

Where Is Our Focus? / COB / 04.17.16

- † **[Slide 1: Blank]** My wife LeeAnn has a dream job: she makes good money, gets to work from home, can work in her pajamas if she wants; she works on her own, but has a team that helps her whenever she needs them; her bosses love her and respect her, and have invested a lot in developing her skills and leadership ability. I have never had a job like that, so I appreciate what she has with this company, especially since they cover my health benefits too.
 - Now that all might be changing. The company is doing well, and its growth is leading it to reorganize the way it operates. They have told LeeAnn that she can still have a job, but not the job she is doing, probably not with the skill set she is using or the team she is on. She has to choose from several potential career paths and start working toward making that choice work. So everything is a little up in the air, which is unnerving.
 - What if she cannot develop the new skills, what if her new team and new boss are not as helpful, what if the new job pays less than she makes now? We are trying to put into practice what I preach: to focus on doing the right thing each day, trusting him with the results and everything else. But it is hard.

- † I was reflecting on this while sitting in airports a couple of weeks ago. And another thought came to me. I want to walk you into it.
 - So consider: would you say having enough to eat is a necessity or luxury? What about being able to eat out in restaurants?
 - Is it a necessity or luxury to have a safe place to live? What about having a nice place to live, with a nature view, tile floors, a remodeled kitchen?
 - Which is truly important and which is merely nice: that your children get to play in organized sports or that your children come to worship? Which one is important?
 - Again, which is important and which merely nice: to trust that God has a plan for you or to have some sense of control or material security in your life? Which one is really important?
 - Which is more valuable, that someone comes to faith in Christ or that this person has a comfortable life?
 - Which is more valuable, that someone comes to faith in Christ or that you have a comfortable life? You see what I am getting at?

- † Now think about the things that make you cry; don't think too deeply about it, our goal is not to send you over the edge; but think about what makes you cry: losing a friendship, grief, feeling helpless.
 - Think about the things that make you angry: crazy drivers, right? it's worse in Florida, because all the crazy drivers up here go retire or winter down there; crazy drivers, laws that make no sense, high taxes, failed expectations, lack of money, sleepless nights.
 - Think about the things that cause you stress. For me it is having too much to do, not performing up to my own expectations, not performing up to your expectations, the slowness in which God develops us or heals us.

- Think about the things that cause you anxiety or worry. I am better about this than I am about stress, but sometimes I am anxious thinking about loved ones who might die, how losing LeeAnn's job will affect us, what we would do if I cannot effectively lead this church.
 - How many of these things which make such an impact on our emotions are necessities? How many are truly important? How many are so vitally valuable that Scripture sketches them out as our purpose in life?
- † Here's my thesis: we spend almost all our time thinking about these things, but most of them are not necessary, truly important, or vitally valuable; at least not from God's point of view. We focus on cares of this world instead of on the burdens of God's heart.
- I am not denying that our pain is real or valid. When our loved ones die, we are going to hurt; when our marriages fail or our friends betray us, we are going to hurt; when we lose something good or struggle to pay the bills, we will feel pain; the pain we feel in our deteriorating bodies is real and limiting; and when all these things and more are happening, it is easy to feel overwhelmed, so we struggle to cope. I am not denying any of that.
 - What I am denying is that our worldly way of coping is best. In the past, when we have talked about worldly ways of coping, we have discussed turning to alcohol or other drugs, porn or other sexual activity, violent outbursts, over eating or over shopping, or trying to solve our problems in criminal ways.
 - Today I have a different focus. Even as Christians who might not do those things, we have a tendency to dwell on our problems, to turn inward and focus on ourselves, to take care of ourselves instead of others, to isolate. Does any of that sound biblical to you? It's not.
 - So is any of that characteristic of walking on what we call "the top line" with God? that is, walking by faith and obedience to his revelation, letting his revelation guide us into his maximum blessing? No.
 - Which would God rather I spent my time and energy pondering: how to help a particular person come to faith in Christ or what might happen at LeeAnn's job? Would God want me to obsess about how to encourage my fellow believer who is struggling or about my own emotions?
 - What is more productive, to focus on what God has given us to do or to obsess on our problems? Would God rather we focus on doing what he commands or focus on asking him to do what we want next from him? Are we to dwell on our failings and our life's failings and any potential future failings or are we to dwell on the Word of God, rejoicing in his gifts, including the hope that all our suffering will one day end?
- † The worst part is, we invest all this thought and energy and time into trying to make ourselves happy again, yet this "bottom line" worldly perspective will lead us into a trap that never makes us truly happy. Still we persist in it. **Proverbs 26.11 NASB says: Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who repeats his folly.**
- In January, we studied **Matthew 6.31-33 NET**; turn there in your Bible... Jesus said: **"So then, don't worry saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'** [more necessary things than we usually worry about!] **For the unconverted [the pagans] pursue these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But above all pursue his kingdom and righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."**

