

Distractions

“Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is” (Ephesians 5:15-17).

God has given us the gift of life for *His* purposes, not ours. We are not free to live as we please but according to the will of our Father in heaven. The problem we have with this fundamental concept is complex (and we’ve discussed many of the factors that it involves in previous Sunday School lessons), but one of the most important things we need to understand in order to fulfill the above verse in our own lives is the absolute necessity to avoid distractions.

Monks during the so-called “dark ages” [they were not dark!] were acutely aware of the problem of distractions. They placed an exceedingly high priority on meditation on Scripture and on prayer. What was hateful to them were all the things that distracted them from that godly pursuit. They put a high premium on self-control to stay on mission and to avoid all that distracted them. Distractions, they said, “incapacitated them,” meaning that distractions blocked them from what they regarded as the purpose of life. They believed that distractions were brought into their lives by demons in order to keep them from knowing God and His will. They memorized Scripture and reflected long on it, and they prayed long. In this way, they sought to experience the presence of God in their lives.

Western civilization today is monstrous. We have a culture that is immense beyond the wildest imagination of any monk or indeed anyone who lived in the medieval era. Sports, politics, the latest news, music and concerts, movies, innumerable forms of entertainment, staying connected with others on social media, shopping, games, guns, pets, hobbies, social events, reading books, church activities, restauranting, and lots more. The availability of the internet with smart-phones has added a whole new layer of distraction to modern life. Another huge distraction is owning a nice home, which necessitates constantly cleaning and maintaining it. We get distracted also with such issues as “wokeism” and Marxism, and sexual sins, and lots of other issues. Such matters as these are what pagans are concerned with; it’s all they have in life. Other than being aware of current trends, there’s nothing for a believer to gain by being occupied with or brooding over such matters; such issues also only distract.

It’s possible that modern American Christians actually spend their entire days, day after day, in a state of total distraction. We are not making the most of the opportunity that God has given us, that is, this present life. Instead of making our life count for Christ, we are foolishly totally wasting our lives.

What I’m here calling distractions are not necessarily immoral. It’s important, for example, to be aware of current events. And a recreational break can help us to be more productive in whatever we’re doing that’s important to us. But all these *are* immoral if they cause us to waste our time. When Paul writes “make the most of every opportunity,” I think he intends for us to think carefully about what we do with God’s gift of life, whether we’re spending our time for Christ or indulging our sin natures.

We need to be discerning about this. Yes, Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). And, “If the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:36). But this does not mean that we’re free, as Christians, to enjoy all that life and culture make available. The “life” that Jesus puts abundantly on offer is His own resurrection life, life that is to be lived unto God. And the freedom that’s in Christ is being free from bondage to sin and religious rituals and traditions. We’re NOT free to pursue a self-indulgent life according to our desires and values.

Attending church services on Sunday cannot atone for an otherwise wasted life, nor does it satisfy a demanding God. The commandment given to us is, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul and might.” We’re to be *totally* committed to God, loving Him (in all the ways that biblical love entails) with our entire being, our entire life. Distractions are one of the greatest enemies to the Christian life that we can encounter.

Two of the main reasons we fail to identify what I call distractions as distractions is as follows: (i) What I’m calling “distractions” are universally accepted as innocuous components of American life, acknowledged by almost everyone to be “neutral,” that is, they’re regarded as neither immoral nor with any negative “religious” meaning. What’s wrong with going to a symphony concert? Or shopping around for a better winter coat, or checking the latest news several times a

day on the internet? The answer everyone will shout is, “Nothing!” And so, hey, there are no distractions after all, just normal, modern American life. We are so immersed in our world and so used to it that we can’t possibly see anything wrong with using and enjoying all that’s available. *Except that . . . nothing in the world (or in life) is “neutral.” Nothing.* We live in God’s creation, which means that everything has to be referred to Him for value or for meaning. We belong to Him and we live moment by moment in His presence. That means we must be discerning about what we do, what we use, how we spend our time, what occupies our minds, etc. Our goal, after all, is to please God, not to please ourselves.

And (ii), we American Christians have lost our sense of purpose. At some point in our life we’ve made a decision to follow Christ. But most American believers are still—maybe decades later—living their lives as if back at the moment when they first received Christ. There’s been little or no fundamental change in how we live or what we are. We’ve added a veneer of Christianity to our lives, information about the Bible, for example. But our righteousnesses aren’t really that much different from those of our unsaved neighbors. And our character and our identity have changed little if at all. We’ve no sense of being sojourners and pilgrims passing thru this world on mission for Christ. We know Ephesians 2:8-9, yet totally miss the very next verse, Ephesians 2:10, “. . . **created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.**” We are saved *for a purpose*, to accomplish something important to Him. Salvation, in other words, is not an end in itself, as we suppose, but an entry into something greater. I suspect most of us in the Church have no idea what that is. So our lives are purposeless. And so we don’t recognize distractions as distractions.

I don’t think we’ve really grasped what it means to follow Christ. Jesus challenges us with this, **“Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple”** (Luke 14:27). And then He added this, **“Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple”** (14:33). We classify these verses as some of the “hard sayings” of Christ and so promptly ignore them, or somehow explain them away. Anyone carrying a cross was about to be in agonizing pain and then dead within just a few hours; that person is hardly distracted by all that his culture puts before him! Jesus really expects His followers to love Him with all their being, and to understand that what He sends us to do is the very most important thing in the world to do. Jesus said, **“Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing”** (John 14:12), which is inviting people into the Kingdom. (And see *especially* John 20:21.)

Paul understood what following Jesus meant by these “hard sayings.” Paul’s life was purposeful, committed to doing the will of God, however hard such a life was for him. And Paul repeatedly tells us that we’re to imitate him. In 2 Timothy, Paul gives 3 examples of the types of people who live deliberately avoiding entanglements with distractions: soldiers, athletes, and farmers (2:3-7). And then he adds this, **“Reflect on what I am saying.”** So let’s reflect: We’re to be single-minded, self-disciplined, and diligent in carrying out Christ’s mission. And so Paul enjoined contentment on believers: **“Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that”** (1 Timothy 6:6-8). Paul was satisfied with all that Christ had done for him. He needed nothing else to make life enjoyable. Neither should we.

Dear reader: If you’re a believer in Christ, this present existence is only temporary and preliminary. It’s the one that’s coming after our resurrection that will be eternal and filled with blessing. And *that* is when we’ll be rewarded for the kind of life we live now and the kind of person we are now. We need to be totally gripped by this understanding and live accordingly. Unbelievers know nothing of this; all they know is to seek happiness and enjoy all that the world puts on offer. Unbelievers’ lives are filled front to back, top to bottom, with what I call distractions because their lives have no meaning or grand purpose. But we must not live like unbelievers! What unbelievers do with their lives is pure foolishness. May we, however, be wise and understand the will of the Lord.

We don’t need to retreat and hide behind the walls of a monastery to escape distractions. That would be exactly the wrong thing to do. And it wouldn’t work anyway. Rather, we need to do 3 things: (a) exercise the will to live unto the Lord, as He has revealed we’re to live, and not for oneself; (b) nurture continually the awareness that we have a new identity in Christ and we’re on mission, viz, Gospel outreach and pursuing personal purity; and (c) rely on the Holy Spirit’s gift of self-control so that we can say “No” to the stream of distractions that constantly assault us, and “Yes” to the will and guidance of the Spirit. We’ve been chosen **“to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last”** (John 15:16). May we be faithful in living out the Word of God, to the glory of God.