

Focus – 2011

Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji

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Author, John MacArthur tells the story of two brothers in his book Our Sufficiency in Christ,

“Homer and Langely Collyer were sons of a respected New York doctor. Both had earned college degrees. In fact Homer had studied at Columbia University to become an attorney. When old Dr. Collyer died in the early part of the century, his sons inherited the family home and estate. The two men—both bachelors—were financially secure.

“But the Collyer brothers chose a peculiar lifestyle not at all consistent with the status their inheritance gave them. They lived in almost total seclusion. They boarded up the windows of their house and padlocked the doors. All their utilities—including water—were shut off. No one was ever seen coming or going from the house. From the outside it appeared empty. (Although at night Homer would venture forth to look for food and other treasures in dumpsters.)

“The Collyer family had been quite prominent, but almost no one in New York society remembered Homer and Langley Collyer by the time World War II ended.

“On March 21, 1947, police received an anonymous telephone tip that a man had died inside the boarded up house. Unable to force their way in through the front door, they entered the house through a second story window. Inside they found Homer Collyer’s corpse. He had died clutching the February 22, 1920 issue of the *Jewish Morning Journal*, though he had been totally blind for years. This macabre scene was set against an equally grotesque backdrop.

“The brothers were collectors. They collected everything—especially junk. Their house was crammed full of broken machinery, auto parts, boxes, appliances, folding chairs, musical instruments, rags, assorted odd and ends, and bundles of old newspapers. Virtually all of it was worthless. An enormous mountain of debris blocked the front door, investigators were forced to continue using the upstairs window for weeks while excavators worked to clear a path to the door.

“Nearly three weeks later, as workmen were still hauling heaps of refuse away, someone made a grisly discovery. Langley Collyer’s body was buried beneath a pile of rubbish some six feet away from where Homer had died. Langley had been crushed to death in a crude booby trap he had built to protect his precious collection from intruders.

“The garbage eventually removed from the Collyer house totaled more than 19 tons. No one ever learned why the brothers were stockpiling their pathetic treasure, except an old friend of the family recalled that Langley once said he was saving newspapers for Homer could catch on his reading if he ever regained his sight.”

Homer and Langley Collyer make a sad but fitting parable of the way many people in the church live. Although the Collyers’ inheritance was sufficient for all their needs, they lived their lives in unnecessary, self-imposed deprivation. Neglecting abundant resources that were rightfully theirs to enjoy, Homer and Langley instead turned their home into a squalid dump. Spurning their father’s sumptuous legacy, they binged instead on the scraps of the world.

It’s unlikely that any of us will go to the extremes of the Collyer brothers, but it is certainly possible that we might get our lives off what ought to be their primary focus.

We all arrange our lives around some type of a focus. It might be sports, video games, novels or movies, relationships or work, family or it might be our relationship with the Lord or our

service to others. Each of us has a focus. A question: What will be the focus of your life in 2011? And of course the next question that begs to be answered is this: "Is this focus for your life pleasing to your Lord?"

The apostle Paul knew what it was to focus his life. We read in Philippians 3:3-9 these memorable words:

⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in^[a] Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

Here is a man with focus. He knows where he wants to go and he heads there with all his might.

Paul, of all people, understood the wealth that he had in his relationship to Jesus Christ. You can catch a bit of this in Ephesians chapter one.

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he^[b] predestined us for adoption to sonship^[c] through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹ he^[d] made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

¹¹ In him we were also chosen,^[e] having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹² in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

¹⁵ For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, ¹⁶ I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit^[f] of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. ¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength ²⁰ he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. ²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

I wonder if we don't focus more on the eternal is because we do not understand how rich we really are. If we were to list the riches we have in Christ from just chapter one of Ephesians, they would include:

1. Every spiritual blessing in Christ – Spiritually we are very wealthy. Not just a few spiritual blessings, but every spiritual blessing. We lack nothing spiritually if we are in Christ. Perhaps you have had people come to you are times and offer you something more. You need this blessing – this second work of grace, or this new relationship with the Holy Spirit or speaking in tongues or this list of do and don'ts and you will be complete. We have it all my brothers and sisters. We have it all in our relationship to Jesus Christ.
2. Chosen before the foundation of the world – kind of stretches your mind to think about it doesn't it. We all hate not to be chosen or to be chosen last whether it is for teams in volleyball or invitations to a party. But we were chosen before the foundation of the world. You can talk about computer power, but this is way off the charts, that God would know you before he even created the world. The tragedy is that somehow we might miss this and think that we are worthless. If God chooses you, you are of great worth eternally.
3. He, in love, just because he wanted to, he chose us to be adopted as his sons. We are God's children because he has reached out to us in his infinite love and grace. We're children of the heavenly King. Again the tragedy is that we might act like paupers when we have the King of kings as our father.
4. Further we have redemption through his blood. We had sinned greatly against him. We were deserving of death and eternal separation from the Lord who made us. We were slaves to sin and we choose to be that way and what did he do. He redeemed us. He purchased us with his own blood. We are highly favored my brothers and sisters. Let us never forget it.
5. And further we are forgiven of our sins. Not just barely, but fully according to the riches of his grace lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. A few days ago a man fleeing a highway patrolman in the twin cities, drove a stolen vehicle into a van killing a mother and her two sons. When the man learned what he had done, he pleaded with the police to shoot him that he did not deserve to live. The fact is that none of us deserves to live. We have all sinned against our Lord, but he has forgiven us. Praise his name.
6. I will skip several blessings and move to the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. He is the seal of our relationship with the Lord – the deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the final redemption of those who belong to the Lord. The great tragedy is that we would not care about these blessings, that we would be satisfied with a whole lot less. That somehow we would think that we had everything we needed spiritually by dropping in at church for a few minutes on Sunday morning and singing a few love songs to Jesus and then spend the rest of our time focused on something of no eternal significance.

