



Matthew 14:22-33
Believe
Focus

Rev. Brian North
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About two months ago, I made one of the scariest, and most considered, purchases I've ever made. Even when I bought Gwen's engagement ring nearly 22 years ago, which cost a little bit more, the decision to do so didn't take me as long as this Dollar Store purchase did: I bought a pair of reading glasses. I finally caved in because my arms are not getting longer. Reading books, magazines, reading articles on my phone...all these kinds of things have become a little more of a challenge in the last couple years, and I finally gave in. So the glasses sit by my bed, and occasionally I have the humility to actually use them.

Why did I get them? Because: **Some things were out of focus, and that was making some facets of life difficult.** And it's the same thing in our walk with Jesus: we need to be focused on Him. We need to be single-minded about his call upon our lives.

And as we continue in Part 2 of our "Believe" sermon series, we come to a theme that really isn't connected to any one belief statement we made in Part 1 this last fall, but is more connected to a number of those belief statements, and is deeply connected to several theological tenets of Scripture. The theme today is that **"I focus on God and His priorities for my life."** This is really the root belief and action in our response to God, once we have a relationship with Jesus.

We need that sense of focus. **We need that sense of being single-minded about God's priorities – as well as His plans – for our lives and our life together as a church.** When things get out of focus, or when we start focusing on the wrong things, that's when we get our priorities out of whack.

This has its roots right from God in the Old Testament. For instance, the first two of the 10 Commandments are: 1. Have no other gods before me. 2. Don't make, bow down to, or worship idols of any kind. Right there is a call to single-mindedness...to staying focused on God and His priorities for our lives. The passage from Deuteronomy that Jesus partially quotes when asked

what is the greatest Commandment – and we looked at some a couple weeks ago – is another reminder to be focused on God, and not all the other stuff in life: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:5-9). That is a call to single-mindedness...to staying focused on God and His priorities for our lives and for our communities.

And this single-mindedness does *not* mean that we have to forsake everything of this world and live like hermits with our lives devoted to our relationship to God. That’s not what it’s about. It’s about recognizing and acknowledging God and His priorities and building that relationship with Him in the midst of life. That’s why Moses’ words to the people in that Deuteronomy passage are that they are to take these commandments – and it’s referencing the 10 Commandments – and put them in places where life happens: talk about them at home, when you’re on the road...tie them as symbols on you so you always have them wherever you are; put them on the doorframes of your homes and on the gates of the cities. Let them influence and lead you wherever you are, in other words. Why? So our focus would not be taken off of God and his calling and priorities and plans in our lives.

And the fact is, there’s a lot that seeks to distract us, to take our focus off of God’s priorities for us: (My cell phone rings, I answer...). ☺ OK...cell phones can take our focus off of God, but so can careers, money, politics, relationships, health, housing, car problems, sports, technology, community service, and more. Many of these things are good in and of themselves; but if we let them, they will end up being a distraction from God, rather than being places and opportunities to glorify God in the midst of them.

There are a number of people in Scripture who showed incredible focus on God’s priorities in their lives. Some of them show incredible focus even in the midst of difficult situations or temptations. Joseph, from the Old Testament, comes to mind. Here’s a guy whose brothers faked his death and

shipped him out of the country to Egypt. Talk about a curve ball in life that you don't see coming, and could completely distract him and throw him off course from keeping God's priorities first. And yet, **Joseph stayed focused on God in the midst of his life.** He lived a life of integrity and service to Pharaoh and worked his way up the chain of command.

When he had a major potential distraction come his way in the form of another government official's wife, as she tried to seduce him, Joseph stayed true to God's priorities. How many people get distracted and lose focus? Losing focus there could have cost Joseph everything he had, perhaps even his life. But he stayed focused, and it all ended up being for God's glory in the end when famine struck his homeland, and his very own brothers ended up coming to Egypt for food because they had stored up a lot of grain in anticipation of a famine in the region. And Joseph was the reason Egypt had stored up that food. As Joseph himself said to his brothers at the end of the whole ordeal: what they brothers intended for evil, God intended for good. And that happened, in large part, because Joseph's focus stayed where it needed to be – even in the face of rejection by his brothers, adapting to being a foreigner in Egypt, and sexual temptation. His unwavering commitment to staying on target with God's values and priorities kept Joseph on track, and in the end God was glorified.

Other times, it's good stuff that takes our focus off of God's priorities. **When David stepped up and fought Goliath, he stayed focused.** Saul, the king, offered his own personal weapons and armor. He dressed David in his tunic – which was equivalent to a t-shirt for us, something you might wear on its own, but often worn under something else – he put his armor on him, his helmet, and gave him his sword. David quickly realized, however, that all this stuff was a distraction for him. As a shepherd, he had protected sheep his entire life and fought off all kinds of wild animals – and never wore anything like this. This stuff was going to take his focus off of the job before him. So he shed all that extra stuff, and grabbed his trusty sling and a handful of smooth stones, and then went and took out Goliath. David realized that this other stuff, as good as it was, was going to be a distraction, and get in the way of what he needed to do. Sometimes even good things take our focus off of God's priorities for our lives.

