

# The Key to Spiritual Growth

## 1. Suggested Songs

- A. Purer in Heart (#671)
- B. Sweet Hour of Prayer (#827)
- C. Take Time To Be Holy (#731)
- D. Only in Thee (#492)
- E. Jesus Calls Us (#399)

## 2. What is the key to spiritual growth?

### A. Chapter 5 of the book of Hebrews is very unusual.

1. In the first 10 verses, Paul is explaining the relation between Jesus, our High Priest, and Melchizedek, the mysterious king of Salem from Genesis 14.
2. But when he gets to verse 11, he stops and says "of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing."
3. Apparently, he had spoken about this subject before and watched as his listeners' eyes glazed over. He knew in advance even as wrote verses 1-10 what their reaction would be --- and he pauses to deal with the problem.
4. What was the problem? Keep reading:
  - a) **Hebrews 5:12-14** For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need *someone* to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. <sup>13</sup> For everyone who partakes *only* of milk *is* unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. <sup>14</sup> But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, *that is*, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.
  - b) The problem was spiritual immaturity. And the solution? Spiritual growth.
  - c) Paul's readers were "babes" who needed to grow up spiritually. But how would they do that? Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 4:13-15. In those verses, Paul gives us the key to spiritual growth.
    - (1) **1 Timothy 4:13-15** <sup>13</sup> Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. <sup>14</sup> Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership. <sup>15</sup> Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all.
    - d) In the New American Standard Version, verse 15 reads "Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress may be evident to all."
    - e) Paul is telling Timothy that the key to spiritual progress or spiritual growth is spiritual focus. Paul told Timothy to focus on spiritual matters -- to be absorbed in them, to give himself entirely to them. The key to spiritual growth is spiritual focus.

B. But should we really be surprised that spiritual focus is the key to spiritual growth? No.

## 3. Focus is the key to growth and success in any endeavor!

### A. Albert Einstein

1. A young research assistant working at Princeton University in the 1940s recounted how his boss had searched for a paper clip. "We had finished the preparation of a

paper and we were looking for a paper clip. After opening a lot of drawers, we finally found one that turned out to be too badly bent for use. So we were looking for a tool to straighten it. Opening a lot more drawers, we came upon a whole box of unused paper clips." His boss, the assistant said, "immediately started to shape one of the good paper clips into a tool to straighten out the bent paper clip." When the assistant asked him what he was doing, he said, "Once I am set on a goal, it becomes difficult to deflect me." That boss' name was Albert Einstein.

2. As a patent attorney, I have a special appreciation for Albert Einstein since he began his a career as a patent clerk in Switzerland. In fact, he wrote his most important papers while he was a patent clerk. But when you think of patents, you probably think of another name --- Thomas Edison.

#### **B. Thomas Edison**

1. Over his career, Edison filed 1700 patents in the United States and 1200 foreign patents. In one year alone (1882) at the peak of his career he filed 106 successful patent applications!
2. In 1898, a reporter camped outside Edison's laboratory for three weeks hoping to get an interview. When he finally met with Edison, he asked him the secret of his success. Here is what Edison said:
  - a) The secret to success is the ability to apply your physical and mental energies to one problem incessantly without growing weary. ... You do something all day long, don't you? Everyone does. If you get up at 7 AM and go to bed at 11 PM, you have put in 16 good hours, and it is certain with most men that they have been doing something all the time. The only trouble is that they do it about a great many things, and I do it about one. If they took the time in question and applied it in one direction, to one object, they would succeed.

#### **C. Now let me make one thing very clear right from the start -- this is not a self help sermon.**

1. The goal of this sermon is not just to get us all to focus so we can be successful. It would be very possible for us to be the most focused people on the planet, and yet we could all be focused on the wrong thing.
2. Paul talked about such people in Philippians 3.
  - a) **Philippians 3:18-19** For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, *that they are* the enemies of the cross of Christ: <sup>19</sup> whose end *is* destruction, whose god *is* their belly, and *whose* glory *is* in their shame -- who set their mind on earthly things.
  - b) These were very focused people and they were focused on a god -- but that god was their own belly. As Paul tells us, they had their mind set on earthly things.
3. The Bible is full of very focused people who were focused on the wrong things.
  - a) Haman in the book of Esther was very focused, but he was focused on killing poor Mordecai.
  - b) Jezebel was very focused, but she was focused on killing Elijah.
  - c) The Jews in Acts 23 were very focused, but they were focused on killing Paul.
  - d) Judas was so focused on his money bag that he was unable to recognize the promised Messiah when he standing right in front of him!
  - e) It is very possible to be focused on the wrong thing. What then should we focus on? Let's let the Bible answer that question.

