



*To Know Christ . . .
and to Make Him Known*

Wilmington, North Carolina
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Staying Focused Luke 4:31-44

It was probably ten years ago now. Jo Ann and I were in a department store. As we passed through the men's department, a T-shirt—you know, one of those with a message on the front—caught my eye.

It had three words on it: "I lack focus."

What made it so funny was that the letters were all *out-of-focus*! We all could probably think of someone who could wear that shirt—it might even be ourselves . . .

Focus is an important thing.

If you're extremely nearsighted as I am, you know how hard it can be to see without your glasses. Now the cause of nearsightedness is interesting. Because of the steepness of the shape of the cornea, the image doesn't focus properly on the eye's retina, but rather in front of the retina. The technical term is *myopia*. The practical effect is that without corrective lenses or surgery, things more than a few feet away are blurry—out-of-focus. And that makes it very difficult to function.

Jesus' focus on His mission

Spiritual focus is important too; really it's much more important. And as we've seen over the past several Sundays, Jesus had it! He had it at least from the time He was twelve years old, when He stayed behind in the temple after Mary and Joseph had left to return home after their Passover visit to Jerusalem, because He had to be in His Father's house, about His business (Luke 2:49).

When He was about thirty, He had gone to John the Baptist to be baptized, then went out into the wilderness, led by the Holy Spirit who had descended on Him in bodily form as a dove as He was praying after His baptism. During those days He fasted and was severely tempted by the devil, but defeated him at every turn. Luke tells us that Jesus then **returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit** (4:14).¹

When He returned to His hometown of Nazareth, He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath and was chosen as the reader for the Prophets lesson and as the preacher or teacher for the day. He read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah that glorious passage that says:

**"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners**

**and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."**

Then He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. Every eye was fixed on Him and every ear was anxiously waiting to hear what He would say about this passage that they all knew ultimately pointed to the coming Messiah. Jesus said, **"Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing"** (Luke 4:14-20).

With this passage of Scripture, Jesus told the good folks in the Nazareth synagogue what His ministry would be like, the pattern it would take. In effect, Jesus claimed this text as *His mission statement*. Jesus said He was being sent to proclaim good news and to bring freedom and healing. The people all heard this gladly to begin with and were excited, *until* Jesus told them that He knew many in Israel would reject Him, and that His message and ministry wasn't just for Israel, but for the whole world. Then those who moments before were gushing with admiration and pride over their hometown boy turned on Him and tried to throw Him off a cliff. **But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way** (4:30).

Jesus wasted no time getting to work on His mission. Leaving Nazareth, He went to the town of Capernaum on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. On the Sabbath, He began teaching the people, and they were amazed, **because his words had authority** (4:32). In fact, His words had so much authority that He was rebuking demonic spirits and they were coming out of people!

Luke tells us in 4:31-37 about one particular instance in the synagogue in Capernaum. A man possessed by a demon cried out at the top of his voice, **"Go away! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"** Jesus simply spoke to the demon, ordering it to be quiet and to come out of the man. The demon didn't say anything else. It did throw the man down on the floor in the midst of the people, but came out without harming the man. Now that's *authority*!

Of course the people were amazed, and the word about Jesus **spread throughout the surrounding area** (4:37).

Luke goes on to tell us how Jesus left the synagogue and went to Simon's house (4:38-39). That's the Simon who would come to be known as Simon Peter, Jesus' disciple, eventually the prominent apostle. Simon's mother-in-law was sick with a high fever, so those who were there asked Jesus to help her. And help her He did! Bending over her He rebuked the fever, and it left her immediately! **She got up at once and began to wait on them**. Imagine that—one minute she's burning up with fever; after Jesus speaks, she's asking Him, "Could I get you and your friends something to eat or drink?"

Later that day when the sun was setting, people who had family members or friends who were sick with all kinds of diseases brought them to Jesus. He laid His hands on each one and healed them. He cast the demons out of those with demons. As they came out, they would shout, **"You are the Son of God!"** But He rebuked them and wouldn't let them speak since they knew He was the Messiah, and He didn't yet want this known (4:40-41).

When you look at what happened here, it quickly becomes clear that *Jesus was incredibly focused on His mission*. Here He was in Capernaum, *teaching* about God's kingdom—God's rule and dominion—and *demonstrating* God's rule as He cast out demons and healed those who were sick. His mission was to proclaim good news and bring freedom and healing to the bound and oppressed. And people were loving it!

Jesus knew He needed some solitude, some time to pray and meditate. So at daybreak **he went out to a solitary place**. But the people wouldn't leave Him alone. They tracked Him down,

kept looking for Him until they found Him. And when they found Him and He made it clear that He was about to leave, they did their best to try to stop Him. They didn't want Him to leave them.

Now that kind of response can be distracting—people expressing admiration and needing you, *wanting* you to stay there with them. Jesus already had something of a following there. He could set up shop and use Capernaum as His base of operations, and who knows, as word got around, He might gain more followers this way than any other . . . He could be pretty comfortable and relatively safe carrying out a ministry of healing and exorcism right there in Capernaum—not a lot of Pharisees or Sadducees or Roman government to contend with.

But Jesus was focused on His mission. It was about *God's kingdom*, not His own comfort or success or being adored and wanted by the people. He told those who had tracked Him down, **"I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent."** So He went around preaching in the synagogues of Judea.

"Because that is why I was sent." Jesus was determined to *stay focused* on His mission, determined to do what the Father had sent Him to do—to proclaim and demonstrate the rule of God that was coming in Him!

Staying focused

Last Sunday I pointed out that one of Luke's purposes in his account of the Gospel and its second volume, the book of Acts, was to show how Jesus in His life and ministry is the model for His church's life and ministry. That's especially true here.

Not only are we to have the same mission that Jesus had, extending His work in the world as He empowers and works through us by His Holy Spirit; *we are to stay focused on that mission just as Jesus did.*

Now it's easy for us to lose focus. Things that go on in our personal lives, things that happen in our life together as a church or in our city or county or state or country or the world—all of these can be incredibly distracting. Sometimes we're distracted by things that are good, maybe even very good, but they're not what God has called us to as a church. Some wise saint once observed that sometimes the good is the enemy of the best that God has for us.

Sometimes we're happy just bee-bopping along and enjoying the ride. Worship is good, our church is doing some really good things, we have good facilities and such. But are we doing what God has called us to do, what He has commissioned us to do? Are we really *on mission* with Jesus in the world?

Some years ago, our church adopted the mission statement that you see on the front of our bulletin and in other places as well. It is simple, yet profound: ***To know Christ . . . and to make Him known.*** In our strategic planning process, nothing has changed about that statement. Our vision, values, and action initiatives all grow out of knowing Christ and making Him known.

Knowing Christ and making Him known *must* be our focus if we're to be on mission with Him in His world. We can't afford to get distracted by good things or bad. We must *stay focused*, just as Jesus did.

Because you see, all the wonderful opportunities that come our way and all the really good things we can do, if they aren't consistent with this mission God has given us, if they don't align with and help us fulfill this mission, they're *distractions*. If we take our eyes off Jesus and the mission He has called us to, our vision becomes blurry. We lose focus. We become like the alligator I read about in the *Our Daily Bread devotional* years ago that was using those incredibly powerful jaws that could rip large animals apart to try to chew up a marshmallow that

some kid had thrown out the car window to him.

Jesus stayed focused on His mission, brothers and sisters. And so must we!

†MEG

¹ Scripture taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version[®] (2011 edition).