

Message: Claim Your Time And Attention

Friends!

I wrote and rewrote today's message, and where I've ended is, maybe, my best draft yet. But it's all I've got for us.

Today's message is really straightforward. We're going to talk about this principle of claiming our time and our attention. And we'll talk about one way, one great way, in which we can focus our attention and claim our time.

I want to talk about claiming our time and attention because I think they're basic, basic to following Christ, and also because, frankly, this is something that I've just never gotten a good handle on, which reveals something or other.

If many of the things in this message series are things that I've gotten better at over the years, this is the one I've grown the least in. I have to keep it ahead of me, in front of me, all the time. A basic trouble, of course, is that I'm being outrun by distracting things that want to claim my time. We all are. We'll talk about this. Let's pray first.

Prayer:

Good Work: Claiming Our Time:

If we are going to be faithful people, people who, oh, let's build off last week, people who become more and more faithful all the time, one of the things that we must do is claim our time.

Does that communicate? We must claim our time, say that this time is for this, this time is for that. This time is for me, this time is for you, this time is for us. This time is for work, this for rest, this for play. If we don't claim our time, something else will. Time that is unclaimed by us will be claimed by something.

Here's what I know: Exhaustion claims my time more than anything else. And I don't mean that I'm exhausted. I mean this scenario: It's been a long day. There are a bunch of things that need done--work, or paying bills, or cleaning the house, or spending time in prayer, reading Scripture, making sure Sunday morning will be easier for the family--but instead of doing these things, you take a little break, and 3 hours later roll off the couch or look up from the computer and go to bed, groggy and guilty and anxious. Rather than, say, setting a time limit, or putting "watch TV out of exhaustion" on our to-do list, or simply pushing through the tiredness, getting a few things done, and going to sleep early--rather than doing any of these, each of which would be a way to claim our time, we instead let our exhaustion have it.

And when our time is claimed by something else, we almost always feel out of control. And when we feel out of control, we almost always act out in some way: over-drink, under-communicate, go shopping or lash out or try to pin down whatever we can control, as quickly as possible. We act dysfunctional.

And I just don't think I'm projecting here.

Take a moment and consider when you last felt in control of your time? And take a moment and consider how dysfunctional, or we can go further, how sinful, unkind, or faithless, you've been. There is almost always a relationship between a period in which we have no claim over our time and in which we leave behind Jesus' way of living.

We have to be people who claim the time we have, who don't wonder at the end of every single day where the day went, because we know.

Now: We are obligated people, with many relationships and responsibilities. If we don't care for our children, our friends, our parents, our neighbors, perhaps no one else will. We are people given to others, no matter how much we'd like to pretend we've been given only to ourselves or the people we like.

But in some basic way, we have to be able to let our "yes be yes" and our "no be no" and we can't do that,

we can't offer ourselves to those we are obligated to, if we can't even get a handle on where our time is going.

We end up saying no to everything and everyone out of a reactionary panic, or we say yes because we've totally lost all sense of self-ownership. Either way, this isn't like Christ, who "did only what he saw the Father doing."

What is claiming your time? What should be? What should be claiming our time, but what really is?

These two questions, if we could answer them, would reveal to us what we should say yes and no to. That may take work, but it's good work; it leaves us in control of our days, rather than out of control of, you know, everything.

And in case we're distracted right now, realizing just how out of control our claim on our own time has been, let me ask us again: What is claiming our time and what should be?

But if we're distracted, that's no surprise.

Good Work: Paying Attention

We don't pay attention very well. To live the Christian life well in the places we do our living demands that we pay attention. It is hard to pay attention; even the

phrase reveals that attention costs us something else. It takes energy to pay attention. It takes effort, and work. Distraction doesn't take much effort; all we have to do is be around, you know? Live.

There's a reason Jesus was able to just walk around all over the place, travel back and forth across Judea, and somehow find, in the few dozen stories we have of him, enough to fill our entire lives with stuff to reflect on, talk about, learn from, read. Jesus paid attention. He noticed the way people were feeling, he was mindful of the noise going on around him, he paid attention to the contexts he found himself in. He was aware of what was going on in his own heart, and able to give voice to it. Jesus paid attention to the world he lived in.