#### **4. The Bible has a great deal to say about focus.**

**A. The Bible is full of "focus verses."**

1. When I first became interested in this subject a few years ago, I began to keep track of the verses in the Bible dealing with the subject of spiritual focus. I was amazed at just how many focus verses there are!
2. On one level, the message is pretty simple and one that I, as a former teacher, can fully sympathize with. God wants our attention. He does not want us to be figuratively "looking out the window" while he is teaching us how to be saved and how to live. He wants "front row" rather than "back row" Christians in his classroom!
3. Let's look first at just a few examples of the many focus verses in the Bible:
  - a) Paul of course was extremely focused, as he tells us in Phil. 3:13-14.
    - (1) **Philippians 3:13-14** Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but *this one thing I do*, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, <sup>14</sup> I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.
  - b) As Paul explains elsewhere, a Christian must have a spiritual focus. We must have a spiritual mindset.
    - (1) **Colossians 3:2** Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.
    - (2) **Romans 8:5** For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those *who live* according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.
  - c) What did Jesus say the result would be if we let the cares of this world distract us from our proper focus? He said it would choke the word and make us unfruitful.
    - (1) **Matthew 13:22** He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful.
  - d) And what did Jesus tell Martha when she was so distracted by worldly concerns that she did not seem to notice that the Son of God was sitting in her living room?
    - (1) **Luke 10:41-42** And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: <sup>42</sup> But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.

**B. Another focus verse is found in Matthew 5:8.**

1. **Matthew 5:8** Blessed *are* the pure in heart: for they shall see God.
2. How is Matthew 5:8 a focus verse? What does purity of heart have to do with spiritual focus?
3. To answer that question, let's turn to the book of James.
  - a) Focus is a primary theme in the book of James. It's not surprising that James (who grew up with Christ) would say so much about focus. He personally witnessed the focus of Christ.
  - b) An example is found in James 4:8.
    - (1) **James 4:8** Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse *your* hands, *ye* sinners; and purify *your* hearts, *ye* double minded.
    - (2) Did you know that the Danish theologian Kierkegaard wrote an entire book about just that one verse? He called it "Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing."
    - (3) The key to understanding what James is talking about is in the last part of that verse -- "purify your hearts, ye double minded." James is linking purity of

heart with spiritual focus! Those who are double minded (not focused) cannot be pure of heart. The pure of heart are those who are single minded -- those who are focused on God. Those who "draw nigh to God" in verse 8.

4. But wasn't Jesus telling us the same thing back in Matthew 5:8?
  - a) **Matthew 5:8** Blessed *are* the pure in heart: for they shall see God.
  - b) Paraphrase: Blessed are those who focus on Christ, for they shall see him!
  - c) The message is simple: We see what we focus on! There are many other passages in the Bible about having a pure heart:
    - (1) **Psalm 86:11-12** Teach me thy way, O LORD; I will walk in thy truth: unite my heart to fear thy name. <sup>12</sup> I will praise thee, O Lord my God, with all my heart: and I will glorify thy name for evermore.
    - (2) **Psalm 119:10-11** With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments. <sup>11</sup> Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.
    - (3) **Psalm 119:113** I hate the double-minded, But I love Your law.
    - (4) **Proverbs 4:23-25** Keep your heart with all diligence, For out of it *spring* the issues of life. ... <sup>25</sup> Let your eyes look straight ahead, And your eyelids look right before you.
  - d) There is a beautiful song in our book on the subject of spiritual focus that we don't sing often enough: Purer in Heart (#671) It is a focus song.
    - (1) Purer in heart, O God, Help me to be; May I devote my life wholly to thee. Watch thou my wayward feet, Guide me with counsel sweet; Purer in heart, Help me to be.
    - (2) Purer in Heart, O God, Help me to be; That I thy holy face one day may see. Keep me from secret sin, Reign thou my soul within; Purer in heart, Help me to be.

