

People spend a lot of time in life doing things that they think matter most. That's not to say that everything we do is or should be serious, but there are some important times in our lives when God passes something by us that He wants us to pay attention to. I think God does this occasionally so we remember to focus on what really matters in life, because we oftentimes get so distracted in life that we can miss things that are right in front of us. I want to talk a bit today about some people in the Bible who were laser-focused on things that seemed good on the surface, but didn't ultimately matter. They were so focused on these things that they completely missed the message God put right in front of their faces. I want to talk about the Pharisees of Jesus' time, what they got wrong, and how we can instead focus on what God wants us to focus on so that we don't miss things that He's trying to show us.

John 11:45-53

What did the chief priests and Pharisees care about?

- Their place/temple
- Their nation
- Translations differ on the exact phrasing, but the basic gist is that they were worried about their holy place and their civil authority

What was the problem with that?

- All of what they were worried about came true! But they were powerless to stop it. Even after killing Jesus, it all still happened. But what I find interesting is that they missed the reason why it was going to happen, because they actually could have prevented it.
- Let's look at what they were worried about.
- Their first worry was that everyone would start following Jesus instead of looking up to them.
 - This is the sort of thing that the world chases after. Just recently, the video streaming site Netflix posted its earnings report for Q1 2022. For the first time ever, they had a decrease in the number of active subscribers. Everyone's reaction was complete panic. The stock started tanking, the company started

laying off entire branches of employees to try to cut costs, all because this number that was "supposed" to go up and had always gone up went down instead. Which is silly, because if you think about it, that number couldn't go up indefinitely anyway. You can't expect to keep growing a userbase forever; you eventually just run out of people.

- But this is a typical worldly mindset: That numbers have to constantly grow, that attendance has to constantly increase, that sales have to grow larger. Sure, God blesses people. One of the first blessings He gave to Adam and Eve was "be fruitful and multiply." But don't conflate blessings with commands.
- Compare this to God's approach with Gideon: He told Gideon that his army was too large, and culled it twice just so Israel knew that their Savior was God and not some army they managed to scrounge together.
- Compare also to John the Baptist's response to his disciples when told that his followers were leaving to follow Jesus instead. John the Baptist wisely said "He must increase, I must decrease".
- Compare also to Jesus' own teachings in John 6:53-67, where He intentionally drove away those He knew weren't taking their belief in Him seriously.
- Ultimately, God cares about quality of people, not quantity.
- The Pharisees' second worry was that their temple would be destroyed.
 - The Romans eventually came and destroyed the temple. It hasn't been rebuilt since.
 - In Ezekiel 10 we're told a vision about the glory of the LORD departing from the temple. I'm convinced that He never came back, and the Israelites kept worshiping there without even noticing He was gone.
 - I think the main problem was that the temple to them was an idol that kept their focus from God instead of directing it towards Him.

- Their third worry was that their place of authority would be removed from them.
 - I don't know about you, but I don't know any of their names, aside from the ones that are named in Scripture. Like all other rulers before and after them, their time of authority came to an end. The only authority that lasts is a heavenly one, and they were focused on their earthly authority, which is now long gone.
- Their fourth worry was that the Romans would come in & that the nation of Israel would perish.
 - On the surface this seems like a good thing to be worried about; Israel is the apple of God's eye. They wanted to protect that.
 - The Romans were a threat to the nation of Israel! They weren't treating them well, there was a constant pressure to be taken over entirely, they worshiped foreign gods, they killed innocent people, they taxed the Israelites unfairly... the list goes on.
 - But what were they missing by worrying about this?
 - They were missing that God had promised their forefathers that Israel would never die out! Were they not trusting God at his word?
 - They were missing that God had saved Israel from many similar situations before! Did they lack faith that it could happen again?
 - They were missing that God had sent prophets many times before to tell Israel that invaders would come if they did not turn and repent! Did they forget why God allowed people to invade in the first place?
 - If they were really worried about the Romans invading, their first order of business should have been to seek justice and the love of God. That was the key underlying message that all of the prophets preached.
 - Micah 6:8 - After describing all the sin in the land, after prophesying the exact kinds of things the Pharisees were worried about (nations coming in and overtaking Israel, mistreating and killing its people, scattering them to the four winds), Micah gave them an ultimatum and told them how to

avoid this fate: He said to “Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.”

- What did the Pharisees do? The exact opposite!
- Instead of acting justly, they sought injustice: They conspired to murder someone for simply speaking against them. Their farcical trial against him later showed they cared nothing for true justice at all.
- Instead of loving kindness, they exemplified unkindness: A few chapters back in John 9, a man who had been blind his entire life was miraculously healed. What did they do? They interrogated him, they cross-examined him and his family, and finally threw him out of their presence when he so much as uttered a contrary point of view. There was no celebration with the man that had been healed; the last thing they said to him was even an insult: “You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!”
- Instead of walking humbly with God, they walked arrogantly with each other: You always see them skulking around in groups. Calling meetings together, conspiring to do nasty things to other people, complaining to authorities above them, and beating down any of them that tried to stand out and not conform to their collective hivemind. None of them showed humility, aside from one or two that slipped away to talk to Jesus in secret. You don’t see any indication that they did much to show they cared about God at all, aside from outward appearances.

