



Where's My Attention?

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Mark 13:1-8

It's hard to keep our attention focused. We treat many children in our society for having a deficit of attention, yet we know it is a slippery slope for all of us. Some need the medication, others of us just lapse into a rambling span of attention, whether from the constantly shifting stimuli around us, the various demands on our time, the barrage of media influences, or a habitual drive for some external source of entertainment. With all the competing demands for our attention, even when we do focus, it is hard to focus on God and God's priorities. What does God want us to focus on, anyway?

The disciples had their own issues. They were amazed far too often by the same things others had taught them to value. They looked at life from the lens of their culture, their experience, their own points of view and frames of reference. Jesus was constantly calling them to see life from a different place. He wanted them to look at God's issues, not their own. It was a seemingly losing battle with them. No matter how often Jesus called them to a new assessment, they shifted back to their traditional concepts of life with its priorities. How often do we do the same?

One day they were leaving the Jerusalem Temple with its immense walls, the huge stones laid one upon another in mind-boggling fashion. The disciples pointed the enormity of the construction out to Jesus, sure that he would be just as impressed with it as they were. It was a masterful feat of engineering and craftsmanship. It gave every appearance of being able to last through eternity. Jesus wasn't impressed. He said, "You see all this? It won't last. It will be utterly destroyed." Do we focus on things that will just be destroyed?

That was the last thing they expected to hear from him! Imagine their consternation at his words. It was about as unbelievable as anything else Jesus had uttered. It did not fit at all in their expectations of Messiah. After all, Messiah was to usher in a new lease on life for Israel, and they had come to expect Jesus to be Messiah! How could that be, if the Temple in Jerusalem, the seat of God's power and presence on earth was to be completely destroyed? How could that happen if Jesus were Messiah? How could Jesus be Messiah and the destruction of Jerusalem be imminent? It made no sense to them.

On getting outside the city, where they could still see the looming temple structures, they asked Jesus to say more about it. They wanted information. They wanted to know when, how, and why. They wanted the details of this unexpected, but looming destruction. They trusted Jesus' words, even while they struggled to fit them their models of Messiah and the restoration of Israel they so expectantly awaited. Do we still try to force Jesus into our own models?

While Jesus called them to new perspectives, they were stuck in the old, established ones. Jesus had talked about the reign of God in terms of loving God and one another. Jesus had talked about it in terms of serving one another. They still thought in symbols of power, strength, and force. They thought in terms of intimidation. How could Messiah's reign begin amid the destruction of the most visible symbol of God's power, presence, and authority on earth?

Jesus' answer begins with recognition of their inability to focus on God's plan of redemption. He knew they were focused on the physical power structures of God's presence. They were looking to the coming of Messiah in full glory and power. They equated the destruction of the Temple with the extraordinary, which for them could only be the long-expected inauguration of Messiah's reign.

Jesus said, “Don’t be fooled. Many will try to deceive you regarding my coming, but the one has nothing to do with the other. They will point to all sorts of signs that mean absolutely nothing. The end is still further ahead.” Do we need this kind of reminder to look beyond the immediate chaos of life?

Jesus was not consumed with political issues, the sovereignty of Israel, the overthrow of Rome, of even receiving a crown as King of Israel. In fact, he had refused the crowds who wanted to force him into that position. Jesus was uninterested in leading a military rebellion against Rome. He told his disciples that being great in his reign had nothing to do with power over others. It was about serving one another at the point of their needs. It was about declaring real love through our actions. It had nothing to do with force.

The Temple spoke of power, majesty, wealth, and sovereignty. While they looked at structures to impress, Jesus sought completely different means to enact his agenda and ministry. He sought out those in greatest need and met their needs without fanfare. He sacrificed to help and express God’s love. He called people to dependence, not to independence. He called them to confession, not to coercion. He called others to release their anger, resentment, and sense of personal rights that they might rest in God’s provision and direction, regardless of their circumstances. What distracts us from Jesus’ priorities?

Displays of power, independence, and pride did not impress him. Imposters claiming to be God’s anointed would rise to lead Jews in battle against, Rome, but he would not. They would come operating under a different set of criteria, criteria set in opposition to all that Jesus had preached, taught, and modeled. They would come to deal in violence, revenge, and death. He had come to deal in peace, life, and forgiveness. How could he who preached forgiveness and love for enemies lead a nation in battle against their political oppressors?

That the false christs would claim to be God’s anointed did not surprise him. That many believers would fall for the ruse did not surprise him, either. They would be distracted as they heard the desires of their own hearts on the lips of others claiming to speak for God. That was to be expected. For ages people had been distracted in just that way. Jesus wanted to warn them again.

They had liked Jesus’ direction, emphases, and expression of God’s loving character. They had rejoiced in the grace, mercy and forgiveness he had preached and modeled. They had basked in the glow of God’s care and nearness his life proclaimed. It would be so easy, however, for them to slip into the fantasy that such might be obtained through violence, power, and destruction. It would be easy, not due to any sense that it fell in line with Jesus, but because it fell in line with their natural leanings. They would set aside the purpose of peace and love to achieve it through anger, violence, and war.

It would be tempting. We so easily come to depend on the visible trappings of power. We so easily become distracted by that power. We so easily forget that our tendencies to depend on power and material means quickly overshadow God’s purposes and plans. Not only that, they run counter to God’s expressed will in Christ Jesus. Where is it that we try to follow the guidance of our society in conflict with the gospel?

If we seek redemption, love, and grace, they is only achievable through Christ Jesus and the way he taught us to live. Distraction may take us down another path, but it could never lead us where God would take us. Jesus was not in the business of alarming people. Jesus was not in the business of violence. Jesus was not in the business of using power to bend others to his will. Those who would take us down such a path are little more than a distraction from the purposes and attitudes of God: love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness without end. These are worth our attention. They were worthy of Jesus’.

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