- Jesus instructs us to focus on reflecting God’s character and pursuing God’s work, and offers that way of life as a cure for our worry which derives mostly from focusing on the things of the world.
- † In Haggai’s prophecy, we learned the basic principle, “Do what God says and trust him with the results and everything else.” That has been a basic teaching at the essence of true spiritual life ever since God created people in the Garden of Eden. It sounds so simple, yet it is so difficult to live out.
- LeeAnn and I try to do the work God puts before us each day. No matter how stressed or anxious or sad or mad we are, we give our best to our employer and try to trust that God is going to work it all out. But there is more to this: we need emotionally and mentally to let go of the things stressing or worrying or saddening or angering us, so we can dwell on the real work God has given us.
 - What is truly important in our lives, what would truly give LeeAnn and me more lasting joy, to keep her wonderful job with no commute and good pay and benefits, or to see one person we know come to faith in Jesus?
 - So what would happen if we took the hours we currently invest in coping with stress and anxiety – our preferred methods are television and novels, by the way – and we invested them in building relationships with our neighbors, or in following up with the people who ask the PCCO for help, or in helping you build relationships with your neighbors?
- † I had lunch with another local pastor this week. LeeAnn always asks after these lunches what we talked about, and I say “wives!” but really we tend to focus on shop talk. While we were talking about preaching, however, this pastor mentioned that his wife warns him if he speaks too often on pet themes.
- I am not telling you anything new today, so maybe these are my pet themes. But as I mentioned to this pastor, it is remarkable how often the Bible touches on the same themes, over and over, in book after book, because they are [so to speak] pet themes for God, so they bear repeating.
 - In February, I shared with the Core Group what the Bible teaches about a vision for the church and goals derived from that vision. Carolyn Stoltzfus noted that this is the same vision I have been sharing in sermons and Sunday school classes since I got here, and that everyone agrees with it, the problem is we are not doing it. Carolyn is a perceptive woman.
 - I think our struggle to live out God’s vision and to pursue God’s goals as a church derives from our struggle to live out God’s vision and to pursue God’s goals as individuals. The church is just a community of believers, and it will reflect the spirituality or worldliness, the maturity or immaturity, of its members.
 - So maybe we each need to repent of our failure to focus on God’s revealed vision and goals for our lives, confess we have had this problem and ask for his help to correct it. Let’s start by talking a little about what really matters to God.
- † ➔[Slide 2: creation circles]◀ Eight months ago, we talked about God creating people in his image. Stick your bulletin there in Matthew, because we will come back there, but turn now to **Genesis 1.26-28a NET: Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness, so they may rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move on the earth.” God created humankind in his own image, in**

the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply! Fill the earth and subdue it!”

