

Focus Up

Is it easy for you to become distracted? Maybe some of you even distract yourself intentionally, like when a preacher is about to begin and you suddenly realize you have some mental business to take care of for the next fifteen minutes. Distractions come easily in our world, as fast-paced and overstimulated as it is. We're expected to multi-task, to operate with speed yet efficiency. We've become *so addicted* to distraction that it's like we have forgotten how to slow ourselves down, so now we have to pay people to help us slow down and focus on the present moment.

Distractions in life aren't fundamentally bad. Sometimes they are even necessary, like when life gets too emotionally difficult, and we need a mental break. But sometimes, distractions prevent us from going deeper in life, prevent us from taking stock of the state of the world, the state of our own life, the state of our own soul. We can miss life-changingly important things when we have our faces buried in whatever it is that has held us back, that has kept us from truly becoming who Jesus Christ is calling us to become.

But we wouldn't be the first to be distracted by the allure of the world. So, too, were his disciples. Here is Jesus with the disciples, passing through Galilee. As he often did, he was teaching while they walked. His teaching, however, was different than usual. It wasn't about the New Morality, or the Law of Love. It wasn't a teaching about the best way to evangelize and make disciples of all the nations. No, it was a teaching about his upcoming death and resurrection. It was a teaching about what would become the single most important moment in human history, when Jesus of Nazareth died on a cross, the fullness of God sharing in our pain and embracing the totality of the human condition.

Were the disciples listening, though? Obviously not, because if they were listening to that profound and shocking teaching, they wouldn't have been arguing. And perhaps arguing would have been acceptable if they were arguing about interpretation. "What could the Master mean by this?" But no, they weren't arguing theology. They were arguing about who was the greatest among them. The greatest! While their Master was talking about his upcoming death, the disciples were locked in a contest of superiority. In their distraction, they missed the most profound and powerful teaching that had yet to be found on the face of the earth. Because they weren't listening, they made light of the very means by which the whole world would be saved.

Realizing what had happened, Jesus taught them once again. Right out of the gate, he confronted them with the hardest truth first: "*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.*" Which is to say, there *are no* greats in the kingdom of God. We are all in this together. But more than that, more than resting on the laurels of equality, he humbled them. He forced them to slow down and ponder the deeper meaning of life. Not life after, not who was going to sit next to Jesus in heaven. Not who would hold the keys to the kingdom when all was said and done, and Jesus had put the world to rights. He forced them to think about how to make life matter *now*, in this present moment, taking advantage of the one life we have to live.

What was so important to Jesus? What values mattered most? We see it in what kind of life Jesus called his disciples to live. He called them to privilege the needs of others, to prefer their success to our own, to help them thrive before we position ourselves for success. He called them to love with a wild passion, a love that would lead him to the cross and might have led them there too. He called them to really and truly empty themselves and take up his sacred mission, a mission that came to its fruition on a Roman cross. This was as hard a teaching then as it is now because that's not how the world works, nor is it how we are taught to live.

But, nevertheless, he went further. Not just a lecture on servanthood. He brought in a child. “I am found here,” he said. This is yet another scandal from the mouth of Jesus. Children had such little social standing in 1st Century Palestine that to equate welcoming the child with welcoming the Messiah was almost incomprehensible. Imagine the confusion from the disciples. Imagine the anger, even. They were arguing about who had the greatest social standing, and Jesus upended the whole idea of social standing right before their very eyes. It’s not about what we do and achieve, Jesus says. It’s not about clinging to the world’s ideas of what is important and praiseworthy. If we hold only to the ideals of success and stature as the world holds them, then the communities that claim the name of Jesus would become places only for the elegant and elite. If our imaginations are so formed by the world’s view of what kind of person is important, then we miss out on one of the most radical aspects of the Gospel: everyone is equal and must become like a child. Unassuming. Curious. Not distracted by the superficialities of life.

Isn’t this the message of the Cross? Isn’t this what Jesus died for? A world of equals, a world where there is no land in shadows, a world where the Cross of Christ compels his followers to love the world with a ferocious, self-giving love that has the power to set the world ablaze. Be not distracted by the shallow passings of a selfish world. Claim the Cross of Christ as your guide, your Northstar, and be like a child, humble in the face of divine mystery. Walk with purpose through this world, for you indeed are burdened with the glorious purpose of transforming the world in the name of and for the sake of Jesus of Nazareth. The very same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead has filled your lungs and given you the opportunity to join Jesus in working wonders for the world! Take hold of your destiny, and let’s see what God decides to do through you.