

Focusing our Souls

Closer: Developing a Life with God
March 5, 2017 – Brad Bailey

“But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” - Matthew 6:6

“God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth” - John 4:24 (NLT)

“God is sheer being itself—Spirit. Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration.” - John 4:24 (MSG)

- Spiritual connection is more _____

1 Corinthians 2:9-11 (GW)

“...as Scripture says: “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined the things that God has prepared for those who love him.”¹⁰ God has revealed those things to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches everything, especially the deep things of God.¹¹ After all, who knows everything about a person except that person's own spirit? In the same way, no one has known everything about God except God's Spirit.”

- Spiritual connection is more _____
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We can focus our souls on our life with God as we...

1. Become _____

“The challenge of developing life with God is not as much a matter of busyness as it is a matter of priority and pattern for life.”

2. Set ourselves _____ from other focuses.

3 Allow our minds and hearts to focus on what God has made known in _____ (“General Revelation”) and His _____ (“Special Revelation”).)

“The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship.” - Psalm 19:1 (NLT)

“From the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly observed in what he made.” Romans 1:19-20 (GW)

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” - Psalm 119:105

4. Redirect our focus from our nature and limited position to that of God's nature and unlimited position.

He desires for us to know...

- His Great and Transcendent Nature (eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing nature)
- His Caring Provision (breath, food, etc)
- His Goodness (beauty, justice, etc)
- His Love and Mercy

Lamentations 3:21-23 (ESV)

“...this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”

A daily prayer:

“God, I belong to you.”

“May your will become mine.”

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Intro

Today is an invitation...an invitation to develop a closer life with God.

Tomorrow begins a season of 40 days...that culminates with engaging the greatest act of love that was ever made...and it was made for you. These 40 days...which reflect what has been traditionally known as the season of Lent... **provide a season** to create **some pause...**to **take in this love...**this **sacrifice...**and **for our hearts to respond.**

(It's fitting to be a part of our annual life... because it roots us in the blessing of such love. I think of my parents...every year on the anniversary of their birthdays...and when they left this earthly life...I stop and remember the profound love that rooted my life...their sacrifice...and blessing.)

And it's fitting...that we have **begun a focus for this season...** with a series entitled: **Closer: Developing a Life with God**

I know that some may **fear the idea** of becoming **closer to God...**because they **equate** that with becoming more like a **religious fanatic.**

But the truth is that becoming **closer to God** is **not the same** as **becoming more religious.**

Jesus saw that difference. He understood very clearly that we can only find ourselves when we find ourselves in relationship to God.... And **if we don't find ourselves in God...**we may **find ourselves in religion...** with pride in our own rightness and goodness.

It seems to me that **he is the only guys in the room** who **knows who he is...**and he is the freest of all. And that is the life he calls us into.

He as a human lived in an **ongoing connection...**out of **this center.**

His disciples begin to see...and ask...teach us to pray...and as part of his response...

Explained...

Matthew 6:5-6 (NIV)

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Notice he says...**“When...”** ...not **“if...”**

Having such time in communion with God is not simply some optional part of life.

And he clearly says...there is something personal that you must create. He speaks of those who only pray for show...for the outward. He isn't dismissing communal shared expressions of faith...for we know he prayed in public. But he is challenging what happens when we develop that which is just outward. There must be a personal and private aspect.

“...go into your room, close the door”
> You need focus. [1]

We all know that when you are connecting with another... focus is an essential...but not always easy element. A conversation that where there is not real focus...is never really satisfying. And many a man has been accused at that very problem. We seem to be ADD when it comes to focus.
[1b]

We need focused time with God.

And Jesus goes on...

“...pray to your Father, who is unseen” - **Matthew 6:6**

Now this may seem a little strange to our way of thinking. When we think of focusing on a relationship... we naturally think of doing so with **our eyes**....so we might think...how do we focus on God who is unseen?

I understand that part of us that may think....I wish I could just talk to God like I talk with human lives... and **hear** God like a hear human lives...and feel as easily connected as human life I can see and **touch**. But we are engaging a different dimension of focus.

God is Spirit...and we relate to him as spiritual beings.

We relate to God as spiritual beings... our human spirit before God's Spirit.

