

## Avoiding the Distraction of the World

The presidential election campaigns are upon us again – is they ever stop. Not that our elections are not worth our time. We are very fortunate to be able to participate in our government, and we should take part in the process unless we want to leave government completely in the hands of unbelievers.

But I find that the election process takes up more of my thoughts than might be healthy from a spiritual perspective.

The same could be said about many things that sometimes occupy us: sports, our jobs, current events, even what we might have for dinner. How we allocate our thought time might be compared to how we allocate our money. In itself, each purchase probably was reasonably well thought out, until we try spending the same dollar twice or commit all our income to credit purchases so that there is nothing left after the essential payments are made. Our brains are like that. We can take on so many good things that, at the end of the day, there is nothing left over for the health of my spirit. How do I take care of the part of me that will live forever, one place or the other, without losing track of everything else? Can I juggle all of this and not drop a ball?

That's what I want to talk about this morning – avoiding the distractions of the world, or, putting in positively, how to keep track of your spirit in a world full of competition.

Several people have told me that their primary reason for gathering here on a Sunday or a Wednesday is an escape from the distractions of life, to be re-centered. It's a place to be yourself among people who accept you and even like you, where you can feel safe for a while. But how do we maintain in between those times? What can we do, day by day, hour by hour, to stay connected to each other and to God and not be distracted by all that stuff that has to get done?

My first recommendation is simple: pray.

Of course, the first picture that pops into our heads is that cultural image of formal prayer, using certain words, covering certain points, ending in a certain way. No – that's centuries of Western culture, not communicating with God. I heard an illustration about prayer in that it is like calling God up in the morning, and then just not hanging up. The conversation goes on all day. Like 1 Thessalonians 5:17, "Pray without ceasing."

The distractions of this world make us anxious, so Paul wrote in Philippians 4:6 – 7, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, upon thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." Notice the small change I made. Most translations say "with thanksgiving." But, more accurately, it should "in everything, by prayer and supplication, upon thanksgiving." Those anxiety-relieving prayers should be built on a foundation of thanksgiving, not just include thanksgiving among the stress-producing requests.

This comes from a letter that is all about fellowship – how to maintain that connection between spirits, between your spirit and the spirit of another faithful person, and between your spirit and God. In chapter four, Paul addresses what to do when the distractions of this world cause disruptions in the connections, when faithful people find themselves in the undesirable position of being at odds with one another. They don't know how they got there; they don't know how to get out of it – because the distractions of this world have blinded them temporarily. Paul says to remind them that other faithful people find joy in both me and in that person I'm at odds with. Paul says to remind them that all our names are written in the Book of Life, so

whatever is dividing us can't be all that important. Paul says to remember that this church stuff is supposed to be fun – the source of rejoicing. And he says to pray – asking, certainly, but built on a foundation of thanking. The result will be peace that will straighten out your temporarily bum-fuzzled brain and emotions.

I get the request part, but what about the thanksgiving part? We could turn back to Philippians 3:8 – 11 in which Paul writes, “But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. 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.”

Certainly, in our settled, peaceful moments, we can think that way. We can compare what the world offers with what Jesus offers and see that there is no contest. But when we get distracted by those worldly things – not bad things, just things of the world like going to work and raising your kids – when we get distracted, those distractions don't look so small or disposable. Yes, we should thank God for the many ways we have it good – where we live, the climate, the economy, our liberty, our health (and if that's not so great, thanks for our access to the best health care in the world). But being thankful for those things doesn't take away that nagging distraction of getting along on this earth, because those distractions get hold of us by making us a little crazy.

So, pray and thank God for fixing the craziness, even though you can't see the fix yet. That's faith – thanking God when you ask. If you wait until you see God's response, you are walking by sight, not walking by faith. If you want to kill the distractions, thank God for fixing them when you ask. If you actually trust God, your thinking will settle down. But be prepared to accept His response.

This is another reason for praying without ceasing. You get to amend your poorly thought-out requests all through the day, and you will remain focused on the cure instead of the distraction.

My second recommendation for defeating distraction: think about good stuff.

Philippians 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.”