Phillips Brooks wrote ever so perceptibly: "The great danger facing all of us—let me say it again, for one feels it tremendously—is not that we shall make an absolute failure of life, nor that we shall fall into outright viciousness, nor that we shall feel that life has no meaning at all—not these things. The danger is that we may fail to perceive life's greatest meaning, fall short of its highest good, miss its deepest and most abiding happiness, be unable to render the most needed service, be unconscious of life ablaze with the light of the Presence of God—and be content to have it so—that is the danger. That someday we may wake up and find that always we have been busy with the husks and trappings of life—and have really missed life itself. For life without God, to one who had known the richness and joy of life with Him, is unthinkable, impossible. That is what one prays one's friends may be spared—satisfaction with a life that falls short of the best, that has in it no tingle and thrill which comes from a friendship with the Father."

If we are going to have the right focus, a focus on the eternal in 2011, it is a really good idea to understand just how privileged we are to belong as children to the King of kings and Lord of Lord. He is our Savior, our Lord, the one who loves us eternally. "In a love which cannot cease, I am his and he is mine."

I Hope as a first step toward getting an eternal focus in 2011 that you will reaffirm this morning your great position of honor and glory as one of the children of God. This is a springboard for getting it right in 2011.

So what shall we focus on in 2011? Let's look at some great possibilities:

1. Focus on knowing Christ. Again look at Philippians three: ⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in ^[a] Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. ⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in ^[a] Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Following Paul's Example:

¹⁵ All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶ Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

¹⁷ Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.

Paul is bold here. He makes his focus clear and calls on his readers to follow his example.

By contrast, I think of the story of the rich young ruler from Luke 18, who was so focused on his earthly riches that he lost what he might have had in Christ. The Bible tells us that he went away sad. And well he might have. He missed Jesus, the one who came to give us abundant life.

2. Focus on Rejoicing in Christ. In Philippians 4:4 we read, "Rejoice in the Lord always I will say it again: Rejoice. It is very easy to focus on past hurts, present pleasures, pressing problems that we have little energy left to focus on Christ and experience his peace. Paul went to write, Philippians 4:6: Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."
3. Focus on the great treasures we have in Christ. Jesus told a parable of a man who found a treasure in a field and who went and sold all he had to obtain that treasure.

Matthew 13:44 “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

⁴⁵ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. ⁴⁶ When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

We are reminded here rightly that really following Jesus Christ will cost us everything – especially death to self, but we also need to remember that it will provide for us everything that is really worth having. I’m reminded of Jim Elliot’s words, “He is no fool to give what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

4. Focus on following and obeying Jesus Christ. Let’s look at Colossians 3 Colossians 3 (New International Version, ©2010)

Colossians 3 ¹ Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, who is your ^a life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶ Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. ^b ⁷ You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. ⁸ But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. ⁹ Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. ¹¹ Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

¹² Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Jesus said, “Why do you call me, Lord, Lord and do not the things that I say. May I be so bold as to say, that if we not obey, we do not really believe in the biblical sense.

I think of myself as a “cleany.” In case you are not familiar with the term, a cleany is a person who has a place for everything and everything in its place. My wife is a cleany. She says to me. “You are not a cleany.” But I say, “In my heart I’m a cleany.” I want to have a place for everything and everything in its place. But she insists, “You are not a cleany,”

And of course she is right, unless I can count the few hours on Saturday morning when I go through things and put them in their places and take the garbage to the dump. But to be a cleany on one morning a week does not make me a cleany any more than coming to church on Sunday morning for an hour or two makes one an obedient Christian.

Our Christianity must connect with every other area of our lives. We must live out Christ in our homes, at school, at work, in the neighborhood and unless we do, we are kidding ourselves to call ourselves by the name.

Obedience to Jesus Christ involves doing what he wants us to do in the next five minutes, and the next and the next. Let us focus on obedience.

Now these are quite a few things to focus on, but we are used to multitasking and this should not be too much of a challenge for us.

Are you up to the challenge? Will you take the time and energy to give important focus on the eternal and not just to the things that won't matter in a hundred years. It is easy to miss what a wonderful treasure there is in knowing Jesus, to be occupied with looking for something else and simply neglect him.

The late William Hearst was one of the richest men of the past century. He had an immense collection of art. One day he heard of a painting and sent his representative to find it and buy it for him. The representative returned several months later to report that he had traced the art work to one of Hearst's own storage buildings.

Spiritually we may be like Mr. Heast and not know how much we have or we may be like Homer and Langley Collyer and ignore what we have choosing to concentrate on collecting trash, In either case we will lose out on the true enjoyment and appreciation of our riches in Christ. Let us determine that we will be what we can to focus on our eternal riches.

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