

CHRISTIAN EYES — WEEK 3

STAYING ON TRACK



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is **The Healing of a Blind Man by Duccio di Buoninsegna**

Many things can interfere with our Christian eyes. In the parable of the sower, we see the spectrum of ways we get distracted. In the Sermon of the Mount we see how our own hearts interfere. In Paul insisting the magistrates escort him out of prison, we see him not get distracted.

And in Stephen praying for the people stoning him, we see strong Christian eyes to the very end.

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1 Matthew 13:3–8, 18–23 (ESV)

And he told them many things in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.” ...

“Hear then the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

I said earlier that distractions can cause us to revert to our regular eyes. The rocky ground and the thorns are opposite examples of distractions. *Tribulation or persecution* are on one end of the distraction spectrum, *cares of the world* and *the deceitfulness of riches* on the other. They pretty much cover the whole range.

And beware; *the deceitfulness of riches* gets specific mention for good reason. Riches are uniquely dangerous. That’s why Jesus taught about the challenges with saving the rich so often (in Matthew 19:23–24, Luke 6:24, and Luke 18:18–25). One good thing about trials is they can be a wake-up call. In a trial you pay attention and think. Trials can trigger you to remember your Christian eyes.

But riches make you spiritually drowsy.

We tend to think that this parable is about different kinds of people. It is, but I’ve been a different person at different times. I was the stone-cold path for many years. Plenty of seed was lost during that time.

So, don’t think that each of us is just one kind of soil and thus will only suffer from one kind of distraction. You can be rich and in a trial at the same time. The enemy wants you to be drowsy while you’re under attack.

2020 has been a year of rocks for many people. While the year will be remembered for a single virus, the tribulations it spawned came from all directions. Some were injured, others impoverished, others made into pariahs. We even saw a bit of how *persecution arises on account of the word*.

We long for a different year. Pray that this one has tilled the soil. We need a revival.

2 Acts 16:35–39

And when it was day, the magistrates sent the officers, saying, “Let those men go.”

So the keeper of the prison reported these words to Paul, saying, “The magistrates have sent to let you go. Now therefore depart, and go in peace.”

But Paul said to them, “They have beaten us openly, uncondemned Romans, and have thrown us into prison. And now do they put us out secretly? No indeed! Let them come themselves and get us out.”

And the officers told these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Romans. Then they came and pleaded with them and brought them out, and asked them to depart from the city.

This is a perfect example of Christian eyes not getting distracted. Paul’s challenge to the magistrates looks nuts. It gains him nothing.

At least that’s what it looks like to secular eyes. Paul is putting his release at risk—and for what?

For the kingdom. Paul is happy to risk his good fortune in having all the charges dropped so that his reputation and his witness for the kingdom are restored. His personal safety is only important to the extent that it helps advance the kingdom.

And it wasn’t really risk anyway. Secular eyes see the universe as random and so see risk in most anything. Christian eyes see God as Lord of His creation. He may decide to put us through trials, but that’s not what the word risk means.

So, Paul keeps his focus through all the excitement. He’s happy about being released, but that’s not what’s important.

When you’re not distracted.

There’s another, advanced lesson in this passage.

Notice what the potential distraction was. It wasn’t Paul being in prison; it was Paul being released from prison. Since Paul was surely praying to be released, this leads to a curious rule.

You can be distracted by answered prayer.

The mechanism is like with riches; your ego kicks in, and you think you’ve got everything under control.

The rule about spiritual distractions is pretty much the same as the rule about distractions when driving. Distractions all have one thing in common.

They’re distracting.

3 Matthew 5:8

*“Blessed are the pure in heart,
For they shall see God.”*

In Biblical languages, “heart” refers to the seat of one’s personality. Love, hate, fear, etc. come from the heart.

*Keep your heart with all diligence,
For out of it spring the issues of life. — Proverbs 4:23*

But it’s more than just the source of your emotions; it’s the seat of your morality and ethics—even sin.

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me. — Psalm 51:10*

*The heart is deceitful above all things
and beyond cure.
Who can understand it? — Jeremiah 17:9*

So, what does Jesus mean by *pure in heart*?