What catches our attention? The news – which is about all the things that go wrong in the world. Political ads – which are more of the same. Hitler motivated an entire country by focusing the citizens of Germany on all that had gone wrong since World War I. Those who want to convince you that Jesus is about to return appeal to the “signs of the times,” and they are not good signs. Why have motivators for thousands of years staked their appeal on making people angry about the way things are? Because it's easy. The world is broken. Making people angry about it is just manipulation. God made the world the way it is not to make us angry but so we would have to make a choice. We could continue to trust ourselves and get more of the chaos, or we could trust Him and rise above the brokenness. The distractions of life trap us in the brokenness. We rise above the brokenness by thinking about good stuff.

Think about true stuff – like the evidence of God. Heading that list is the empty tomb, but there is lots more.

Think about the darkness at the Crucifixion – that unbelievers debated for centuries why it got dark for three hours in the middle of the day. They did not debate whether it got dark, but why it got dark. Millions of people saw it. Contemplate what God did and smile.

Think about when Paul was stoned, dragged out of Lystra and left for dead. He got up and walked back into town. Imagine the looks on their faces.

You can think about the evidence for the things of God all day – and some of the humorous ways God pulled things off.

Think about noble stuff – like the Bereans, who were, it says in Acts 17:11, “more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the Word with all readiness and searched the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.”

Think about the people you have met who fit that description: noble. They did not dismiss the gospel because it was different than what they already believed. They were not so open-minded that their brains fell out – they did not accept what just anyone told them, but they were noble-minded; they gave everything a fair hearing, so they accepted the Good News. Many people in this room fit that description.

Think about justice – God is going to make all this work out. When God said, “Vengeance is mine,” He was saying, “Leave justice to the professionals.” When we try to exact justice from those who have done us wrong, we mess it up; we are amateurs. Let God take care of justice so that the distractions of the world will not be able to hook you with their descriptions of all that is wrong on this earth.

Think about things that are pure. John, in 1 John 3, uses Jesus as his example of what is pure. Think about how Jesus handled things. Paul wrote to Titus, “To the pure, all things are pure; to the unbelieving, nothing is pure.” In other places, Paul called on us to have pure hearts and pure consciences. Peter exhorted us to have pure minds. Hearts, consciences, and minds like Jesus: pure. Think about the real thing and you will smile; think about the counterfeits and you will frown.

And the list goes on. Think about good stuff to break the hold of the distractions of a broken world. We live on this earth and will be in the midst of brokenness all the time, but the distraction of that brokenness does not need to control us. It is background noise.

The third way to defeat the distractions of this life; reach forward.

Philippians 3:12 – 13 “Not that I have already attained or am already perfect; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead.”

We are not there yet. We are being transformed into the character of Jesus; these good traits are increasing in us; but we are not quite there. We could spend our time lamenting our shortcomings. Paul says to reach forward to where you are going.

God has promised us love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (to use the list in Galatians 5:22 – 23). We trust God that these will be ours, as Peter put it in 2 Peter 1:8, “in increasing measure.” And these are promises for the faithful on earth, not at some remote time in the future. The power is ours for the accepting. All that holds us back is the limitation of our own faith. Do we trust God or do we not? The past is

useful only in knowing which holes not to fall into twice. What is important is where we are headed.

Paul included both life on earth and life after Judgment Day in his picture. Paul pressed on to the goal for which Jesus laid hold of him; he also pressed on to the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. This goal of Paul's was not a special goal just for him, but the same one we all have: to teach angels the nature of faith and to appeal to fellow earth-bound spirits about the Good News of peace and joy.

The distractions of this world want to occupy our minds with what has gone wrong in the past and seems likely to get worse. We defeat this mentality by (1) recognizing that this world is supposed to be broken, God is not surprised; (2) we have been given the ability to rise above it. So, let's plan to do that. We are not going to fix the world; it is the way God intended. What we can do is to abandon the doomed right-and-wrong mentality, accept the bail-out, and move into a new kingdom with a different economy: faith. We no longer judge our past by comparing to some right-and-wrong standard, which only traps us in continual failure. Rather, we press on from wherever we are and make the next decision by faith in the promises of God. We escape the distractions because we are focused on promises.

The fourth method of escaping the snare of the distractions of this world is also in Philippians, Philippians 2:5, "Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus."

And what facet of the mind of Jesus does Paul use as his example? "...who, being in the form of God, did not consider it something to be held onto to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross."

