

## On Focus and Discipline

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*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. Galatians 2:20*

All Christians want to offer the Lord a more righteous life, and all Christians struggle to do so. Far from license to sin, God's grace in Christ calls us higher. Heavenward. The Bible has many expressions for this upward call on our lives: to let your light shine, to abide in Christ, to practice righteousness, to walk in the light as he is in the light, to bear fruit in keeping with repentance, to walk by the Spirit, to live in a manner worthy of the gospel—to name just a few. (see Matthew 5:16, John 15:4, 1 John 2:29, 1 John 1:7, Matthew 3:8, Galatians 5:16, Philippians 1:27) We are not trying to earn or retain God's favor, which has been freely given in Christ. We are not trying to impress him or to pay him back. Our debt was settled at the Cross. We are just loving Jesus back, the one who gave himself for us, without our eternal souls hanging in the balance. What beautiful freedom we have in Christ! And yet, "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing." (Romans 7:19) It is in our ongoing struggle with sin that the words of Christ are most true: "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Mark 14:38)

The way we advance in the Christian life is the same way we began: always and only by faith in Christ. Faith is never a "one and done" deal. We read in the Scriptures that "the righteous shall live by faith," (Romans 1:17) and "without faith it is impossible

to please him.” (Hebrews 11:6) The Christian life is not an easy way. It is a fight of faith to be won. It is a race of faith to be run. So, the writer of Hebrews exhorts us to always be “looking to Jesus,” (Hebrews 12:2) which is just another expression for the imperative of faith. This is the nature of God’s saving work in our lives as Christ is progressively formed in us. That is the transformation he is after. As the Psalmist says, “He leads me in paths of righteousness for his namesake,” (Psalm 23:3) to places I cannot go without him. Whenever I stumble, I can be sure that in that moment I lost my focus. I took my spiritual eyes off of Jesus.

In my Air Force flying days, there was nothing more exciting than flying fast and low to the ground. Typical low-level runs to target in the F-16 were at 540 knots. When you are that fast and just above the trees and rocks, your focus is not in the cockpit or on what’s immediately below and around your aircraft. Rather, your focus is out front, toward the horizon, several miles ahead, which is where you will be in a matter of seconds. The slightest descent rate, a moment of inattention, and you can turn yourself and your aircraft into a debris field over a mile long. And there are some who have. This “crash and burn” image has been helpful to me in the Christian life. Many sincere believers in Christ, in moments of weakness and temptation, have lost their focus, they have taken their eyes off of Christ, and have turned their lives into a kind of debris field. We are not immune.

Faith is not a respecter of persons. It does not care if you are a pastor, missionary or Bible teacher. Faith is not a respecter of past accomplishments. Being a person of faith is not like having an academic degree, a black belt in martial arts, or a hall of fame induction. There are no individual laurels to rest on in the Christian life. As one of my friends says, “We are one step from stupid, all the time.” This brings up the question, “How much do we really change as Christians?” Paul says, “For I know that nothing

good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out." (Romans 7:18) It is certain that in our sinful natures, or what Paul calls the flesh, we do not change at all. I am old now, but I still struggle with everything I struggled with as a young man. "But I thought we were new creations?" (see 2 Corinthians 5:17) We most certainly are, but the new creation is Christ in us! Therefore, we have our sinful natures and Christ, and we run our race along a cliffside, one step from stupid all the time. Who is able to keep us from falling? Who is able to keep us from crashing and burning? Only moment-by-moment trust and dependence on Christ will carry the day. He never stops being our Savior, the one we should always look to. He is at the same time our reason, our example and our power. He is everything to the Christian, and apart from this understanding we are more than severely handicapped in running our race. We bring nothing but weakness to the table. If it is going to be, it must be Christ in and through me!