Identity In Distraction:

Absentmindedness isn't a sin; if anything, it's over-attention to our interior world. And not noticing things isn't wrong. Both these things disable our ability to connect our lives with God's work, but they aren't failures. We, though, generally aren't absentminded or oblivious. We're distracted. And we're distracted because we love to be distracted. Worse, our identities are often, built on and reinforced by interruptions to our focus.

When you no longer feel right, no longer feel like yourself, unless your phone regularly buzzes, unless

you've had time to lose yourself in a book or a game, unless the TV is on in the background or you have emails to respond to, or you've checked your Facebook or blog or stats at least once recently, then someplace... else.

This is subtle, but it's important; let me say it another way. If the only way we feel like ourselves is if we are consistently dislocated from our present moment and situation by something else--whether that's a phone call, buzz, or chirp, whether that's making sure, as soon as we get rolling on something, that we stop to check in with Facebook or the news, whether that's having to have the TV or News on in the background, or being in some codependent relationship with a person who never leaves you alone, it doesn't matter. If we need to be stimulated away from the present in order to be ourselves, our identity is built on distraction.

Gossip, which the Bible lays out as a sin, as not Christian, does the exactly same thing as checking our phone all the time. It dislocates us from the present, and moves us mentally and emotionally somewhere other than where we physically are. And for those of us who are outliers here, who are great at burrowing down and focusing deeply, then be thankful, not prideful, and remember only our father in heaven is perfect.

Being attentive is a skill; to not be able to focus our attention is a disability, and it's one that, somehow, many of us who could focus our attention have embraced. Are there those of us who have a deficit of attention; yes, and this is more work for us than others, but that does not excuse us from the task.

A person can talk about paying attention, because it's work, but you can also talk about giving attention to something, and that points out how great a gift attention is. And yet, some of us have so deeply over-leveraged our lives by inviting distractions and distracting things into them that we no longer have the gift of attention to give.

Can distraction from ourselves be good? Sure, now and then. In great emotion. Can an interruption be exactly what we need now and then? Sure, particularly in very stressful, difficult, inflexible circumstances. But that's not the way most of us live. Most of us, though--not you all, other less put-together people, like me--most of us live reactionary, inattentive lives. We don't claim our time, and we don't practice an attentive life.

We long ago gave up the Christian responsibility of being attentive for the stimulating pleasure of something other than what we're doing.

So what can we do? Because when a person's in a pickle, they outta make relish!

Strategy:

Here's a strategy for the three of us who like them. I could fill this out much more than this, and will if you want me to. But: Keep a list of where your time has gone, what's claimed it. This takes so little effort; you can do it while you're going to the bathroom instead of distracting yourself with your phone.

Here's what will be on it, in some measure:

Strategy: Working, Resting, Playing:

Working, resting, and playing. We get what work is, we know that one. Effort that goes to taking care of our basic needs. Playing is, I think, work unrelated to want: energy, effort, the practice of competency that has nothing to do with food, shelter, and bills. And if play at its best energizes us, if work at its best provides for us, then rest at its best restores us.

And I think we'll discover, if we list out what has claimed our time that day, that most of it went to work and play. Entertainment, by the way, is play, not rest, not unless we're wild outliers, and when we get off the couch and stretch after binge-watching Netflix or playing video games or watching football we hop up out of the couch, ready to engage the world, unlike those poor saps who just feel more tired.

So we make our lists, of what claimed our time. Work, rest, and play. And we'll discover almost no rest, some

play, and mostly work.

When people are trying to eat healthier, they keep a food journal, and just keeping a food journal helps them eat less, because no one notices, pays attention, to just how much they eat. No one notices, pays attention, to just how much time we spend doing the things we do.

Differences:

But what claims our time, in big huge chunks, and where our attention goes are not the same things.