## 5. Focus is not easy, but fortunately we have a perfect example of focus that we can follow.

### A. The Focus of Christ.

1. If you do a search on Amazon.com for books with "Christ" in the title, you will be given a list of nearly 12,000 titles. Of those 12,000 books, there is not a single book about the focus of Christ --- and yet there is no better example for us to turn to for spiritual focus. Jesus was perfectly focused.
2. Jesus was focused on God the father and on the mission he had been given from God the father.
  - a) **Luke 19:10** For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.
  - b) **John 17:4** I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do.
  - c) Jesus had a mission; he had a goal -- and he allowed nothing to distract or divert him from accomplishing that mission. The Jewish leaders tried to divert him and even his own family tried to divert him, but he would not be diverted.
  - d) Satan also tried very hard to divert Jesus from his mission.

### B. Satan recognized very early that the best way to derail the Messiah would be to change his focus. Satan tried to do just that in Matthew 4.

1. **Matthew 4:3** Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread."

2. **Matthew 4:8-9** Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. <sup>9</sup> And he said to Him, "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me."
3. Satan was trying to change Jesus' focus! And he tries the same thing with us.

**C. Satan does not want us to be focused on anything.**

1. Satan fears focus of any kind because if we know how to be focused then one day we might turn our focus on God. Satan would much prefer that we be unable to focus on anything at all.
2. **James 3:16** For where envy and self-seeking *exist*, confusion and every evil thing *are* there.
3. Satan thrives on confusion, and focus is a cure for confusion.
4. Look at the denominational mess we see around us in the religious world. Where do you think all of that confusion came from? Not from God -- God is not the author of confusion. (1 Cor. 14:33)
5. Knowing that Satan is trying to confuse us should tell us how important it is that we not lose our spiritual focus.
  - a) The CEO of Pepsi once said that nothing focuses the mind better than the constant sight of someone who wants to wipe you off the map! He was talking about Coke, but we could just as easily apply that sentiment to Satan. Satan is actively trying to confuse us and divert us from our proper focus on God. That, if nothing else, should tell us how important it is to daily work at maintaining our proper focus.

**6. Spiritual focus is not optional for the Christian.**

**A. To obey the greatest commandment we must have spiritual focus.**

1. **Matthew 22:35-38** Then one of them, *which was* a lawyer, asked *him a question*, tempting him, and saying, <sup>36</sup> Master, *which is* the great commandment in the law? <sup>37</sup> Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. <sup>38</sup> This is the first and great commandment.
2. Whatever else is involved in obeying the greatest command, it must be true that the first step in loving God with all of our heart, mind, and soul is for us to focus our attention on God. If we do not focus on God, then it will be impossible to love him with all of our heart, soul, and mind.
3. God and God alone must be the focus of our life. Every decision, every action, every thought should come from and be based on that spiritual focus.

**B. The Bible and common sense both tell us that we cannot focus on two things at once.**

1. We cannot focus on God while focusing on worldly pursuits.
  - a) **1 John 2:15-16** Love not the world, neither the things *that are* in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. <sup>16</sup> For all that *is* in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.
2. We cannot focus on God while focusing on money (or anything else other than God).
  - a) **Matthew 6:24** No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.
3. We cannot focus on God while focusing on ourself.
  - a) **John 12:25** He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this

world shall keep it unto life eternal.

**C. Focus is not something we can put off until later.**

1. James reminds us in James 4:14 that our life is "a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away."
2. Understanding just how little time we have in this life to prepare for eternity should help us focus on spiritual matters.
3. Samuel Johnson: "When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."

**7. How do we focus on God?**

**A. We focus on God when we focus on the Son of God.**

1. **John 1:18** No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared *him*.
2. **John 14:9** Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou *then*, Shew us the Father?

**B. We focus on God when we focus on the word of God.**

1. We should have a thirst for the word of God.
  - a) **Psalm 119:162** I rejoice at thy word, as one that findeth great spoil.
2. When Satan tempted Jesus in Matthew 4 to change his focus, what did Jesus do? He quoted the word of God, and we should follow that example. The best way to obtain and maintain spiritual focus is to read and study the word of God every day.
3. If we are not spending time every day reading God's word, then it should not surprise us at all if we lack spiritual focus. We focus on God when we focus on God's word.

