February 10, 2019

**“Focus”**

**Deuteronomy 6:4-15**

How well do you *focus*? It probably depends on what you’re “focusing” on, right?

There’s one kind of focus if you’re looking through a microscope or a camera lens. There’s another kind of focus if you’re standing on top of the mountain you just climbed and you’re taking in the vast view. There’s another kind of focus when you’re a groom and you see the first glimpse of your bride walking down the aisle. There’s another kind of focus if your child is performing on a stage for the first time.

We know what it means to focus when it really counts. But in general, how well are you able to focus on what is most important? Our world and our lives throw a lot of things our way that all clamor for our attention and focus. If you’re like me, it often isn’t long before my mind has wandered elsewhere as something else has grabbed and dominated my focus. It can be something of great importance. And it can be something totally meaningless and worthless. Lot’s of things compete for our focus.

* Are you able to read in a focused way like before?
* Are you able to hold a focused conversation – eyeball to eyeball as well as ever?
* Are you able to have uninterrupted focus, or has your attention span shrunk and withered like a flower halfway through a long, cold winter?

I truly don’t know anyone who is proud of their ability to focus on what is most important. We might be able to identify what is or should be most important… but to stay focused on it? That is a challenge for most people.

Has this always been an issue?

Our culture’s attention spans have slowly eroded away like my hairline.

Is it because of the influence of technology and the internet? Is it because of the fast-paced nature of every video and movie out today? Do these things condition our brains to only be focused if it is fast, constantly stimulating and “blink-and-you-miss-it oriented”? Regardless of if the advance of technology is causing shorter attention spans or if it is merely reacting and then contributing to it, it is a scientific fact that our 9 second attention spans are 4 seconds shorter today than they were in 2000 when we had a whopping 12 second attention span.

One easy way to spot the difference is the way that the advertising industry has changed in recent years.

McDonald’s Happy Meals have been around forever. The target audience is the same are the greasy, nutritious contents. But McDonald’s, like every other company trying to stay ahead, understands that peoples’ brains work differently today than they did 30 years ago. So their advertising has had to adapt in order to get people interested in buying their products. Let’s take a fun look at a Happy Meal commercial from 1990 followed by one from recent months. Play both videos.

Same span of time – 30 seconds. Same content – greasy burger, fries, drink and a toy. Vastly different approaches – to cater towards the attention span of the target audience.

What do you see that is different – besides the apple slices? Lol.

Of course technology is better, that’s a given. But the pace of a commercial – geared for kids – is dramatically more engaging and stimulating because everyone knows this is what is needed to grab and keep people’s attention in our culture. There’s no wonder why the number of ADHD diagnosis have more than doubled in the past 20 years – now officially affecting over 10% of the population.

Our “screen time culture” – is a big factor in our growing inability to focus. And we’re not even beginning to touch on the content of that screen time. (games, social media and all the forms of movies and tv today). Our culture is good at capturing our momentary attention. But staying focused is a problem for millions in ways that it never has been before. Our brains are being conditioned to hunger for the next stimulating influence, and it has caused our attention spans to suffer incredibly. We are having trouble focusing. My mom taught first grade for 30+ years before retiring. She says that there was a dramatic difference in the attention span of her first graders in that span of time and it required her to adapt her teaching style in order for the kids to stay on pace with their learning.

There are many other factors that make it hard to focus beyond the influence of screens and media. Having young children sends all new parents into “young parent brain” … sometimes for years as we adapt to the constant and ever-changing needs of little ones under our care. More people than ever work 2nd and 3rd shift – confusing sleep schedules and routines. More people than ever are on some type of medication. And while this has hopefully helped us manage many of our ailments, every medication has side-effects and most of those affect our ability to focus. So our shrinking attention spans can have multiple influences.

But the predominant reason why I believe our inability to Focus has reached an all-time High (or low), it is because of the innumerable masses of messages, postings, distractions, advertisements, touch screen games, snapchats, and countless options and temptations that are vividly fired our way at hyper speed all day, every day. We are so used to absorbing the mass quantity of hyperlinks, pop ups, commercials, promotions, status updates, tweets, videos, Instant messages, spam, etc that it is really hard to focus without being taken off in a random direction, and another, and another. Before we realize it, our mindset can be so far off from where it originally was or should be, that we don’t even know what we’re supposed to be doing. And this has become so prevalent that we’re not as good at things because we can’t focus enough to learn and grow.

