



THE REALITY AND REMEDY OF DISTRACTIONS

I was a better person after I spent time with Dallas Willard. His humility and wisdom resonated with soul care and encouragement—a catalyst to my spiritual formation. Many ah-ha moments came while in his presence or in his books.

Dallas helped me to think and discover, like when he wrote, “What characterizes most of our local congregations, whether big or little in size, is simple *distraction*.”¹ His statement prompted me to ask over 100 pastors and church leaders the question: “What things can distract you or your church from being successful in God’s eyes?” The answers to this survey—often expressed with passion and illustrated with current examples—fell into three distinct categories.

The Reality of Distractions

By far the biggest distraction cited was *busyness*. The survey clearly revealed that people are wrapped up in activity, both outside and inside their church lives. “We’re too busy for real relationships,” admitted a church worker. Parents conceded to the lure of multiple after-school activities as they seek to give their kids rich, full lives. Pastors bemoaned the fact that they have become program-driven in order to “take it to the next level.” “I am so busy doing the work of the Lord,” articulated one pastor, “that I forget the Lord of the work. This is *the* struggle of my life.”

Many pastors behave as if they are paid to be busy. They become kingdom plate spinners, putting on an impressive show of juggling schedules and multi-tasking. People applaud them as they run around to keep up the plates—the preaching and teaching ministry, staff leadership and development, congregational care and visitation, community involvement and building campaign, personal integrity and family life, etc. Then a plate falls—and then another. Broken pieces litter God’s kingdom.²

One pastor shared with me that he knows when he has been with Jesus during the week. He said, “When I get up to preach on Sunday morning, I can look my people in their eyes and preach the Word with boldness.” He then confessed, “Lately I have been looking above their heads, looking off to the side, or staring down at my notes because I know that I have not spent time with the Lord. I have been too busy doing other things.”

I recall Dallas telling a class of seminarians about an experiment done with mice. A group of mice were injected with amphetamines (stimulants), placed in a box, and then observed. All the mice, because of their hyperactivity, died. After these dead mice were removed, another group of mice were placed into the box, again, after being injected with amphetamines. But this time, one mouse that was not injected was also placed into the box. That one mouse, surrounded by other mice jumping up and down, started doing the same thing. And like all the others, it too died because of its own hyperactivity.

¹ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 235.

² A parable of this first distraction is found at the opening of the first chapter of *The Divine Conspiracy*: “Recently a pilot was practicing high-speed maneuvers in a jet fighter. She turned the controls for what she thought was a steep ascent—and flew straight into the ground. She was unaware that she had been flying upside down.” Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 1.

Sometimes I feel like I'm that mouse. I live in a culture that is addicted to hurry. We clutter our calendars and fill our date books. The electronic devices that organize our lives need more memory. Activity justifies our existence. I want to be like Jesus—successful in God's eyes yet never in a hurry—but the pace of life around me affects me. I'm distracted.

Another distraction mentioned by those I surveyed was *meanness*. Christians can be mean. And when they are, it can be a great distraction. One pastor shared about a lady in the church who admitted that her goal was to split the staff. A spirit of criticism and negativity is often brought to the worship service. As one pastor lamented, "I need to hit a homerun every time I preach." Mirroring the world's *modus operandi*, Christians operate as if it is better to be right than to be good. As Dallas observed, they believe "being right licenses you to be mean, and, indeed, *requires* you to be mean—righteously mean, of course."³

There are three types of people in every church. There are *caterpillars*. These are the parishioners who crawl in and then crawl out on Sunday morning. They never get involved. Another group are the *pillars*. These saints lift up and support the ministry of the church. They pray for the pastors. They are active and involved. The third group is what I call the *pills*. Every church has them. They make business meetings trying and tiring. Though inclined to highlight problems, they decline to be a part of the solution. They gossip; and they have long memories: "I will never forgive that [man/woman/pastor]." Pills induce a climate of suspicion and mistrust as they use meanness to manage and control others.

