

Once Again, No Distractions

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JACK WAS DOUR THROUGH THE FIRST PART OF lunch, and it played itself out in an unusual silence. Not being all that comfortable with silence, I filled the void with nominally interesting chatter, hoping Jack would finally get around to telling me why he was buying me this very rare lunch. As administrator for one of the region's largest medical centers, Jack was on the go 24/7. It took months of wrangling and the patience of Job to get our calendars in synch long enough for a sit-down conversation. When his assistant called asking me to have lunch with Jack the same week, I knew it was something important to him.

So far, though, the lunch had produced nothing except a nagging awareness that Jack was getting bored with the small talk. I decided to cut to the chase.

"Jack, why are we here?"

Even this direct approach brought a look of disapproval, but he finally blurted out, "You people are so inefficient!" I think the surprise on my face softened him up a bit, because there was just a hint of a smile before he continued. "Well, maybe not you, but pastors and people like you. No, even you." He sure had my interest. "Don't stop there," I said, "I'm all ears."

"Look, what I mean is this: It isn't enough that we give money to the church, or money to your ministry. It isn't enough that we attend the services or events like your breakfasts. Now you want me to be an elder! Well, okay, maybe not you exactly, but you know what I mean, you *church people*."

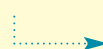
"Jack," I replied, "first, you *shouldn't* be an elder. You shouldn't even be a Sunday School teacher. We've talked about this before, and we both agree you've got more need being taught about faith than teaching it right now. So what's the problem?"

"The problem," he said, "is that my church has asked me to be an elder, and if I say no, I'll be the only business person not to accept the honor." "But Jack," I protested, "you don't have the time to do the job the way the Bible says you should, and in your present state, you don't have the spiritual requirements either."

He bristled at the last statement. "I think you're wrong. In fact, I think it would do the church some good to have a level-headed business person on the Board of Elders for a change. Goodness knows the church could use a bit of streamlined efficiency and business savvy. Maybe I'm just the person to give it! Are you suggesting I'm not a good enough Christian?"

Now Jack was arguing out of both sides of his mouth. On the one hand, he resented the pressure he felt to go someplace he wasn't gifted to go; and on the other hand he resented the suggestion that if he went there that he wouldn't do a good job.

What would you say to him?



Scripture Passages

Luke 4:1-13

Mark 11:1-11

Matthew 26:47-56

Introduction

From the first moment we began this series, we learned the reason we exist is to be in fellowship with God. Our value rests in that relationship and not in what we do. However, once we understand that, the next thing we must learn is that God expects us to be busy doing His work, and that includes tending His creation in the careers we choose, or the jobs that are thrust on us.

In fact, the Creation account in Genesis teaches us that as human beings God assigns us to care for the world (see Genesis 1:26-31; 2:15; 2:19-20).

While the reason we exist never changes, the central mission God has for us changes often through the seasons of our careers and lives. Clarifying that mission keeps us focused. But it's learning to say no to distractions that makes us effective in the accomplishment of the mission of the moment. It also enables us to keep hold of the truth that only what we do in the context of relationship with God matters.

In Depth

During the account of Jesus' temptation in Luke 4, Satan uses three strategies to lure Jesus away from His central mission. (Remember, we learned in lesson one of this series that the central mission in Jesus' earthly life was erasing sin as the barrier between us and God.) In Luke 4:1-4, what strategy is Satan using?

Can you think of parallels in your own spiritual and professional journey, times when physical need so consumed you that you could think of little else? Describe them here.

Now read verses 5-8. What appeal is Satan making in these verses?

How would yielding disrupt Jesus' mission?

Again, describe some temptations like this that appear in your life and career, when the applause or admiration of others is a primary focus or objective for you.

What do you think Satan is trying to do in verses 9-13?

Think of times in your own life when you've wanted to, or actually did, test God's faithfulness. Describe those times here.

Why would it have been wrong for Jesus to submit to Satan's suggestion in verses 9-13?

How does testing God change our relationship with Him?

How would you answer this question from other people: “If God is who He says He is, then why doesn’t He answer my prayers.” (*Maybe it’s you asking that question.*)

Since we exist is to be in relationship with God, everything we do must be measured in terms of its effect on that relationship. In this passage, Satan is about to give up on Jesus, but He tries one more tactic to get Jesus to obey his instructions. Compare the words of the serpent in the encounter with Eve to the words Satan uses here. The idea in both instances is to get the human to challenge and test God—in other words, to turn the relationship upside down, making the servant the one pressing or making demands of the Master.

How does Jesus fend off these approaches? (Hint: note the frequency of the phrase “It is written...”)

Assuming Jesus wasn’t carrying scrolls around in the desert, what does this mean about how He came to know “what was written...”? What principle does this offer us in knowing when to say no?

Because we exist to be in relationship with God, we must seek to know God by knowing what He has revealed to us about Himself. This knowledge is located in the Bible, and there is no way to know God intimately unless you know His Word. There is also no way to resist the temptations that life—and Satan—lay at our doorsteps if we aren’t equipped with an ever-increasing knowledge of the Bible.

No matter what you hear anywhere else, it is not possible to be a useful and mature follower of Jesus Christ—and therefore, it is not possible to have a meaningful relationship with God—unless you read the Bible regularly. There are no cheat sheets or shortcuts.

Recognizing that Satan is always looking for an “opportune time” (the phrase that appears in the NASB version of 4:13), what things might he be using right now to distract you from your own central mission? List them below.

Now review the account of the Triumphal Entry in Mark 11: 1-11. How does the “roar of the crowd” tempt us to change our mission?

What “crowds” are roaring in your ears, tempting you away from your central mission?

Notice that Jesus resists the urge to “pump up the crowd” or to bask in the adulation being offered Him. Why do you think this is true?

In fact, in verse 11 we see Jesus’ humility and His willingness to withdraw to a quiet place instead of prolonging the moment of triumph. What kind of a reaction would you expect from another human being? How would *you* respond to such attention?

When our labors bring us attention and adulation, how might that attention and adulation alter the primary reason we exist (which is to be in relationship with God)?

Now look at Matthew 26:47-56. In this passage we see Jesus being defended by a bold Peter. What pressure might Peter’s courageous action put on Jesus to change His mission?

Can you think of parallels in your own life when doing what’s right seems rude or insensitive to well-meaning acts of others? Describe them here.

Jesus used His knowledge of Scripture to fend off Satan's attempts to distract Him from His mission. How do spiritual disciplines equip us to do the same?

How much time do you spend in Scripture each week?

Being in fellowship with God is the reason we exist. To be in fellowship with God we must know Him. To know Him we must read His Word. And in knowing His Word we have the tools necessary to sort out the distractions that tempt us to chase meaningless goals, symbolic trophies, and the applause of others.

Common Sense and Eternal Principles

- While being in relationship with God is the reason we exist, that relationship is played out against the backdrop of His Creation. Part of His design for us was to work even as we enjoy fellowship with Him.
- The idea that there is one perfect will for each of us is not consistent with Scripture. While God certainly does call out some of His children to perform specific tasks (Moses, Jonah, Paul, for example), what He calls most of us to is a life of faithfulness. When our heart's desire is to be faithful, He blesses our efforts with a constant awareness of His presence, even in moments when things are not going well.
- Even when God calls us to a specific task or career, it is often only for a season.
- That said, when we find ourselves in the place where God wants us, we must protect ourselves against the temptation to be distracted from our central purpose in that season.
- Success can often be a distraction itself, because we begin to believe we are responsible for our successes.
- To know God we must know His word. To know how God wants us to behave while doing His work, we must understand and apply His word.