Before you get irritated with me for meddling, please know that I am one of millions of people who can truthfully say, my attention span is much shorter now than it was 20 years ago. Some of that is just part of being an adult who has much more to handle and be responsible for than I used to have. But I used to be much better at certain things 20 years ago when my attention span was longer than it is today. I have seen this make me impatient, irritable with loved ones and easily distracted when I shouldn’t be. Can you relate?

Our focus capabilities are changing rapidly and it’s affecting our work ethic, our families, our relationships with friends and loved ones, and most importantly, it’s affecting our relationship with God.

Over the next number of months, we are embarking on a series I’m simply calling **Focus.** God will be calling us out to focus on what is most important. Part of that will challenge you to elongate your attentions span. Part of this series will challenge you to stay focused on what is most important when temptations and distractions arise. Part of it will help you develop spiritual disciplines that will aid you deepen your relationship with God. Part of it will deal with focusing on God when it comes to worship. Part of it will help you focus on some likely neglected areas of life such as marriage and parenting skills. Part of it will deal with better managing the technology and addictions in our lives. We will be challenged to stay focused on what our primary mission is as individuals and as a church.

What does God’s word say about this matter of Focus?

**Deuteronomy 6:4-9**

1. **Put Effort Towards Loving God Above Everything Else** 
   1. Love Him with all your heart, all your soul, all your might. **(vs 4-5)**
   2. If our heart and soul and mindsets are invested elsewhere, we are robbing from God what is rightfully His.
   3. If our Might or strength – our efforts – are spent on other things… in other words if God only gets our leftovers… then other things have become idols because they end up taking the place that God should have in our lives.
   4. These people were about to enjoy blessings and luxuries that they had never experienced. Gardens and houses and food and riches that were going to become the whole point of life… they would soon be tempted to shift their focus away from pure love and worship for God and be drawn to all the superficial, peripheral things that they would quickly feel entitled to constantly enjoy.
   5. These things are not wrong, but in **vs 12** it says, “take care lest you forget the Lord… **vs 13** it is Him you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear.”

**Vs 6-7a**

1. **Think Consistently on God’s Word** 
   1. The only way you can is for it to have a place in your life.
   2. No one can do this for you – It must become an actual priority.
   3. It is the Bread of Life. You can bake bread, smell bread, cut bread, serve bread. You can handle bread and put stuff on bread. You can do all that stuff and still starve to death.

This was so important to Israel that God gave them some ways to make sure that His Word maintained prominence in their lives.

* **Teach it diligently to your children.**

What in life would you say you teach diligently to your children?

What would they say about this?

Scripture should be a discussion point in families when you do things together. When you’re at home, when you are on a walk (in the car), when you go to bed, when you get up. These are not checklist items, but are clear indications from the Lord that His intention is to be central to your family life. Do you have a family life? Do you eat together? Go on walks? Do you do anything where you talk to each other? If you don’t put some boundaries and structure into place, then the things of God will never be discussed.

* **It means saying no to some things.** Too many families have unrestricted screen and earbud use with their kids. These devices as cool as they are, are like acid in the relationships of our lives, eroding our relationships. Not the existence of these things… but the unmanaged/unrestricted use of them. Lots has changed with technology… but the old adage is still the same… if you put garbage in…
* Right after Easter this spring, we’ll be talking about ways to better manage our technology so that it has appropriate place in our lives.
* God’s word is clear… **it is the Parent’s responsibility** to instill moral and Biblical values into their kids. The church plays a part but it is our intention to come alongside parents as they do this, but not to do it for you. A Christian education can help do this. But the great tragedy is when parents have their kids in church and maybe even a Christian school, but are not themselves providing the moral and Biblical foundation in their kids lives because they hope these other environments will do it for them. All the while, we buy our kids expensive and addictive technologies and those influences are tragically raising too many kids instead of their parents raising them.