Well, consider what an impure heart is. The Greek word translated as “pure” (katharoi) means pure, clean, undefiled. It’s related to catharsis. The impurities that need to be “purged” are things like *deceitfulness*.

But note well that when your heart is being *deceitful above all things*, it’s mainly deceiving you. The *pure in heart* are simply not deceived. Christian eyes see God in everything because God is in everything. It’s not so much that a pure heart enables us to see God; it’s that an impure heart prevents it.

It’s the deceitfulness of our hearts that keeps us from seeing Him.

You can’t purify your own heart; only the Holy Spirit can. Prayer is the key. Psalm 51:7–11 is perfect for this.

*Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Make me hear joy and gladness,
That the bones You have broken may rejoice.
Hide Your face from my sins,
And blot out all my iniquities.*

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from Your presence,
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.*

4 Acts 6:8–7:3

And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. Then they secretly induced men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. They also set up false witnesses who said, “This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us.” And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.

Then the high priest said, “Are these things so?”

And he said, “Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran, and said to him, ‘Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.’

This is a perfect example of Christian eyes in action. To secular eyes it looks like Stephen’s in a tough spot, but his Christian eyes see a captive audience and a golden opportunity to preach.

Stephen’s response to the high priest’s question runs 52 verses. It’s the longest sermon recorded in Acts. Peter’s Pentecost sermon is only 23 verses.

And Stephen’s “answer” ignores the question. When the high priest asks him, “*Are these things so?*” he’s referring to the accusations, “*We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.*” and, “*This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law.*”

The claim that Stephen speaks *blasphemous words against* anything is absurd. The only time Stephen speaks “against” anyone or anything is at the end (in Acts 7:51–53) when he accuses his audience.

“You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.”

His lighting into them at the end is a curious turn. Stephen was making a brilliant defense up to that point. To secular eyes, it looks like he suddenly remembered that he’s supposed to lose; so he throws the match.

But Stephen’s not a pro wrestler; he’s a Christian.

Who cares about winning? This is about the kingdom.

Always be on the lookout for a chance to preach. Being on defense can give you a captive audience.

5 Acts 7:57–8:1a

Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Now Saul was consenting to his death.

Stephen shows his Christian eyes in his final prayer, “*Lord, do not charge them with this sin.*”

This prayer presumably didn’t convert anyone at that moment, but it planted some major seeds. No one who heard him is going to forget his amazing words. Those seeds will never stop trying to sprout.

And Stephen did the best he could in planting those seeds when he *cried out with a loud voice*.

Imagine Saul going through the rest of his life with Stephen’s last words ringing in his ears.

Stephen uses a powerful apologetic tool here—the element of surprise. In praying for his attackers, he’s forcing them to wonder how what they’re witnessing is even possible.

He’s just not supposed to do that.

So, we encounter another great irony with Christian Eyes. If you don’t get distracted, what you do can be distracting to others. They get distracted from their normal way of thinking and may start wondering what they’re missing.

This applies to even the most mundane of situations. For example, suppose you’re in a casino (just passing through, of course) and you see a man playing the slots.

But instead of staying at the same slot machine like a normal person, he plays only one pull and then moves to another machine. Furthermore, he doesn’t just pull the lever, he does something unusual with it (jiggles it, or pushes it up, or whatever). Who cares? Right?

No, he’s got your attention. What does he know that you don’t? Is he a repairman checking for a defect? Or is he just trying to make money off a defect?

This illustration is silly, but it shows the distractive power of doing the unexpected. Even in this simple case, an unusual behavior is still enough to distract. Bigger surprises are even more distracting.

Christian eyes lead to Christian decisions. Stephen’s decision to pray for his tormentors, instead of saying something “normal,” should give everyone pause.

What makes it so powerful is that there’s no counterargument. It proves his faith is genuine.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Which kinds of soil have you been?
2. Ever had good news make you slip up?
3. When has your heart deceived you?
4. Have you ever had to defend your faith?
5. How have people proved their faith genuine?

Items for prayer: