

"FOCUSED ON GOD"

Thinking about this message, I remembered this story of a man who went to a business dinner and took his wife. At one point, a co-worker said, "*Hey, who's the most important person in your life right now?*" He immediately said, "*My sales manager.*" As soon as he said it, his wife looked at him like, "*What did you just say?*" He realized that wasn't the correct answer, so he began back peddling and telling his wife how important she was, but she went home, wondering, *What does he really think? What does he really feel?* I thought of this because while many Christians know that God is supposed to be the most important person in *our* lives, we might wonder sometimes in the push and pull of everyday life, where he really stands in our thoughts and affections.

Last week we saw in the Scriptures this fantastic claim that the way to flourish in life is to make a serious commitment to becoming a fully developed disciple of Jesus. And we introduced this idea of the seven facets to fill out what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

There is an upward look

1. Focused on God
2. Fulfilled in Christ

There is an inward look

3. Biblically integrated
4. Growth-oriented

There is an outward look

5. Ministry-minded
6. Committed to the church
7. Devoted to disciple-making.

This morning we're going to look at the first of the seven facets: ***A disciple of Jesus is focused on God.***

- I. **YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IS THE PRIORITY OF YOUR LIFE AS A DISCIPLE OF JESUS**

The word “focus” means *a central point of attraction, attention, or activity*. To say a disciple of Jesus is focused on God means that God is not an afterthought or an added-on concern to be fit in as other commitments allow. God is central.

A. It was central to Jesus' life and ministry that he continually called people to believe in God.

1. In John 14:1, Jesus says, *Believe in God, believe also in me.*

Jesus' message for the unreligious people of the world is, “*You need to believe in God.*” He has the same message for religious people, “*You need to believe in God.*” For the anxious, the doubters, the discouraged, and the rebellious he says, “*You need to believe in God.*”

It is interesting that the Bible is all about God and our relationship with him, yet the one missing is any attempt to prove God exists. The Bible's perspective is that the reality of God is absolutely evident to those *willing to see*. It's written deep within us, and it is all around us. Creation declares the reality of the creator. The human longing for love and meaning and moral guidance reflects the reality of the personal creator God who made us in His image.

2. According to Scripture, in Romans 1, we humans have an *innate knowledge of God that we suppress because of pride and sin.*

David Berlinski is one of the world's leading physicists. He is an agnostic who leans toward atheism, and yet he points out the arrogance of many modern skeptics. For example, he took issue with Richard Dawkins's book *The God Delusion* and wrote a counterargument titled *The Devil's Delusion*. Here's one little section:

“Has anyone provided proof of God's inexistence? Not even close. Has quantum cosmology explained the emergence of the universe or why it is here? Not even close. Have our sciences explained why our universe seems to be fine-tuned to allow for the existence of life? Not even close. Are physicists and biologists willing to believe in anything so long as it is not religious thought? Close enough. Has rationalism and moral thought provided us with an understanding of

what is good, what is right, and what is moral? Not close enough. Has secularism in the terrible 20th century been a force for good? Not even close, to being close. Is there a narrow and oppressive orthodoxy in the sciences? Close enough. Does anything in the sciences or their philosophy justify the claim that religious belief is irrational? Not even in the ballpark.

I share this for those who struggle with faith and are swayed by skepticism. This is an honest scientist. To him and others like him and to us all, Jesus brings an incredible message affirming the reality of God. The many fulfilled prophecies in the life of Christ vindicate his claims and confirm them. The historical accuracy of the Biblical documents, unrivaled preservation of the text of Scripture, the historical evidence of the resurrection, and the unrivaled impact of Jesus on humanity and history all assure us that Jesus brings a message that is not only spiritually powerful but intellectually compelling for those willing to explore it honestly. Foundational to Jesus' message is the absolute assurance that God is real and the passionate insistence that the life we need to live requires us to not only believe God exists but to place relationship with God at the center of our lives.

B. The centrality of God was central to the message of Jesus.

1. Love for God comes first in the commandments of God. In **Matthew 22:36-38** Jesus was asked: *“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”* ³⁷ *And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”* ³⁸ *This is the great and first commandment.*

2. To centrality of God is the starting point in Jesus' teaching on prayer. We often go to pray because we are burdened. You have concerns, lots of them: daily bread –needs of all kinds, the forgiveness of sins, that person you have a hard time forgiving, the temptation you're fighting, the challenge you're facing. All these things call for your attention but when you go to pray Jesus, in **Matthew 6:9** says, *Pray like this: Our Father in heaven hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. What does it mean*

to pray like that? In the Bible, the name of God is not just a label. It is who he truly is. To “*Hallow*” something means to make it holy or consider it holy, to treat it with reverence. So Jesus tells us that as we begin to pray we should begin with a renewal of our focus on God.