Jesus did not overcome the distractions of the world by separating Himself from it. Rather He lived every day in this broken world and served. He kept a spirit mind-set while in the midst of the masses who were trapped by that broken world. He definitely took time out to pray, talked about good stuff, and looked forward, not back – all while keeping up a killer schedule.

So how do we adopt this manner of thinking? The other steps don't work without this one, and this step is not one we accomplish by trying harder. Rather, this is a transformation made by the Spirit of God that dwells in the faithful. Like 2 Corinthians 3:18, "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory [the parade of character traits], are being transformed into the same image." Or 2 Peter 1:4, "...by which [by His divine power] 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." By these promises we become partakers of that divine nature. For this we pray. These promises are a big part of the good stuff we think about, to which we look forward. Without an honest expectation that these promises will happen, they won't.

When you find yourself distracted by the world, think about the promises of God. Keep a list of favorites in your purse or wallet, since the distractions of life tend to make us lose track of them. In reviewing your list, you are likely to find just the one that will deflate the pressure you are feeling.

The fifth means by which to escape the distractions of the world, to re-focus on our reason for being, 1 Thessalonians 5:21, “Test all things, hold fast what is good.” Or, my modern language version, check everything; keep the good stuff.”

Not much around us is 100% good, pure, noble, true, or those other descriptions from Philippians 4:8. Certainly, we can find a few things, like Jesus or God’s love, or God’s planning. But if it is down here somewhere, it probably has a flaw or two. If we are to examine everything carefully, we will find those flaws. Paul says, don’t focus on the flaws; just keep the good stuff.

Think about how political campaigns are organized. A significant portion of the appeal to the voters is, “Look how bad my opponent is; therefore you should vote for me.” The writers are careful to avoid the obvious question, “Are you any better?”

Various religious groups highlight the flaws in the doctrines of the competition. Do they not understand that they have flaws, too?

Talk radio of any political persuasion majors in exposing flaws. All that is accomplished is to make people angry with nameless, faceless people somewhere else.

Paul says, “Examine everything – don’t be naïve – don’t be gullible – don’t be taken in by a slick presentation; but, keep the good stuff.” Don’t listen for the flaws and use those flaws to throw out the whole thing. Listen for the good parts and keep them.

Which method makes you smile? Which method lets you learn something?

We can look at Christianity today and be really sad about the division and acrimony and ignorance. Some highlight the supposed shortcomings of others with the result of just making people angry. Or we can assume that, 99% of the time, a practice or teaching of a different group arose in response to a problem, and that was their fix. They were trying to be better. I may not agree with how well it worked or into what it morphed over the years, but that is not important. Paul says that the take-away lesson should be their intention to fix something that was broken. Think about what they got right.

We can make jokes about Jehovah’s Witnesses or 18-year-old Mormon elders knocking on our doors, or we can appreciate that they are out there, beating the streets to spread their message – as we should. We can object to how some groups are too severe, or too laid-back, or too focused on this or that, or we can appreciate why they became that way, understand what they were trying to fix, and think about how I might incorporate that good idea without falling in the same ditch I think they did.

The takeaway lesson from the mess of the Christian world is not its flaws – God didn’t need to be a rocket scientist to know that, if He populated the church with people, they were going to mess it up. The takeaway lessons are how to be more evangelistic, how to be a part of each other’s lives, how to know God as a person instead of the Great Power in the Sky, how to succeed in a broken world.

The sixth method for overcoming the distractions of this world is in Colossians 3:2, “Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.”

That is harder than it sounds. If you focused all your thoughts on things above, you would trip over stuff, lose your job, and probably starve. How do we function in this world and set our minds on things above?

If you read the context, Paul’s point is to make decisions based on who we are, not the situations in which we find ourselves. Paul says, “Remember that you died and your life if

hidden with Christ in God.” He follows that up with a list of bad behaviors that are not appropriate for one who “is hidden with Christ in God.”

How do good people rationalize bad behavior? I’m not asking about people who don’t care a thing about God – they have their own reasons for their behaviors. I’m talking about sincere, church-going people who make terrible choices.

Those who don’t dig too deeply into the Scriptures have a simple answer; don’t do those things. Suck it up and do the right thing. Be moral and honest and kind. What they fail to notice is that most people have been trying to do that their whole lives and have been failing miserably. To use Floyd’s line, “Try harder; fail bigger.”