So those were all their concerns, at least as they stated them. What did they do about it?

- They conspired to kill Jesus
- They even conspired to kill Lazarus just a short bit later in John 12:9-11
 - This part always amazes me, since Lazarus had already been raised from the dead! Did they think the miracle was fake? Did

they think he'd stay dead if they killed him again? I really want to know what they were thinking.

- They missed God's message so entirely that they resorted to murder.

So how are we like them, and what can we do to avoid it?

What are our worries?

- Are we worried about our nation?
 - Unlike Israel, we have no promises from God!
 - In fact, if I read the book of Revelation correctly (which I may not be, I'm no prophet), but it sure looks like America isn't in there! If it is, it probably doesn't play as important of a role as we think it does.
 - Do we delude ourselves into thinking America is some last bastion of God's holiness upon this blighted planet? Because if so, that's wrong; that's what Christ's Church is, not some manmade country. This "Church" is all of God's people from every tribe, language, and nation.
 - Do we delude ourselves into thinking that God somehow needs the United States in order to enact His sovereign plan? That He's weak and incapable of fending for Himself? That despite creating the entire world and raising and destroying nations throughout all of history, that this one tiny landmass is somehow imperative that it be in some indistinct form that it never was in before in order for God to be able to do His job?
 - God doesn't need our nation. If he chooses to use it for His purposes, great. If He chooses to destroy it for His purposes, that's also great. What matters in the end is that His Name is glorified. It doesn't matter *how* that happens. The way in which He glorifies His name is not up to us.
- Are we worried about the longevity of our religion?
 - How is that our responsibility?
 - Are we so prideful that we think it's up to us?
 - I'm not saying that we should sit back and let nature run its course rather than witnessing to those around us, but we don't need to worry about the big picture gameplan about where

Christianity is headed, because that's not our area of authority unless God has given it to us.

- What *is* all of our area of authority is loving our neighbor as ourselves; a lot of Jesus' teachings, like the entirety of Matthew 5, are about interpersonal relationships and how we love others.
- Think of it this way: If God can create the world, and can then save us from the sin we brought into the world, don't you think He's big enough to take care of the Good News that He Himself started? He's the One Who did all the things that caused the Good News to happen at all! That's not to say we shouldn't spread the Good News, but we don't have to worry about it ever dying out. That's in God's hands, not ours, and it's prideful of us to think we can do anything to help it out other than what we've been told to do.
- Are we worried about our church?
 - Let's talk about Elijah. Elijah was a prophet who was worried about other people following God.
 - I always thought of prophets as some sort of job contractor for God. You don't have any work until God comes along and tells you what to do, then you do it and then go on your way until He gives you something else to do. At least that's what it seems like from the Old Testament prophets.
 - I work for a company where we do contract work. There's people in our company whose entire job is to just try and get more contracts. They reach out to various offices, find things that are coming down the pipe, try to meet needs the customers have, pitch ideas, and ultimately try to get the people with money to sign a deal where they pay us to do work for them. If there isn't enough work, the work pipeline stalls out and ultimately the company either shrinks or goes belly-up.
 - God doesn't work this way, at least not from what I see in the Old Testament prophets. He gives them something to do, they do it, then he gives them something else. If I were them I'd say something like "Hey God this is a nice gig and all but could you

give me some kind of itinerary or schedule so I know what's coming down the pipeline next? Like, tell me what to do a week ahead of time so I can plan everything out and rent the donkey I need to travel to Bethsaida because during rush hour it's hard to find a donkey if you haven't booked your reservation ahead of time. Like cmon God." I think God taught them about trusting Him through this.

- So Elijah is in this lull between two jobs God has given him. In 1 Kings 19 he's just gotten done confronting Ahab, showing God's power to the prophets of Baal and the people of Israel, God has sent rain to end this severe drought that's been plaguing the land, but then Jezebel, Ahab's wife, sends Elijah this nasty letter and he goes running into the desert to hide in a cave and whine that it's all pointless and that nobody in Israel follows God anyway.
- Here's God's response:
 - 1. Go to Damascus
 - 2. Anoint Hazael to be king of Syria
 - 3. Anoint Jehu to be king of Israel
 - 4. Anoint Elisha as a prophet to be your successor
 - 5. Oh and by the way I've got 7000 people in Israel who follow me instead of Baal.
- Elijah, the man of God that he is, obeys.
- After Elijah anointed Jehu, Jehu ended up killing Ahab and a good part of Ahab's family, including Jezebel.
- Hazael became king over Syria and fought against and killed the other members of Ahab's house. He attacked parts of Israel as judgment for following Baal.
- None of the threats Jezebel made against Elijah, that Elijah was so worried about, came true.
- His successor Elisha inherited an even more powerful spirit of God than Elijah had.
- While Elijah was busy moping and saying "woe is me", he, a prophet of God, was completely blind to how much God was moving while he was moping!