For me this means that unwelcome fears and cares are quieted, self will is subdued a bit at least and there is a peace that comes as you realign your heart with its true center. The needs are still there, and you'll ask God to intervene in them, but first, you pray for God to be glorified, set apart as holy and honored in the world and, more personally, in your life. The Bible encourages us to pray about everything but Jesus teaches us that as we pray about everything, we center our lives on God.

3. Prayer is not just asking God to do things for us. It is about lifting our hearts to God to center our lives on God. In prayer, not just at special times but throughout the day, and when we wake in the middle of the night, we lift our hearts to God. Listen to **Psalm 86:3-5**. It says, *Be gracious to me, O Lord, for to you do I cry all the day.*
*⁴ Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, do I lift up my soul.*⁵ *For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you.* **Verse 4** suggests the soul, the real inner you, can be lifted up or dragged down.

Augustine has a passage in which he asks, “*How can I lift my soul? What ropes or machines are needed? What ladders?*” Then he answers his own question. He says, “*My will is the way I lift my soul. By neglecting God my soul sinks, descends... by loving God I mount the steps that lift my soul. Standing on the earth, I am in heaven if I love God. The body to be lifted up must change its place. The heart to be lifted up must change its will.*”

A devotional book of the fourteenth century, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, says, ‘*On one level we may be ... meeting all the demands of the external affairs. But deep within, behind the scenes, at a more profound level, one may also be in prayer and adoration, song and worship, and a gentle receptiveness to divine breathings.*’

Think of your life like a wheel. The rim constantly moves about in all the different areas, issues, and relationships of your life. The hub is the center: that's the deeper you where you are feeling, forming values, and deciding issues. At the hub of your life, you have a choice: You can be God-centered, or you can be off-center. If we think very little about God, we allow our souls to sink. If you allow thoughts full of unbelief, anger selfish thoughts, and petty thoughts to go unchecked and dominate your inner life, you are not lifting your soul up to God! In **Ephesians 5**, Paul talks about being filled with the Spirit singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord. That's the true image of the inner life of a disciple of Jesus.

For centuries it appeared as if the earth was stationary and the sun moved around it. Then a man named Copernicus proved that what seemed obvious was not true. The earth that was orbiting the sun! That discovery changed our understanding ever since. What Copernicus did to our perceptions of the earth and the sun is what God wants to happen to us in our relationship with him.

Relationship with God is the priority of life for a disciple of Jesus and...

II. RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD HAS TO PREDOMINATE EVERY ASPECT OF OUR LIVES AS DISCIPLES OF JESUS.

A. God's pleasure and glory is our motivation in all of life.

*This is a central themes in Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. 1. **Matthew 5:16-17** Jesus says, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. Why do we do good works? Not to earn salvation but to glorify God our Father! We want to see him honored.*

*2. **Matthew 6:1**, a few verses later, Jesus says, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. This is the other side of the same point. Don't do good to be seen doing good by others. **Verses 2-4** "Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to*

you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Jesus says do not be so focused on the horizontal human dimension, looking to see what others see you doing, focus on God.

3. Matthew 6:22-23 sums it up, *“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, ²³ but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness.* The word “healthy” is the Greek word that also means “single.” If you vision has a single primary focus your whole life will be full of light. **Verse 24** sets the imagery aside and explains the issue. *“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.*

This whole teaching about being God-centered means there doesn't need to be any aspect or area of life unrelated to God. There doesn't need to be and *should not be* a secular un spiritual thread in the tapestry of your life. **1 Corinthians 10:31** *So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*

So we learn to ask God-centered questions: How can I serve God in this place, this season, this hour, situation, or relationship? How can I glorify God in my choices, in how I care for others and how I carry myself? How can I allow the circumstances of life not to distract me from God but to draw me deeper into dependence on God? It is challenging, but it is also meaningful, purposeful, and helpful to live like that. It is what we are made for and it is essential for disciples of Jesus.