As those with physical bodies...we may initially think of such a spiritual nature as a secondary or less “solid” way of relating. We think that what is physical is what is more real... that some sphere of reality is spiritual ...but more **like an optional layer** of our nature to explore of we want. So naturally we think communication is synonymous with words.... ultimate intimacy is sexual... and physical death is the end we should fear.

But I wonder if that doesn't reflect our becoming overly attached to our physical nature. God has described human life bear the very breath of God's Spirit within us. We are spiritual beings. God has revealed the truth is quite different ... God and all that is eternal...is most ultimate and real.

As Jesus said...

“God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth” - **John 4:24** (NLT)

Eugene Peterson's Message paraphrase's it this way...

John 4:24 (MSG)

God is sheer being itself—Spirit. Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration."

Jesus is declaring to us that **not only is God Spirit**, but **our deepest connection is spiritual**.

[2]

If we reflect a little deeper....we begin to realize that **focus is about more than the eyes.**
My eyes can SEE someone.... but not really SEE them.

If we can get beyond our over attachment to our physical nature...and understand that we are also spiritual beings...we can begin to understand that...

Spiritual connection is more transcendent

“Transcendent “ means...

- beyond or above the range of normal or merely physical human experience.
- existing apart from and not subject to the limitations of the material universe.

It's understandable that we are attached to what is physical ...but our current physical nature is limits our connection to how we see someone.... and sharing is bound by the limitations of language and words. **While words can serve us well...** they are **extrapolations of reality.** God never suggests that what is spiritual is anti-rational. We don't engage spiritual reality by trying to empty our minds to discover some mystical special truth...but ...but **spiritual connection does transcend the boundaries** of words and our own human understanding. [3]

As the Scriptures describe...

1 Corinthians 2:9-11 (GW)

“..as Scripture says: “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined the things that God has prepared for those who love him.”¹⁰ God has revealed those things to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches everything, especially the deep things of God.¹¹ After all, who knows everything about a person except that person's own spirit? In the same way, no one has known everything about God except God's Spirit.”

Spiritual connection is more intimate

If we think about it...physical proximity does not simple equal intimacy. Physical proximity does not create the deepest connection.

Who do you feel closer to....someone in the room with you who does not know you...or someone in the other room who you know understands your heart?

There were people who traveled with Jesus, ate with Jesus, and never knew Him...never knew His heart. [4]

Physical presence does not determine closeness of the heart... understanding does.... And that comes by the deeper nature of spiritual presence. [5]

Spiritual connection is more accessible

Not limited to location ...or our senses...or visual setting.

This is “wherever you are” reality.

So many of us have found that God has met us in unusual ways and unusual places. And we are thankful for that.

So developing focused time with God involves focusing our spirits... or what we often think of as our souls...

It may be a bit like the way we think of “**tuning in**” to **unseen signals of a radio**. There are many radio waves in this room. But we can’t hear them because we don’t have receivers to pick them up. Our ears are not tuned to those frequencies.

Like we do with any relationship we are trying to know and engage personally

We can focus our souls on our life with God as we...

1. Become intentional

Connection involves intention.

Illustration: My wife and I... intentional...and adjust...and it transcends feelings.... (we may start distracted... feeling connected or disconnected.

Like any relationship...

“Staying connected ...involves staying current.”

One of the great benefits of **regular church attendance** is that it **forces us to slow down**, even if just for an hour or so, and turn things over to God. Often times we feel more calm, refreshed, and at peace with everything afterwards. But then the hustle and bustle of the week sets in.

The focus we share with a community serves like **an entry into life with God**... a town hall meeting that can lead to a personal meeting.... a meeting with a work team after which we head into our personal tasks.

So it is a **vital part of a weekly schedule**...and the question is what follows in terms of personal focus. How can we **extend focus into our more personal daily rhythm?**

“The challenge of developing life with God is not as much a matter of busyness as it is a matter of priority and pattern for life.”

Anyone can create a few minutes to sit in the morning. Most of us may feel too rushed. But if we are too rushed for even 5 to 10 minutes...we have to recognize that we create the rush.

Habits can help motivate the heart...and in turn...the heart will then help motivate our habits.

- Set a reminder on your smartphone...

You are already living an always connected life... You have already developed a capacity to always already continually in all circumstance connected... **It's this (smartphone)** ... it use to be a thing...attached to a wall.

You have been working for your phone...and now it's time to make your phone work for you. Pull it out...don't pretend you didn't bring it...I just saw you checking your texts / email. Set it for 9am, 12, 3, 6pm – put in as prayer... focus...whatever you want.