- We learned this meant people are to reflect God’s character, represent God in life situations, reproduce God’s image in other people [mainly by raising children to live as image bearers], and rule in God’s name [in other words, be God’s stewards] over the rest of creation on the Earth.
 - ➔[Slide 3: church circles]◀ In our dispensation, our biblical time period, the church is the representative people of God. So we seek to live as God’s image bearers, reflecting God’s character, representing God in life situations, reproducing God’s image by helping others [including our children] to learn to live as image bearers, and to be God’s stewards not just concerning the planet, but also to the people groups who do not know God.
 - I think we could see God’s vision for our church in this one teaching, we could derive his vision and his goals for us. But just to make things clearer, he has given us further teaching.
 - ➔[Slide 4: Commandment]◀ First, throughout the dispensations, there has been a universal Great Commandment: We are to love God with all of ourselves and love others as ourselves. We find this given to us by Jesus in **Matthew 22.36-39 NET**. Turn there in your Bible... [someone asked] **“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus said to him, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. The second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’**
 - ➔[Slide 5: Commission]◀ A second clarification comes in the Great Commission, a special command given as a purpose statement for the church. We find this in **Matthew 28.18-20 NET**; turn there in your Bible. **Then Jesus came up and said to them [his disciples], “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”** We are to reproduce God’s image by making other reproducing disciples of Christ.
- † ➔[Slide 6: Three Es]◀ These are the things that really matter to God: worship, love, and spiritual reproduction. Another way of looking at it is that God desires us to make priorities of our relationship with him, our relationships with each other, and our relationships with lost people. We exalt or worship God; we edify, build up, each other; we evangelize or reach out with the gospel to the unchurched.
- Now the question is, what does this mean for you? I have been teaching these same concepts here for thirty-four months, and everyone agrees this is the Bible’s teaching. But how are we doing at putting it into action in our lives?
 - The Bible makes clear that every believer should live as God’s image bearer, should live out the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. These apply to everyone in the church, universally, including you! In these things we should have complete unity and we each should pursue them as a way of life.
 - We also know, however, that God created us each uniquely with great diversity in spiritual gifts, passions, natural abilities, personalities, and experiences, and God fit us together as a church so that we could exploit our diversity as we pursued his vision in unity. So each of us pursues God’s vision in our own unique way. We don’t want cookie-cutter Christians! You ever been to a

church like that, where the people all look the same, talk the same, act the same? We don't want that! We want to rejoice in our diversity as we pursue together in unity God's goals for us.

† Let me give you some action steps and we will tie this up.

- ➔[Slide 7: Action 1]◀ First, buy into God's vision for you. Know you are saved by grace, set free from the power of sin and selfishness, and are being transformed by the Holy Spirit into the image of Christ. Know it, then learn to live like it! Learn to live like a citizen of Heaven, a minister of Christ, God's image bearing steward.
- ➔[Slide 8: Action 2]◀ Second, most of us need to stop being complacent. We need to become passionate, exuberant, committed to God's vision and goals for us. When Professor Gordon Gregory was with us in January, he taught on the Great Commission as revealed in Colossians 1. In v.29, Paul used interesting Greek words to convey that he was exerting himself, toiling, struggling, striving to pursue the Great Commission in his life. What's something for which you have exerted yourself, toiled, struggled, strived? Did you accomplish this while watching tv? did you have to get off the couch?
- Paul said he exerting himself, toiling, struggling, striving to pursue the Great Commission in his life, even as he was trusting in God to do the work. In fact, he said he was exerting, toiling, struggling, and striving according to God's power: the way he depended on God was to go out there and do the work, trusting God would bless his efforts with fruitfulness.
- I know it is hard. You are tired, overwhelmed, you have family obligations... in other words, you are turned inward, which we said was wrong. Trust me, there will be real resistance in your flesh to the idea of turning outward. But God does not want us to focus on blessing ourselves. He wants us to depend on him for blessing as we learn to live his way.

† ➔[Slide 9: Action 3]◀ If you buy into God's vision and goals, if you are at least willing to pray that God would help you become excited about pursuing his way of life, then the third step for today is to become more evangelistic, to turn outward as a church and individually as Christ's ambassador.

- For many of us, this is frightening. We might suspect we do not have great skill in conveying gospel truth! When I first learned the bridge diagram approach, I practiced it on my cat at least 100 times. And I still screwed it up the first time I could share it for real, because I was so nervous.
- We might screw up, people might get angry, we might feel awkward, we might find ourselves as an outcast. . . but who is in charge of all that, of all the results? You? no, God. What is your task? To do what God asks, and trust him with the results and everything else.

† I have friends who have led people to Christ going door to door to share the gospel or walking through neighborhoods picking up trash and talking to people or walking up to strangers along the beach. Maybe some of you would enjoy trying something like that!

- Others of you would rather die! That's ok. Some of you are shy or introverted. That's ok. It won't stop God working through you, if you are willing to work. I have other friends who share gospel truth online, they answer apologetic questions or they simply engage with people who do not believe, on line. That's a lot less threatening for them.