- Our lesson is this: If we're worried about the church, it's because we're completely blind to where God is moving, and we're utterly out of sync with the work He's currently doing. Because He's always working.
- Instead of worrying about the church, are we worried about our belongings?
 - Why? We don't take them with us.
 - We're told that "moth and rust decay, thieves break in and steal," and this happens all the time; all that we own is slowly decaying and rotting and breaking and falling apart. We're falling apart physically ourselves. It's all part of the curse. I bought a brand new shiny car two years ago and within two weeks I had a flat tire. Nothing material on this world lasts!
 - If X country invades and takes all our stuff, shoot, tough luck. If they burn your house down, it'll only be slightly sooner than it would have been destroyed anyway, because if you just give it time, it'll collapse on its own. My parents are working on replacing the wiring in my grandfather's old house because all the insulation around those knob and tube wires has all aged and flaked off and turned into dust and it's gotten to the point that it's a fire hazard. So they're replacing it with new wires that will also eventually break apart and flake away, but hopefully not anytime soon.
 - Here's the thing we shouldn't miss: No one can take away anything from Christians that really matters. Nothing separates us from the love of Christ! Not height, depth, principalities of darkness, famine, sword, political parties, laws of the land, activists, or anything else.
- So what if we don't care about material possessions? Are we worried about future generations instead?
 - Revelation makes it crystal clear that it's going to get worse before it gets better, so why should it surprise us if it does?
 - John 21:20-22 says this:
 - Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved (meaning John) following them... When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus,

“Lord, what about this man?” Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!”

- Our mission is clear: We should follow Jesus. It’s not dependent on what other people do. We can point them to Christ, we can help draw them nearer to Christ, but we cannot force them to follow Him. Our walk is our responsibility, and their walk is between them and God.
- If we're not worried about future generations, are we worried about our own personal safety?
 - If so, why?
 - If we know the Healer, why worry about being injured?
 - If we know the Life-giver, why worry about being killed?
 - If we know the Father of creation, why worry about our worldly family?

So what can we do to avoid being like the Pharisees? We can do what they didn't and follow the three-step plan God gave through Micah:

- Firstly, we can act justly
 - This has nothing to do with political justice in the land, though God made it very clear throughout the Old Testament that He cares deeply about justice for the poor and downtrodden by society. This is a personal call to action to act in a just manner. To seek out injustice and make it right. Not by squelching anyone we see doing what we perceive as unjust; that's what the Pharisees did. That's what caused them to mistreat the man who was born blind. Instead, we are called to mercifully extend a helping hand to those who are broken and cannot find justice on their own.
- Secondly, we can love mercy
 - If Judas Iscariot walked through the back doors right now, we're called to love him. Have you ever thought about that?
 - That's a hard pill to swallow, but if that's not true, then how can God love us? All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

- We need to be extremely clear in our stance that we love sinners and extend mercy to those who don't deserve it, time and time again.
- It's easy to remember that God hates sin and Satan loves it, but remember this also:
 - Remember who hates sinners: Satan.
 - Remember who loves sinners: God.
 - If we're of God, we need to love sinners of all forms, just like He did.
- Thirdly, we need to walk humbly with God
 - Humility is what Jesus exemplified
 - Philippians 2:8 reads "And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Humility was what Jesus lived by.
 - Humility causes us to serve others.
 - Philippians 2:3 says "Do nothing from selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves."
 - Walking humbly with God keeps us on the right track.
 - It allows God to speak to us, instead of us yammering among ourselves
 - It refocuses us on things that truly matter, rather than things that pass away
 - It causes us to see God moving both in our lives and around us, so we don't miss obvious things He's trying to show us.

So how do we focus on what truly matters?

- Instead of worrying about earthly things that we will eventually lose, like the Pharisees did, we need to focus on heavenly blessings that God has given us that we are able to gain permanently.
- Instead of concentrating on how other people see us, like the Pharisees did, we need to focus on how we can treat those around us with the love of Christ.
- Instead of hating the righteous the way the Pharisees did, we need to love sinners the way God does.

That's our gameplan for not missing what God puts in front of us. Without focusing on what matters, we can quickly become no better off than the Pharisees were. But if we follow God's plan for our lives, He'll show us great things, much like He did for Elijah, Gideon, John the Baptist, and many others.

Let's pray.

Father, thank You for Your love for us. Lord, all of us have blind spots that often prevent us from seeing the work You are doing and being more effective for You. Please give us Your wisdom to open our eyes, like You open the eyes of the blind, to see You moving and how You've given us opportunities. Please help us be receptive to the messages You're giving us. Thank You for Your love for sinners, and for making us Saints through the power of Your Name. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.