So, good, honest, sincere, church-going people accept nonsense doctrines that help them feel better about themselves as long as they don’t think about it too deeply.

But the answer is simple. One of the characteristics of faith is to acknowledge that you are powerless to overcome yourself. Another characteristic of faith is to accept help from God. This concept is expressed dozens of times in the New Testament. Romans 8:13 perhaps summarizes it best, “For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” If you let the Spirit help, you will succeed.

That’s how you set your mind on things above. Set your mind on the power by which you succeed: the Spirit that dwells in all faithful people.

As Paul wrote to Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:24, “Some men’s sins are clearly evident, preceding them to judgment, but those of some men follow later.” Everyone needs the Spirit to be able to overcome. Some people have a superior level of self-control and can avoid some of the more public catastrophes – but they have theirs, too, just better hidden. Setting our minds on things above helps both groups. Those with the more obvious shortcomings see hope that they might finally get something right. Those with the less visible shortcomings can learn the difference between attaining the arbitrary standard I set for myself versus the impossibly high standard set by Jesus – and that even that impossibly high standard can be attained through the Spirit.

The world distracts us with conflicting messages that alternately tell us we are terrible and that we are good enough. We bounce from one to the other like a ping-pong ball until we are completely confused. Focusing on things above allows us to see the true standard and the gift by which we may attain it.

And, finally, the seventh means by which we can escape the distraction of this world, Matthew 6:25 – 34, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things (specifically, food and clothing) shall be added to you.”

What does it mean to seek the Kingdom of God, and what does it mean to seek His righteousness? How does that work?

First, seeking the kingdom. Jesus was talking to a large group of interested Jewish people. They correctly understood the “kingdom” to be the eternal kingdom which, to them, was in the future – the not-too-distant future. The prophets had talked about it; the people in this crowd had varying levels of expectation of it. But they were not in it, yet. Jesus was recommending to them that they keep their eyes open, that they listen carefully, because the Kingdom they had anticipated for so long was soon to arrive. Jesus was recommending that they expend some time and resources to be in position to be a part of this new, eternal kingdom. Of course, for most of the crowd, being poor, devoting resources to this was risky. So, Jesus

assured them that they would not starve or lack clothing – although He did not say anything about a roof.

But we live after that watershed event; we live in the time of the eternal kingdom. In fact, all of us here have pretty good reason to believe that we are already a part of this eternal kingdom, so seeking it is no longer necessary. We have found it already.

The second part, “seeking His righteousness,” is the more important part. In fact, the importance was about the same for those in Jesus’ audience and for us today.

How do we seek His righteousness? Perhaps Romans 3:21 – 26, “But now the righteousness of God apart from the Law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through the faith of Jesus Christ, to all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has the faith of Jesus.”

We seek His righteousness by seeking His faith. We are being conformed into His image (Romans 8:29), transformed into His character (2 Corinthians 3:18), partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). These are actions taken by the Spirit, but Jesus used the word “seek.” That implies some sort of action on our part. What can we do to “seek” His righteousness, the righteousness that is by faith? Here’s a partial list that fleshes out the list I’ve talked about this morning. To find them all, you should read the whole New Testament:

- (Romans 16:17) Note those who cause divisions...and avoid them
- (1 Corinthians 5:11) Do not keep company with “excuse makers”
- (1 Corinthians 6:18 – 19) Flee immorality...You are the Temple of the Holy Spirit.
- (Colossians 3:16) Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly
- (1 Thessalonians 5:11) Comfort one another and edify one another
- (Hebrews 10:25) not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together
- (Hebrews 12:14) Pursue peace with all men, and holiness.
- (1 Peter 2:2) Long for the pure milk of the Word

Grow your faith by assembling your own list of God’s promises, hanging out with fellow believers, and having day-long instant messaging with God.

1. Philippians 4:6 Pray
2. Philippians 4:8 Think about good stuff
3. Philippians 3:13 Reach forward
4. Philippians 2:5 Have the mind of Jesus
5. 1 Thessalonians 5:21 Test all things, keep the good stuff
6. Colossians 3:2 Set your mind on things above
7. Matthew 6:25 – 34 Seek first His righteousness

With these, you will overcome the distractions of the world and have a life of joy.