By nature, caterpillars can have a metamorphous take place. They can have a change of heart. They can become pillars. The message to pillars is: God bless you; and may you do what you do out of delight and not duty. As for pills, most think they are pillars. They don't see the log in their own eye as they point at the speck in their brother's eye. Recently I shared about caterpillars-pillars-pills to a church. After the service, as I was greeting people at the back door, a lady came right up to me and said, "I sure hope those pills were listening to you today." She, like all of us, needs to do some self-examination.

The third distraction identified by those I surveyed was *worldliness*. There is confusion and concern over what's the bottom line for ministry today. When a seminarian placed in charge of the church's discipleship program turned in a list of who was discipling whom to her senior pastor, he told her, "I don't need the names, just the numbers." One church worker stated emphatically while surveyed, "We are so wrapped up in the numbers game. My church is too mechanical, like an assembly line where relationships become insignificant."

Dallas often pointed out that we increasingly measure success in the church with the "ABCs of church growth" (Attendance, Buildings, and Cash). We've become Excel-based churches that chart everything, instead of Word-based churches that proclaim the good life found in an ongoing, interactive, ever-deepening relationship with Jesus. Business models shape our ecclesiology and define our success.⁴ When I asked Dallas what he thought was the biggest issue facing pastors today, he answered without any hesitation, "How they define success." Tragically, their definitions often come from the world's dictionary. As Dallas observed, "It is so easy for the leader today to get caught up in illusory goals, pursuing the marks of success which come from our training as Christian leaders or which are simply imposed by the world. It is big, Big, always *BIG*, and *BIGGER STILL!* That is the contemporary imperative. Thus we fail to take seriously the nurture and training of those, however few, who stand constantly by us."⁵

³ Ibid., 238. Dallas further exposed the practice of meanness and "condemnation engineering" in chapter 7.

⁴ I recently heard that 90% of church plants in America—like new businesses—fail. Tragically, yet not surprisingly, we get business results when we use business models.

⁵ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 246.

The Remedy of Distractions

Only after I categorized and ranked them did I notice that the first letters in the distractions are BMW! Naming our distractions better enables us to confront them. Instead of getting run over by Busyness-Meanness-Worldliness (“the Ultimate *Distraction* Machine”), we should learn to routinely “stop, look, listen” before we step out into and make our way through the traffic of life and ministry. Following this elementary rule as we approach *the* cross-walk (“Take up your cross and follow Me”) helps us to stay focused on the road of transformation that God sets before us.

Stop. God says, “*Be still* and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). In the New American Standard Bible, this command (not suggestion) begins, “Cease striving.” In the margin it reads, “Let go, relax”—stop! Stop the busyness. Relax your grip on control and the need to achieve. Let go of the burden to make things happen.

The spiritual discipline of solitude positions us to do this—to be still and know that God is God. Purposefully being alone with God awakens us to the fact that this is “a God-bathed and God-permeated world”⁶ where He is the hero. He gets the credit. As God states in the second half of Psalm 46:10, “I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.” “Solitude well practiced,” explained Dallas, “will break the power of busyness, haste, isolation, and loneliness. You will see that the world is not on your shoulders after all.”⁷ In solitude we learn to entrust results to God. He is the one who does the work. Unlike any other deity, He “works for those who wait for Him” (Isaiah 64:4).⁸

If anyone could justify busyness, Jesus could—but He didn’t. Though He was sent to save the world, He was not distracted by demands or enticed by momentum. He simply lived with an assurance and confidence in His Father’s love and timing. The discipline of solitude helped to foster and maintain this strength and wisdom. He clearly saw that every opportunity did not equal God’s will. Jesus would “often slip away to the wilderness and pray” (Luke 5:16)—even when the people sought after Him.

If Jesus in His humanity needed to step away from people and be alone with God, then how much more do you and I need to do the same! A practical way to engage in this transforming habit is to make a date with God. Schedule an appointment with Him. Write it down in your calendar. On this date—whether it is for 30 minutes, an hour, or longer—I invite you to reflect on the following five sentences. Hear God say to you:

Be still and know that I am *God*.
Be still and know that *I am*.
Be still and *know*.
Be *still*.
Be.