**C. We focus on God when we spend much time in prayer with God.**

1. Paul tells us in 1 Thess. 5:17 that we should pray without ceasing.
2. How can we pray without ceasing if we are not constantly focused on God? Paul is telling us here once again that a Christian must have a spiritual mindset. We must have a spiritual focus.
3. Prayer is crucial to maintaining a spiritual focus. We are not focused on God if we are not praying to God as we should.
4. To have any hope of maintaining a spiritual focus in this modern world, we must spend time with God and his word every day.
5. Song: Sweet Hour of Prayer
  - a) "Sweet hour of prayer! sweet hour of prayer, that calls me from a world of care."
6. Song: Take Time to Be Holy
  - a) "Take time to be holy, speak oft with thy Lord; Abide in Him always, and feed on His Word."
  - b) "Take time to be holy, the world rushes on."
7. We must take time each day to spend time with God while the world rushes on.

**8. Practical tips for improving our spiritual focus.**

**A. Television can make it difficult to focus on God.**

1. The first tip for improving our spiritual focus is to turn off the TV!
2. This may sound like an overly simplistic solution to a very complicated problem, but let's consider for a moment the effect that TV has had on our society.



- a) **1 Timothy 6:6** But godliness with contentment is great gain.
    - (1) And what are the two main by-products of TV? UN-godliness and DIS-contentment! Do we really expect "great gain" from that?
  3. But what does TV have to do with focus? TV more than anything else has caused us to become a visual society rather than a verbal society. As one social critic said, we have become the inarticulate society, and TV must accept much of the blame.
    - a) Before TV, our thinking and discourse were dominated by the printed word and speech. But now, as the commercial says, Image is Everything. If you do not look the part, your message will never get through.
    - b) We spend hours transfixed by moving images on the surface of a sheet of glass, and we wonder whether we have somehow been changed by that! Of course we have been changed, and not for the better.
  4. God has never wanted us to focus on images, and yet our world is becoming increasingly image-based.
    - a) What does the Bible have to say about words and images?
      - (1) As for words, one title for Jesus Christ the Messiah is the Word -- the Word made flesh.
      - (2) And as for images? The first commandment given to the Israelites was that they have no other gods. And the second commandment? God told them not to exalt images. In God's first written communication to his people, written with words on tablets of stone by God himself, he told his people not to exalt images.
    - b) God has chosen to communicate to his creation through the written and spoken word, and we must never abandon God's chosen method of communication.
- B. The Internet can make it difficult to focus on God.**
1. In fact, the Internet can make it difficult to focus on anything!
  2. Let me say at this point that television and the Internet can both be very effective tools for evangelism. This sermon, for example, will be available on the Internet tomorrow for anyone around the world to read. The Internet is an effective and inexpensive way to potentially reach the entire world with the gospel.
  3. But if you think that TV had an effect on our society, stay tuned. The Internet in its present ubiquitous form has been with us only a few years, and yet we can already see its dramatic effects. Most of leave our TVs at home when we leave the house, but soon the Internet will be with us 24 hours a day wherever we happen to be.
  4. The Internet is already reaching the point of deification to some. It is the great invisible omniscient omnipresent force whose search engines have all the answers. We go to it first when we have a problem, and from it when find the answers and wisdom we seek.
  5. Our attention spans have seemingly been reduced to seconds as we surf from web site to web site, not taking the time to focus on any one idea for more than a few minutes.
  6. The greatest evil in our society has become boredom -- and it must be avoided at all costs.
    - a) The problem of course is that boredom is not static. What excites us today, bores us tomorrow, and so on we march like army ants looking for new excitements and new diversions.
  7. As one social critic warned, we are amusing ourselves to death. Television and the Internet can be wonderful tools, but they can also make it difficult to maintain our

spiritual focus.

