesn't matter. My dad was totally blind, lived with excruciating pain 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for over 20 years. That's all I knew growing up. That tends to help you sort out what really matters and what doesn't matter in life. I'll be honest with you. I still struggle with people that have so much, and yet they grumble and complain about so little.

Do you understand, that if at the end of the day you have eyes to see the sunset, that you can see your spouse, that you can actually see your own children, *do you understand how blessed you are?* Do you understand that if you could go through one 24-hour period without excruciating pain, *do you understand how blessed you are?* Do you understand that if this afternoon you could just go for a walk with your spouse, you could get on a bicycle and ride it, that you could go out in the backyard and just one time throw a ball to your son, *do you understand how blessed you are?* How do we lose sight of that in a land of plenty when we have so much, and yet we complain about things that ultimately don't really matter that much? We just lose our perspective.

All my life I was strong and healthy. Patty and I were just talking about this the other day. I never could have imagined that by the age 55 I would have had two radical, open-heart surgeries. I never thought that would be my story. When I was 39 years old, both the cardiologist and the surgeon said, "Bryan, there is no human explanation for why you are alive." I understand that I should be dead...but I'm not dead! I've been given extra days—bonus days—and I will guarantee you God did not give me these days so that I can fritter them away on things that just don't matter. I refuse to do that. I currently have a valve in my heart that has a serial number on it—a manmade valve that has a shelf life that, in my mid-sixties, will wear out. I know that. There isn't a single day that I don't know that, and it causes me to realize every day matters. Life is a gift from God. It is to be treasured and celebrated. Every night when I go to bed, I say to God, "God, thank You! You gave me one more day!" I don't know that I have tomorrow, but I had today, and I am not going to waste the life that God has given me. Maybe my story is *my* story in order that I might remind all of us that every day matters, that life is a gift from God. Don't waste it!

One of the burdens on my heart that is so difficult for me to process is when I see people simply wasting their lives on things that don't matter. It is very difficult in a land of plenty to stay focused on what really matters. We've been on a mission for several years now to make it very difficult for people to waste their lives...because every day matters! My heart would be that we, together as the people of God, would sort through the things that really don't matter in order to live for the things that do matter, which I would contend is very difficult to do living in a land of plenty.

Years ago I saw a series of pictures that told a story in *Life* magazine. Basically it was a series of pictures. There were no words until the very final picture. The first picture is like a mom on the porch of a farmhouse, and she's calling in the children at the end of the day. The next picture indicates that all the children are there, but you can tell there's someone missing. The next picture shows like the hired hands and the dad; they're all looking around for whoever is missing. The next picture shows the sun is down; it's dark. They have lanterns, and you can tell by the look on their faces that they're very concerned. In the next picture the sun is rising; the yard is full of people—friends, neighbors that have gathered—to look for whoever is missing. The next picture shows these people, and they're all holding hands, and they're walking across a wheat field. The last picture is an aerial shot, and these people are all in a big circle, and in the middle of that circle is a father kneeling down holding the lifeless body of his son. And the only words in this whole series of pictures is under the last picture, and it simply says, "Oh, to God that we would have joined hands earlier."

Oh, to God that we would have joined hands earlier, that we as a church—that we as *the* church—would join hands and not get distracted by things that really don't matter and not get hung up on things that really aren't important. But we, together, would commit ourselves to living for the things that matter, and together we would get the job done! To God be the Glory!!

Our Father, we're thankful this morning that when we were dead and lost in our sins, someone introduced to us the message of the Savior. God, we understand that throughout history Christians have been tortured and imprisoned and put to death to carry this message around the world. God, we understand that even today, every three minutes one of our brothers or sisters in Christ is put to death for the sake of the gospel. God, we have been blessed to live in a land of plenty, but, Lord, it provides plenty to distract us from what really matters. God, help us to understand life is a gift and that every day matters, that we would invest ourselves in the things that matter, that we would be diligent and passionate to take this message next door and around the world, that as long as there is one lost sheep that we would be passionate to seek that when You long to save. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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