So we may be “at work,” but what we’re doing “at work” is surfing online for hours. We may be “with our kids” but what we’re doing “with our kids” is chasing down Facebook posts while they do whatever around us. We may be “eating dinner” but what we’re doing while we “eat” is watching tv or reading a magazine. We disengage or invite distraction from whatever it is we mean to be doing. So we could, if we wanted, take these lists of what “claimed our time” and honestly consider what claimed our attention in the middle of those chunks of time spent, on the surface, doing things.

Where we paid attention. What did we pay attention to, and why?

And this is where, in preparing today’s message, I

become so hopeless. How can I possibly persuade us to focus? How can I possibly persuade us to be attentive? The prodigal son didn't wake up to himself until he was hungry for the the poop-covered things pigs wouldn't eat.

Our addiction to stimulating distractions and dislocating, immersive entertainments always seems to win. Everyone of us has a thing we'd rather be doing right now, almost regardless of when "right now" is, and if we can do it, we will. And the greatest tragedy is the way the the people we've been given to become not people to love, but people who are in the way of the stimulating distraction that we want.

We need rehab when it comes to distraction. We've got a built in thing, though, as Christians that can restore our ability to focus in us if we want to leverage it. It's in our settings; a menu item. All we have to do is click it.

But it's a hard sell. It's fasting. And I'm presenting this, oh, practice, this habit, this work, in embarrassingly pragmatic terms: As a way to destroy our addiction to diversion, distraction, and disruption.

Good Work: Fasting:

Fasting fascinates most of the Christians I talk to. It's like a duck-billed platypus. It's some really unusual, strange thing that doesn't fit at all with how we live.

You know, like a duck-billed platypus. What is that? When the Bible talks about “fasting,” it’s usually talking about going without food. This is the understood meaning of “fasting,” of “to fast,” it’s to go without food. It gets used in other ways now and then, which are great powerful metaphors--check out Isaiah 58 if you’re bored--but the reason fasting can be a great powerful metaphor is because it’s something to begin with, a going without, and it’s going without food at base. Fasting can be more than “going without food,” it can be a “going without” in general, as a principle.

We’ve talked about fasting in the past. It’s easier to say what it’s not than what it is. It’s not “going without” something in order to be impressive to God’s People. Jesus comes down on this hard.

Fasting also isn’t a way to mortgage God. We don’t fast & all of a sudden get whatever it is we want. In fact, in fasting, we discover what God wants from us, because fasting punches holes into our regular routine and our regular way of life, which regularly looks at the world from our set of wants and needs, not God’s.

But if this isn’t what fasting should do or should look like--it shouldn’t be done to manipulate God, a fool’s errand, and it shouldn’t be done in a way that brings personal glory--what should it do and how should it look?

I'll take the always safe route and assume for us, for the moment, that we believe fasting, going without food, or fasting as a principle, going without something is at least an "ought to do" thing for Christians, because Jesus did it and talks about us doing it to.

Fasting: What It Does:

Fasting does all sorts of things, of course.

Fasting Wakes Us Up:

One of the things it does is force ourselves awake. It's a spiritual slap in the face when we're spiritually falling asleep at the wheel. It makes us aware of what we consume, and the ways we consume it. It makes us aware of what we take for granted--take as irrevocably and rightfully granted to us. Fasting helps us remember the granter, the one who has granted us anything that we have stewardship over in this life.

Fasting returns our attention to God, and isn't just something we do because spiritually and emotionally and psychologically is good for us, benefits us.

Fasting--going without--is also, more positively, a special responsive act of worship. It's a special responsive act of worship, and like the way baptism is a "pledge of a good conscience toward God," fasting is a pledge to God of our awareness that we need Him. Nothing gets our attention like a hunger pain.

But we need woken up, we need our attention to be focused somewhere. We need to invite hunger pains into our lives, figuratively and literally.

We need to invite into our lives cravings that we don't immediately go meet, but instead allow the craving to first, claim our attention, and then, allow that to wake us to whatever is that is claiming our time generally in that moment. Does this make sense? We go without something, and its lack draws our attention. The pain of not having it gets our attention.