Peter, in this morning’s Scripture passage, shows some incredible focus on Jesus, as well as what happens when we lose that focus. Here he is, in this boat with all the disciples because Jesus had told them to go on ahead of him across Lake Galilee...a violent storm kicks up – which is not uncommon there because of the tall and fairly steep peaks that rise up from the lake...so this storm has sprung up, it’s night...they didn’t bring any headlamps with them...And Jesus walks out on the water to get to them. Of course, they think it’s a ghost. I don’t care whether you believe in ghosts or not – I think from a Christian worldview we’d have to say that they aren’t real – but regardless, if you were in their shoes, in the pitch black with some stars and maybe part of a moon providing a little light, and you saw someone walking on the water, you’d probably reconsider the possibility of ghosts, too. But Jesus says “Don’t worry...don’t be afraid...it’s me.”

And Peter wants confirmation, and so he says to Jesus: “Hey, if it’s really you, then tell me to come out on the water.” This is a marvelously theologically adept way of putting this. You and I do this all the time. We want something in our life – a new car, a new job, healing from something, a Mariners team that isn’t terrible – and we’ll pray “Lord, this is what I want, but I put it in your hands, and want your will to be done.” Peter wants to get out and walk on water, but it has to be Jesus who initiates it, it has to be in His will, it has to be His priority, or it’s not going to work out very well. So he’s like, “Hey Jesus, if it’s really you, then why don’t you invite me to join you on the water.” And Jesus says, “Cool. Step on out of the boat.” And for a few moments or minutes or however long it was, Peter is there walking on water with Jesus. He’s completely focused on Jesus and trusting Him that Jesus’ will for Peter to walk on water is enough for him to actually do it.

And then he loses his focus. He’s no longer single-minded in his trust of Jesus. He starts to focus on the wind blowing hard. He focuses on the waves around him. Maybe he focused on the boat still rocking around in the waves. His focus on Jesus started to get a little blurry – like me trying to read small font at arm’s length without my reading glasses – especially in the morning.

Jesus speaks to this topic as well. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks

of not focusing on earthly treasure, but heavenly treasures instead...he speaks of not having “two masters” because you can’t focus on them both...He says don’t focus on these things. Don’t focus on the clothes you wear or the food you eat, or what you drink. Then he says, **“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33)**. In the language of today’s message: Focus on the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. Be single-minded about God’s Kingdom. As you go through life, don’t let all these other things distract you and cause you to take your eyes and your focus off of God. Stay single-minded about God and His priorities.

So: Are you staying focused on God, or are other things distracting you and gaining your attention? When you go to work, when you head to the store, when you talk with the parents of your kids’ friends, when you’re chatting with your neighbors: Do you have in the back of your mind that this might be an opportunity to be the hands and feet of Jesus? It’s so easy to “play Christian” on Sunday mornings, or in our small groups, or at other times...but if that’s the only time we are focused on God and his priorities – when we’re in our Christian “bubble” – then we’re not being single-minded about Jesus. If you would like to be more single-minded about Jesus, then take an honest look at your life, and find a place where you have perhaps been distracted, where your focus has come off of Jesus and onto something else. Maybe it’s in a certain relationship or in a certain place or time of day or your cell phone usage or some other aspect of life where you tend to get focused on things other than Jesus’ priorities for you. Start with one facet of life where your focus is off of Jesus, and ask God to help you be more focused on Him in that situation, or place, or with that person.

And then collectively, as a church, we can make sure that we are focused on God’s priorities and plans for us here at Rose Hill, as well. This is certainly not just an individual thing, but something for us to consider together as a church body as we live out our faith together, encouraging one another and seeking to shine the light of Christ. In his letter to the church in Philippi, Paul sets himself as an example to the church for having that singular focus. He writes, **“I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14)**. It’s a verse that

many of us are familiar with, and maybe even have memorized; and it speaks to this single-minded focus on Jesus' will and priorities and plans. Do you know what comes next, however? Here's what Paul writes: **"I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things"** (Philippians 3:14). All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. "Mature" isn't just referring to age: it's spiritual maturity he's talking about. And while none of us may feel like we're all *that* mature – especially when we have Jesus as our first example – the fact is, most of us in this room have a degree of spiritual maturity. We've been Jesus followers for a good chunk of our lives, and we've been a part of this church, or other churches, for many, many years.

Are we pressing on toward the goal? **Do we have that single-minded focus for God's priorities for our church?** Are we, as a church, willing to step out of the boat, trust Jesus, focus on him, and focus only on God's priorities and plans and vision for Rose Hill? Is that the goal for which we strive? Or does our gaze shift on occasion so that our focus ends up on other stuff that isn't really critical or as important as what God is calling us to?

I believe Rose Hill is a church that *really* wants to stay focused on Jesus, His priorities, and where He's leading us. That has been the aim and the legacy of this church for all of its existence. I think it is for most churches. No church does it perfectly, though. One of the challenges every church faces is that there are *so many* ways to focus on Jesus, to make him known to others, and so forth...and often we want to do them all. How do you pick the best ideas for any one church out of an ocean of really good ones? And so it's easy to become an unfocused church.

Maybe, just like I needed some reading glasses to help my focus in certain situations...perhaps we need to get focused in on Jesus and what His priorities are for us here at RH; to have a greater sense of unity and single-mindedness. If we all will come together and be single-minded about God's priorities for Rose Hill, God will do amazing things through this church here in 2019, and beyond.

With that in mind, I would like to invite you to join with me in this statement of belief about living a life that is focused in on Jesus: **“I focus on God and His priorities for my life.”** Let’s live that way individually and collectively as a church here at Rose Hill. And let’s pray...Amen.