- Most of you probably are willing to talk to a person face to face about God’s truth, but it has to be the right situation. That’s ok too. But I ask that you be more intentional about it. First, take the opportunities that arise, do engage in spiritual conversations when you can.
 - Second, be more intentional about making such opportunities possible. How many of us have zero in depth conversations with non-Christians in an average week, about any subject? We need to change that.
 - One way is to become friends with our neighbors and coworkers. Now don’t go into it thinking “I must get them to come over so I can share the gospel!” They’re going to sense that and think you are a nut. No, you just get them to come over. Invite them to supper or to watch the ball game or go with you to a concert. As you build the relationship, you will bless each other as friends at least. And they will sense your character and they will perceive your faith, and God will make opportunities for you to plant seeds, as you live out your faith before them, encourage them in their lives, pray for them, and share truth if the conversation develops that way.
 - The same is true for the people you meet at your child or grandchild’s school events or sporting events. Even at GEMS and CSB, we could have parents who are unchurched.
 - Sometimes you can plant seeds with an encouraging word if you see the store checkout lady is having a bad day or you have a regular waitress or you sit next to someone on the plane. On my plane ride to Florida, I started a conversation with the man next to me by commenting on his hat. It turned out he was going to Florida to attend the same wedding as I was!
 - You can even turn an awkward situation into good. My dental hygienist came to church here... once. Thursday, I saw her for the first time since then. We smiled a little awkwardly at each other. She was spunky enough to ask how the church was doing. I said, “Good. We are attracting some new families, even though we scared you and your husband away.” She said, “No you didn’t.” I said, “Yes we did. It’s ok.” And that led to an hour long spiritual conversation.
 - Another way to reach out is to volunteer in places where non-believers are likely to be. Some of you tutor students at the Point or are involved in the Good News Club in the elementary school. You could volunteer at the pregnancy center or the food cupboard. The PCCO needs people to take calls and other people to help clients find help; and I would love to have a team of people here who would go pray with those people who need help. Surely some of us could do some of that work for Christ!
 - At the very least, you could start praying for lost people, right? I mean, praying on your own, not with them. That’s not too scary. How many of you had people praying for you before you came to Christ? Probably most of us, even if we never knew it. So let’s get on board with God in this. Think of at least five people who do not know Christ and start praying for them regularly. If you can, think of five local people or five people with whom you might be able to start building that relationship, because then God might reveal opportunities to you as you pray. Every believer in this room could at least do this.
- † Our small groups also could be more evangelistic. What if we each had five local people for whom we were praying, and we started praying for them together in small groups and we exchanged lists each week so that at least one other person also was praying for those people all week long?
- And what if in our small groups, we had a social night each month – something fun like a pot luck supper and games or a night out bowling – and we each invited one non-believer to these

fun events? They would get to see Christian fellowship in action, they would get to know more believers, they might grow to be interested in small group or church.

- And what if in our small groups people started intentionally building relationships with each other's list: so when Carol takes her neighbor out to lunch, she also invites LeeAnn. And if LeeAnn hits it off with this other woman, then LeeAnn later invites her to do something together. So now you have two Christians in her life, praying, talking with her, building relationships, witnessing for Christ.

† I had a spiritual mentor, Bob McNabb, who led scores of people to Christ, who built up two successful churches larger than ours in a Buddhist country in just a few years, all through a ministry of multiplying discipleship: he and his team led people to Christ and raised them up to go out and lead others to Christ and raise them up to go out, and so on.

- LeeAnn and I asked Bob once what we could do to be more successful, given that we do not have the spiritual gift of evangelism. How do I know that? Because I know people who do have the gift: they lead people to Christ every week, in coffee shops, on street corners, on the bus, wherever they are God uses them in this way. That doesn't work for me, so what can I do? Bob surprised us by saying he doesn't have the gift either! He just shares as often as he can, and by doing that, he comes across the person who is ready to hear, the person God is ready to bless. It's a numbers game: share the gospel fifty times and you are fifty times as likely to lead someone to Christ as the person who shares only once.
- Bob later wrote a book about the second key to success: doing evangelism in teams, like I mentioned for our small groups. Through his missions agency, Launch Global, he has been using these techniques here in the States to teach people how to do evangelism and to prepare them for missions work overseas. He has teams working in nine US cities now, and every year they have amazing success reaching people for Christ. I hope that sounds intriguing to some of you. We could do this and see this fruitfulness here!

† You can live for yourself, but the cares of this world will be everything to you and they eventually will overwhelm you. Or you can live for God and the cares of this world will diminish in impact, and you will grow to be strong, faithful, content, at peace, even experiencing a transcendent joy. And best of all, you will be walking with God, living his way...