B. To place relationship with God at the heart of your life calls for both a decisive commitment and a persistent practice.

Romans 12:1! *I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.* That is a decisive commitment. **Verse 2** is the persistent practice, *Do not be conformed to this*

world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

1. Practical spiritual disciplines are a big part of cultivating a life focused on God. Time alone with God meditating on Scripture, Scripture memory, consistent rhythms of church attendance for worship, fellowship and communion, prayer, sometimes praying to God with no agenda you are asking him to sponsor and no needs you are asking him to meet - just your heart's desire for communion with him. Those spiritual practices help us grow a God-focused life.

2. Ultimately, to live a life focused on God is an issue of the heart. Years ago, I came across an image that I found helpful and powerful. It was roughly based on something C.S. Lewis wrote. He said it is as if human beings are bent out of shape by sin. The Bible's story begins with perfect love at the center of the relationship between God and humanity. The brokenness introduced by sin is a bending, twisting, and warping of what was meant to be. The spiritually healthy posture, the created position before sin and brokenness set in, was upright. A posture of standing erect, face turned upward to God in a listening, speaking, communicating relationship. It was a position of continually receiving your true identity from God and your relationship with him. But as flawed and fallen humans, we have been bent out of shape – bent over toward issues in creation and not the creator Himself. We get trapped in the continual attempt to find our identity and fulfillment in something other than God.

We have to reflect on our lives and humbly accept the lessons we receive from life, God's word, and God's Spirit and from people. If we *want* to know, God will show us how we get twisted toward some person or thing that is not God. It might be money, status, success, sexual prowess, pleasure, security, the affirmation of others, attention, connection, whatever it may be and it may be more than any one thing. We have to continually turn from that thing back to God himself.

If we do not truly place God at the center of our search for identity and fulfillment we will find that even our love is an impure thing full of

selfishness. We will control, manipulate, intimidate, and do all kinds of things to meet that unmet need that only God can ever truly touch. That selfish hunger will tend to taint the otherwise healthy relationships we are designed to enjoy and by which we are nurtured, and God is glorified. The key to spiritual health and true discipleship is simple and profound at the same time. As we see these areas where we are twisted out of shape, as our emotions, temptations, and intrusive thoughts reveal them, we turn again to God as God.

I find I get bent out of shape embarrassingly often. Over and over, I have to renounce the deformed posture and straighten up into the grace-drenched relationship with God. Standing upright in his presence, with an uplifted face and heart wide open to receive his grace and his word of blessing, we find our true identity, healing, and fulfillment in Him.

Conclusion

This kind of relationship with God is only possible because of the God-sent Savior. It is only experienced by those who acknowledge and receive Jesus. In **John 14:6**, *Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me.* God does not just overlook our sins. Our sins separate us from God. You cannot compensate for them or convince a holy and glorious God to ignore them by anything you do or promise to do. You need a Savior. Our only Savior is Jesus. God is infinite and eternal and more mysterious than we can comprehend. He exists as one God but three unified persons, the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. In Jesus, God the Son took on human flesh. Without ceasing to be God, he became one of us in order to save us. He lived a perfect life for us as our champion representing all who come to him and belong to him. He gave himself up as a sacrifice to judgment and death on the cross. In doing that, he satisfied the demands of God's law and justice, paid for our sins, and made the way for our redemption and forgiveness. He offers you an overwhelmingly more than sufficient grace, new life, salvation, forgiveness, eternity, and a relationship with him now. You can't earn it. But you can receive it the instant you turn in repentance and trust in

Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Come to him, trust in him, receive the saving grace he offers, and begin to learn to live a God-centered life.

Amen.

A Prayer for Receiving Christ

Almighty God, You have beautifully revealed your love in Jesus, whose body was broken and whose blood was shed for our salvation. I admit my need for your saving grace. I turn to Christ, the bread of life, and trust in him for my redemption. I believe he died on the cross to pay for my sins and rose again as Lord and Savior. I receive and rest on him alone for my salvation. Grant me the eternal life promised to all who come to him in faith. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

Create in me a clean heart, O, Lord. I relinquish my demanding insistence on following my inclinations and priorities to fully embrace Jesus as Lord. Help me to be a bold and believing God-focused disciple who truly follows Jesus. Empower and sustain me by your Holy Spirit. Guide me with your inspired word. Transform me more and more into the likeness of Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.