We have no idea what we will be doing then.... But we can at least be aware....check in with God.

We are reminding ourselves that God is already there.... Who loves you, and is involved. Tomorrow you will be more intentionally aware of God that you were today.

2. Set ourselves apart from other focuses.

Any relationship that wants to connect meaningfully... realizes they need to not just set apart time...but a place... a space that is focused.

Christ often went to solitary places to pray (see Matthew 14:23; Mark 1:35; Luke 6:12).

He was sleeping in a small room likely with others.

We can all find ways to shut out the noise and put ourselves in a position to hear God. In fact, it's essential.

In essence we are simply choosing what is central...and join the center...by saying **NO**
Knowing involves 'No-ing'

To engage anything...we have to choose not to be engaged in something else. It's not always easy...it wasn't for Jesus...and it won't be for us. It's not a matter of some absolute or rigid structure force into life's activity....it's a general priority and pattern.

And we will grow to discern what distractions are essential and what are not. Some are not distraction....some interruptions to pure time are opportunities to flow with God... and some distractions are deceptive...they are just drama trying to declare an importance that isn't there.

3. Allow our minds and hearts to focus on what God has made known in Creation (“General Revelation”) and His Word (“Special Revelation”).

While God is not reduced and defined by any physical nature...He does says look at what I have done...and that which I have spoken. This includes both creation itself...and the Scriptures... which are a living Word.

Psalm 19:1 (NLT)

The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship.

Romans 1:19-20 (GW)

From the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly observed in what he made.

Jesus... taught us to look at creation...

“Look at the birds of the air...” - Matthew 6:26-27 (NIV) [6]

But to this... God knows that we can only understand in part...that our understanding is dim... darkened... limited. [7]

So God has engaged creation and revealed far more of His nature and will. He has made his will and word known...which is captured in the Scriptures.

Psalm 119:105

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

And as we look to these sources to focus on God, we are able to....

4. Redirect our focus from our nature and limited position to that of God's nature and unlimited position.

Many times we are really just focused on the problem we see...and we “bring it to God”...but “it” is what we really are focused on. We can be prone to bring our problems to God...but more to just see if he really gets how big they are....more than coming to grasp how big he is.

As we shift our focus upon God, we reorient our souls around who and what ultimately rules our world.... and our woes and wills are drawn into the larger reality of His goodness.

He desires for us to know...

- His Great and Transcendent Nature (eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing nature)
- His Caring Provision (breath, food, etc)
- His Goodness (beauty, justice, etc)
- His Love and Mercy

Lamentations 3:21-23 (ESV)

“...this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”

It's important to remember that even when we forget God, He never forgets us! He knows what's happening to us every moment of the day, and He also watches over us.

Closing:

So I want to invite you to consider the next 40 days...as an opportunity to develop and deepen your life with God... with some focused time with God.

We read of how Jesus got up early in the morning and went to a place to pray. It was not an addition to the day...it was the source of makes it really a day.

It is like the oxygen line when suffocating. Now I know that we don't likely actually feel that. But I would suggest that is our problem.

I want to invite us to consider that if our souls could speak to us...they might cry out that we are suffocating ... slowly falling unconscious... and gasping for air.

This week... start by taking 10 minutes ...preferably in the morning...to just shift focus. And I want to suggest **two very simple statements** that can serve to center our souls. Two simple prayers...5 words each.

"God, I belong to you."

"May your will become mine."

I want to invite us to **practice this together**. I want to invite you to relax your body... perhaps place your feet on the floor. Close your eye. Exhale some of the tension within you...the focus your body might have on problems you feel.

Now simply pray: "God, I belong to you." (repeat...slowly)

"May your will become mine."

Notes:

1. Regarding focus, also note:

Psalm 123:2 - We keep looking to the LORD our God for his mercy, just as servants keep their eyes on their master, as a slave girl watches her mistress for the slightest signal.

Colossians 3:1 - Therefore, if you have been raised with the Messiah, keep focusing on the things that are above, where the Messiah is seated at the right hand of God.

1b. Funny video about men not listening to women. –

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1r8rmNFycSg>

2. On John 4:24, the Pulpit Commentary explains this verse by saying "Only the spirit of man can really touch or commune with the Spirit of spirits"

Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges says "God is spirit, and must be approached in that part of us which is spirit"

3. Consider also...

Matthew 16:17 (NIV)

"Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven."