Of course, we do not always get this right, and we can be grateful for the words of the apostle John: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9) Do not take this verse to mean that every time we sin we fall out of God's grace until we confess our sins and are saved once again. The Bible clearly teaches that salvation is not by works, but by God's grace through faith in Jesus. (see Ephesians 2:8-9. Galatians 2:16). If we could lose what we never earned to begin with, and lose it over and over again, how could God call that *salvation*? Instead, understand this verse as God's gracious way of saying that he does not expect his people to be perfect. He is after progress in the faith, not perfection. Some Christians, myself included, need to hear that. He knows we are weak. He knows how necessary the Cross was for our sake. He knows we live one day at a time, and we sin one day at a time. So, in victory, we give him all the credit and glory. And in defeat, we

humble ourselves before God in confession and repentance, we let it remind us of the gracious nature of our heavenly Father, and we keep going. David's words are instructive:

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! ... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me ... Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit ... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. Psalm 51:1-2, 10, 12, 17*

We should be reminded that true confession is an expression of genuine sorrow for sin. It was for our sins that our Lord Christ suffered and died. Have we lost this response of sorrow and regret for sin? Have we become hardened to it? Yet this is how God restores our joy. This is how we get back on the vine. (see John 15:5) This is how we make right our relationship with God. Someone might ask, "How often should this be done, or with what frequency?" As in any personal relationship, we know when things are not right between us, and this is true of our relationship with God. We should keep short accounts or short lists of unconfessed sin, and "clean the slate."

Confession then is the faithful response that pleases God when we mess up, and here's the beauty in it: confession keeps us humble, dependent, looking to Christ. We become less judgmental, less self-righteous, more like Christ. Isn't it true that when we are honest about our own sin, we become more patient, understanding and supportive of others who also struggle, but perhaps in ways that are different and more public? The church at large must be this way, and not just in recovery ministry. Each of us

struggles in different ways, and each must be encouraged to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (Philippians 2:12-13) I will always marvel at how gently Jesus handled people who knew they were sinners: “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? ... Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.” (John 8:10-11) Jesus always calls his people upward into righteousness, without condemnation.

I know there will be some who say something to this effect: “I get that I’m to keep my spiritual eyes on Jesus, that trusting him is the only way forward, but what does that look like? Is there anything that I should actually be doing to exercise or follow through with my faith in Christ?” I will not attempt a full treatment of the practices of the Christian faith or what some call the spiritual disciplines. Entire books have been devoted to the subject. But I can offer a starting place.

*Stay connected to Jesus’ Word.* We are bombarded by so many errant voices and messages in the world, all vying for our attention, all trying to outdo the other. I have people in my life who I care deeply for, and I can see that much of the distress and anxiety that they carry comes from listening to the wrong voices. But there is only one voice we must hear. Our good shepherd says, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” (John 10:27) Peter declared, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God.” (John 6:68-69) Aren’t you glad that God made sure that his Word was written down through his apostles and prophets, and then preserved and translated through the centuries by faithful followers? The Bible’s primary message, the gospel of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, is the interpretive key that unlocks the Scriptures

to us. This message has power to save, and with great implication over our lives. We read it, study it, meditate on it, and submit ourselves to it.

*Stay connected to Jesus' people and Jesus' mission.* Fighter aircraft are employed in formation: multiple aircraft working together to accomplish the mission and to protect each other. We call it *mutual support*. As I recall my experience in combat, we had the priority of mission, which in this context was the destruction of our target, and the priority of bringing everyone home. Everything else was irrelevant. In much the same way, the body of Christ has the great commission of making disciples, life-long learners and followers of Christ, and we enjoy a unity in love and purpose the world is unfamiliar with. In the church you will find people, imperfect and broken as they are, who you can worship with, learn with, serve with. In the church, you will find people who will encourage you in the faith, who will understand you and still love you, who will hold you accountable. When you love someone, you don't let them do stuff that's bad for them. In the church, you will find people who will help you change your community if you have been hanging out with the wrong crowd. In the church, you will find people who will pray for you. We cover each other's "six," and we do it with prayer. It is warfare after all, and none of us is strong enough to "lone-wolf it." Follow your leader, and do not break formation.

The most finished Christians I know keep their spiritual eyes on Christ by these disciplines. They build their lives on his Word. They stay attached and accountable to his people. They stay busy and productive for the cause of Christ. Though life is hard, they know the purpose of his mission and glory, they know peace in the trial and storm because he is with them, they know the protection and provision of a good shepherd who knows how to care for his flock, they know the joy of being on the receiving end of his saving love and grace, they know the fellowship and support of the saints, they

know the hope of heavenly treasure and glory beyond the grave, they know the limitless store of his wisdom and strength, they know a yoke that is easier and a burden that is lighter as they trust in him, they know spiritual blessings and promises innumerable in Christ. They know life as it was meant to be lived. They know life that is truly life.

*I lift my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. Psalm 121:1*