And this would be, oh, self-abusive, if it weren't for the fact that we are warm and well-fed. We have many relationships and leisure; we have, by and large, enough, and more than enough.

Opening Up Time; Reclaiming It:

If fasting creates hunger pains that focus our attention, whether those are literal hunger pains, or cravings for the phone we've given up for an hour, the website we've committed to not checking for a day, the sports team we don't follow for an afternoon, whatever it is, if it creates hunger pains and cravings, it also leaves a hole behind.

We need to be honest about this. If you're used to eating whatever you want, or having sex with your spouse whenever you want--Paul talks explicitly about fasting from sex for the sake of prayer--or buying

whatever you want, or watching, or reading, or playing whatever, whenever you want, then if you stop that thing, there is going to be an empty place where that activity of consumption used to be.

That hole will be filled, that space will be filled, because unclaimed time in our lives is filled. It is. So if, in seeking to fast, because the hunger pains and cravings focus your attention, you discover that you now have more time, and you will, because to stop an activity is to create time, space, where that activity occurred, we have to be really, really, thoughtful about what we do with that new time.

Perhaps we just work more. Perhaps we just play more. I'd suggest we strategize a way to rest more.

Or we pray, read the Bible, maybe even gather with Christians to talk about how hard it is to claim our time, much less figure out how God would have us use it.

My point is simply that to fast, which God has given us, this duck-billed platypus exercise, will not only focus our attention, but will create time for us, and that time will be filled. So we ought to take seriously how we fill it.

Think of how much more time you'd have if you gave up, geez, TV, Facebook, texting, and sports for the next two weeks. And then let me interrupt, because

fasting isn't a way to get more time to fill with stuff; it's a way to recalibrate, to recenter, to return our attentions and considerations to God.

Too much of what claims our time simply doesn't have much to do with being faithful to Jesus. That's not because God doesn't care about it; it's because by and large we've forgotten to talk to God about these things. I mean, who has time for prayer, right? And if we create holes in our time through the gift of fasting, we have to realize that they'll be filled. What's easy, what's great, is that the cravings and hunger pains that fasting brings can focus our attention, and help us make choices about our time that are wise, faithful, and constructive for all our relationships, all our work, all our play, all our rest.

But this all begins with us realizing just how deeply the world we live in has co-opted our attention and the time we have.

Conclusion:

I feel like today I'm giving us half-thoughts, half-persuasions. We need a retreat on our atrophying ability to focus our attention, not twenty minutes, with half-articulated theology.

And I regret that I can't persuade us to pay attention to our lack of attention, to claim our time, and in that space, consider the ways all sorts of other things are claiming it. But I can't. I want God to persuade us of it,

but God seems to give us such great freedom that until we realize how dysfunctional, or even sinful, our ways of life are, we don't do much about them. I'd not see us waylaid in that way, but get in front of this.

Much of our economy is built on the commodification of our attention; where your eyes go, and how long they stay there, what your ears perk up to, and how long you listen, this is worth something to someone who is trying to sell you something. I wonder if, by the time Bo is my age, every single space will be plastered with an advertisement, and everything will be free as long as you don't really pay attention to it, but pay attention to the ads that support it.

We have to take responsibility to create for ourselves ad-free spaces, distraction free spaces. We have to protect our time and claim it, because if we don't consciously give and withhold permission to have our time, it's simply going to be taken from us. We'll give it away, and go to bed tired, and wake up tired, and we'll be strangers to ourselves. I've spent so much time neglecting this, and it's made me a person of less depth, less faithfulness, less concern for God's things and more concern for my own than I ought to be at this stage in my journey with Christ. All I can do, all any of us can do, is move forward with the Lord deliberately and attentively. If we sub-contract management of our time to whatever is most distracting, stimulating, or immersive, we're going to

live frustrated, out of control lives. We'll be hurt and hurt others because of it.

I think fasting is a way to focus our attention, to change the way we interact with the time that we have, and to redirect us to God until these things can become habit. I could be wrong, but we've got to start somewhere.