**C. The complexity of our lives makes it difficult to focus on God.**

1. Recall that Jesus said:
  - a) **Matthew 6:31-33** <sup>31</sup> Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? <sup>32</sup> (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. <sup>33</sup> But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.
  - b) Did you notice that last verse? It is a focus verse! Jesus is warning us from letting our worldly pursuits so overwhelm us that they interfere with our ability to focus on God -- to seek first his kingdom.
2. Each level of complexity we add to our lives makes it more difficult to have and maintain a spiritual focus.
3. The French philosopher and scientist Pascal said "I have often said that the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room."
4. Another sage once said that the first step to mental health is to give up your position as general manager of the universe.
  - a) We try to do everything, and we end up doing nothing.
5. Why are our lives so complicated and cluttered? Why do we have so many diversions? (And when I say "our lives" I am talking now not just about the church, but about our society in general.)
  - a) Let me propose an answer to that question that you may not have considered. People's lives are cluttered and complicated and filled with endless diversions because they want them to be cluttered and complicated and filled with endless diversions.
  - b) People in our modern society wants their lives to be complicated. They want to be harried and hassled and busy. Unconsciously, they want the very thing they complain about. Why? Because without that complexity and without those diversions, they would be forced to look at themselves and confront that great gaping hole in their hearts that only God can fill.
  - c) They cannot, as Pascal said, sit quietly in their room because to do so would drive them mad.
  - d) They say they want peace and silence, but deep down they know that peace and silence would be unendurable to them. Their lives are wretched, hopeless, empty, and vain apart from God, and they are deparately trying to distract themselves from that emptiness and vanity with a million diversions.
  - e) But what about a Christian? We do not have wretchedness and death in our house. We are not hopeless and hell-bound. We have a Savior who has lifted us up out of the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into his own glorious kingdom. We have no need of diversion. We are focused on Jesus Christ, our Savior -- and that focus will make us each day more and more like him.
  - f) **2 Corinthians 3:18** But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, *even* as by the Spirit of the Lord.
6. So what then is the key to spiritual growth? The key to spiritual growth is spiritual focus. But that key is available only to those who have been added to Christ. It is available only to those who have obeyed the gospel and been added to his church.



7. But what about people outside the church? Can't they also grow spiritually through spiritual focus? No, they cannot. Why? Because people outside of Jesus Christ are spiritually dead, and dead people do not grow. To grow spiritually, you must be alive spiritually -- and we are raised from spiritual death to spiritual life at our baptism. (Romans 6:4)

## 9. Conclusion

### A. In Luke 14:15-24 we find an entire parable devoted to the topic of spiritual focus:

1. In that parable, God gives a feast and invites all to come. Yet he hears nothing but excuses in return. One has bought property, and can't come to the feast. Another has bought oxen, and can't come to the feast. Another had gotten married, and couldn't come to the feast. They were too busy for God.
2. We sing a song (#399) entitled "Jesus Calls Us."
  - a) Jesus calls us: o'er the tumult of our life's wild restless sea, day by day his sweet voice soundeth, saying "Christian, follow me."
  - b) When Jesus calls, does he get a busy signal? Do we put the author of eternal life on hold while we attend to other matters?

### B. If you are outside of Christ, I am about to let the apostle Peter tell you what you need to do to be saved. But first, let me tell what you do **NOT** need to do.

1. You do not need to make Jesus Lord of your life. Why? Because Jesus is already Lord of your life! He is Lord of everyone's life!
  - a) **Acts 2:36-38** <sup>36</sup> "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." <sup>37</sup> Now when they heard *this*, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men *and* brethren, what shall we do?" <sup>38</sup> Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."
  - b) **Philippians 2:9-11** <sup>9</sup> Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, <sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and *that* every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
    - (1) You mean to say that people who never made Jesus "lord of their life" will one day confess that Jesus is lord? Yes! On that day they will acknowledge that Jesus had always been lord of their life!
  - c) **1 Timothy 6:14-15** that you keep *this* commandment without spot, blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ's appearing, <sup>15</sup> which He will manifest in His own time, *He who is* the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

### C. What then must you do to be saved?

1. If you are outside of Jesus Christ, then you are spiritually dead. You will never grow spiritually until you are born again.
  - a) **Romans 6:4** Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.
2. What should you do? Listen to Peter in Acts 2:38. He was asked that very question, and what did he say?
  - a) Make Jesus lord of your life? No. He is already lord of lords.

- b)** Make Jesus king of your heart? No. He is already king of kings.
- c)** Peter said: "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."
- d)** Peter gave that answer in the first gospel sermon that was ever preached, and that answer is still true today.