Look. We are told in Hebrews 12:2 to “*fix our eyes on Jesus*, the author and perfecter of faith.” In a world where so many beliefs compete for our attention, Jesus presents the best information on the most important subjects. Only in Him can we live in the *real* world. This reality is not a personal opinion, blind commitment, or treasured tradition; it is knowledge of what actually is (i.e., truth) that sets us free to flourish in God’s immediately available kingdom.

Student of Jesus learn from Him how to live and love. They learn how to be right *and* good. Dallas consistently exemplified this reality during the times that I spent with him. He was a good writer and speaker, but he was an even better person. He embodied grace, not meanness.

⁶ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 61.

⁷ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 36.

⁸ Incidentally, this is a verse that Dallas at times cited when signing a book.

Oh, and he was smart. How was Christ formed in him? He was a disciple of Jesus, *the* smartest person *ever* to walk this earth. Dallas fixed his eyes on Jesus. He confessed, “I am learning from [Jesus] how to lead my life as he would lead my life if he were I.”⁹ He spent decades intentionally abiding in God’s truth.¹⁰ He heard, read, studied, memorized, and meditated on the Word. When asked by university students and faculty why he was a follower of Jesus, Dallas often responded, “Whom else do you have in mind?” Good question!

In the familiar story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42), we find one sister “distracted with all her preparations,” while the other one “was listening to the Lord’s word, seated at His feet.” One was pulled in every direction, while the other one took the position of a disciple. One tells Jesus what He must say, while the other one listens to what He wishes to say. One focused on her duties, while the other one fixed her eyes on her Lord. One was acting like a pill, while the other one was becoming a pillar. Which one are you?

Listen. God the Father only speaks twice in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), and both times He says the same thing. He declares at Jesus’ baptism and transfiguration, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased.” At the transfiguration He adds, “Listen to Him!” (Matthew 17:5; in the King James Version, “Hear ye Him!”). Out of all the things that God the Father could say to us, He chooses to reveal that He loves His Son. And that everything Jesus says and does has His full stamp of approval.

Jesus radiates godliness, not worldliness. He is the one to listen to and follow if we want to live as God intends. Through the discipline of prayer we can learn to recognize His voice. We spend time with Him, observing regular times for listening and talking about matters that matter to both of us. We welcome His “still small voice” to bring guidance and comfort. Dallas shared the following personal note: “I have learned not to worry about whether or not asking for guidance is going to ‘work.’ I know that it does not *have* to work, but I am sure that it will work if God has something he really wants me to know or do. This is *because I am sure of how great and good he is.*”¹¹

On the Mount of Transfiguration, right after Peter, James, and John hear God’s thunderous charge, “Listen to Him,” Jesus speaks to them. While they are on the ground afraid, Jesus comes up to them, stretches out His hand, and quietly says, “Arise, and do not be afraid.” When the disciples lifted up their eyes, “they saw no one, except Jesus Himself alone.”

They were totally focused on Jesus—undistracted!

Many pastors, parishioners, and indeed entire congregations need to hear Jesus say to them today, “Arise, and do not be afraid.” Some of God’s people are haunted by the past. Voices from long ago trap us into thinking that we are unblessable. For others, the struggle faced is a current affair. A present reality confronts us. Right now we are worried and bothered. We see no way to escape the rat race. Still others live in fear because of what looms and lurks up ahead. The future (foreseen accurately or not) consumes us. Anxious about tomorrow, we cease to live today.

Yes, we are distracted. But with this reality comes a remedy. Jesus offers a life in “The Kingdom Among Us” where busyness, meanness, and worldliness are unnecessary and uninviting. Those of us involved in this divine conspiracy and who undergo a renovation of the heart will increasingly become the kind of people who routinely and naturally “stop, look, listen” to Jesus on the road of transformation—to His glory and our joy!

⁹ Dallas Willard, *Knowing Christ Today* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 54.

¹⁰ How apropos that the words “Truth Shall Make You Free” are engraved on the outside wall of the philosophy building at USC where Dallas taught in and had an office in for over four decades.

¹¹ Dallas Willard, *In Search of Guidance* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 215 (his emphasis).