**Vs 8**

* **Set yourself Reminders to Read/Meditate on God’s Word**

Bind it on your hand

This is kind of like the idea of writing yourself a note on your hand. Or tying a string on your finger. Why do we do this? So we don’t forget.

Set it as a reminder on your phone. Put it on the schedule on your calendar. Make a reminder, not just now while we’re talking about it, but a reminder that recaptures your focus for other times too.

Or some accountability with another person(s) about it. They’ll help you stay focused.

* **Keep it on the Forefront of Your Mind (vs 8)**

Phylacteries were strapped on to the head – literally – of many “seriously spiritual” Jewish people. It was like a box that contained an actual copy of the 10 commandments, or in some cases of the entire Pentateuch if you were really spiritual. This is not literal – the Word, **AS** should make that clear. What’s the point?

Do what you need to so that God’s word is on the Forefront of your mind.

Why? Because if it’s not, then something else will grab your attention and focus. When you’re contemplating sinning, if God’s word is not already on the forefront of your mind, you will “forget” about it as the temptation to sin will take up that place in the forefront of your mind.

Take notes. Journal. Memorize it. Listen to it. Make room in your life for it or else something else will crowd it out.

**Vs 9**

* **Be Open About God’s Prominence in Your Life**

Write it on the doorposts and gates. Again, some people took this literally. And some still do today, although it’s not common. The point is, the role of God’s word and it’s teachings in your life is not intended to be a secret. Others will notice if it has prominence in your life or not. If they don’t notice, then it probably doesn’t have prominence.

When people think of you, they should think of a person of the Word of God. That can only happen if you learn to focus on it, making it more prominent than anything and anyone.

To this point, Moses has told us What to do. Now focus with me when he tells us the all-important Why behind the What.

**Read 10-15**

1. **Guard Against Other Things That Strive for Prominence**

Because when other things gain prominence, you will lose sight (focus) of the LORD who has saved you and whom you serve.

You’re going to end up with a place to live. A house. In a nice city or town. Clean, abundant water supply. Beautiful surroundings. Nice stores to shop in (since we don’t grow and make our own stuff). Nice vehicles to drive. Nice vacations to take. Nice gifts to buy. These are all good things. (vs 11) When you are full (satisfied, comfortable, fulfilled, entertained, etc.) **Take Care… actually take tangible steps to make sure these things don’t dominate your focus.**

We can so quickly develop an entitlement mentality. These were things that Israel didn’t work for. They were going to receive a bunch of “luxuries” – the best of what their culture had to offer. But that certainly does not translate into success – especially when these things become the actual focus of life while God gets relegated to a secret compartment, or even worse, a forgotten, now unnecessary part of the past.

1. **God is a Jealous God**

Define actual proper jealousy. For us, jealousy is a sin… because it is driven by covetousness and pride. But for God, it’s obviously not sin. He knows how he created us. He knows what we really need. And when we stoop to other things instead of Him, He is jealous because He knows that the only thing that will make our relationship right is to focus on Him.

If a married man – one who has promised himself to His wife – is dating another woman, when his wife finds out, is it right for her to be jealous over the attention her man is giving to that other woman? Of course! It hurts her because it was rightly to be hers.

Is God Jealous of things in your life that have stolen your focus away from Him and serving Him?

That will produce a toxic relationship instead of a joyful one.

Do you need to refocus? What’s one thing from Deuteronomy 6 that you can grab onto to pull your mind and heart into proper focus on what’s most important?

Will you end up revamping how you use your time and energy? Do you need to re-prioritize your schedule so you can focus on God and serving Him? Do you need to re-allocate your finances so you can focus a real part of them on Him? Do you need to re-think your relationships if they are detracting you away from God and His ways? Do you need to re-assume your role as a spiritual leader in your home for your kids instead of hoping someone else will do it? Has all of the stuff and fast-paced distractions of life robbed you of quality time with loved ones and God?

*We need to get focused. Next week we’ll be talking specifically about focusing on God’s Word.*

Loop back into song – “Jesus I Come” focus