Jesus understood how the Spirit of God would become a teacher...a revealer...who would follow him. As we read in **John 14:26 (NIV)**

"...the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."

And Paul would declare in 1 Corinthians 2:13 (NIV)

“ This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.”

4. As one describes, “Even his disciples would be sobered by how much they had been with him...but had not been as devoted as they thought ... Peter refused to hear of his coming sacrifice... and when he was taken away...he denied knowing him. Only his mother and John were there when he was crucified. So having been with him physically...able to touch him...talk with him....did not establish the most ultimate intimacy. The disciples could touch His flesh and still missed His heart. They walked with Him yet were not good friends to Him in His time of need.”

5. As Brennan Manning notes ...

“The experience of absence does not mean the absence of experience. For example, the soldier in combat who, during a lull in the battle, steals a glance at his wife's picture tucked in his helmet, is more present to her at that moment in her absence than he is to the rifle that is present in his hands.”

Brennan Manning," - The Ragamuffin Gospel," p82

6. Matthew 6:26-27 (NIV)

Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

7. Consider also...

Hebrews 4:12 (GW)

God's word is living and active. It is sharper than any two-edged sword and cuts as deep as the place where soul and spirit meet, the place where joints and marrow meet. God's word judges a person's thoughts and intentions.

Focusing our Souls

Closer: Developing a Life with God
Week of March 5-11, 2017

Home Church Study

This week begins a special season of 40 days that culminates with engaging the greatest act of love that was ever made...and it was made for you. These 40 days reflect what has been traditionally known as the season of "Lent." (The Catholic tradition begins on a Wednesday, called "Ash Wednesday" and then not include Sundays. We have simply chosen a slight variation.) This is a season to honor the suffering of Christ's crucifixion and set aside space for our hearts to respond. As such, we are continuing in our new series entitled, "Closer: Developing a Life with God."

1. If you can recall, describe a conversation you recall in which you or the other person was not really focused on the other.
2. When engaging another person, do you think connection is more a matter of physical focus (visual) or internal focus?

3. Read Matthew 6:5-6 (NIV)

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

What does Jesus imply about the significance of personal time with God?

4. What else stands out to you about what Jesus says?
5. In these words we are reminded that we are able to connect with God "who is unseen" because God is Spirit...and we relate to God as spiritual beings... our human spirit before God's Spirit. As Jesus said very pointedly, "God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24)

As those with physical bodies...we may initially think of such a spiritual nature as a secondary or less "solid" way of relating. We think that what is physical is what is more real... and that while some sphere of reality is spiritual ...it is more like an optional layer of our nature to explore if we want. How might this reflect our becoming overly attached to our physical nature...and the ultimate truth be quite different?

6. Read 1 Corinthians 2:9-11 (GW)

"...as Scripture says: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined the things that God has prepared for those who love him." ¹⁰ God has revealed those things to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches everything, especially the deep things of God. ¹¹ After all, who knows everything about a person except that person's own spirit? In the same way, no one has known everything about God except God's Spirit."

What does this tell us about the nature of spiritual connection?

7. We are encouraged in the Scriptures to allow our minds and hearts to focus on what God has made known in Creation ("General Revelation") and His Word ("Special Revelation".)

We can draw upon the best quality we see in the created world because “God’s invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly observed in what he made.” (Romans 1:19-20) Do you recall an aspect you observed in nature helping you to consider something about God?

8. It has been noted that relational “*connection involves intention*” ...and that “*The challenge of developing life with God is not as much a matter of busyness as it is a matter of priority and pattern for life.*” In what ways do you find this true? How might this be true in our relationship with God?

[Could optionally consider here: It has also been noted that “*Staying connected ...involves staying current.*” How do you experience that challenge...with others...and with God?]

9. In the previous text (Matthew 6:5-6), Jesus said we should seek personal time with God...and we should “go into your room, close the door.” What is place in your schedule and physical location that you can set aside to regularly have some focused time before God?

10. It can help to discover the power of even short but substantial prayers that center us in God. The following two simple prayers are recommended as two prayers which we can pray daily through this special 40 day season...and even multiple times during the day. Take a few minutes to pray these aloud as a group...slowly...and reflectively.

“God, I belong to you.”

“May your will become mine.”