

# THE GREATEST GIFT

June 20, 2010

Texts – Psalm 8  
Matthew 6: 22-23, 7: 3-8

*“The greatest gift of God,”* John Powell, a Roman Catholic priest writes, *“is the gift of life. The greatest sin of human life,”* he goes on, *“is to return that gift ungratefully and unopened.”* [Through Seasons of the Heart, John Powell, S.J., Tabor Publishing, 1987, p. 379]

His words resonate with me. *“The greatest gift of God is the gift of life”* . . . . I believe that. I start with that. It is a gift. You are a gift. I am a gift. This, right now, is a gift. It doesn't have to be. You don't have to be. I don't have to be. We just are.

Do you ever feel that way? I hope so. There are moments for me when I'm traveling through the countryside, or looking at the mountains, or watching the lake shimmering in the light of a sunset, and it just fills me with wonder and joy. How beautiful it is. How incredible it is. How wonderfully lucky we are to just be here to see it and to enjoy it.

It's not only nature that elicits this in me. Sometimes human nature does too. When my children were born, I was overwhelmed by a sense of wonder and awe. Such a gift! Words don't even begin to touch it, do they? They don't for me. And you know, that doesn't change no matter how much older they grow. Whether it's six minutes after they're born or six years or twenty six years, there's still that wonder, that awe, that sense of “gifted-ness” about them, isn't there? Not all the time, maybe . . . . How well I remember those days when I'd look at my kids and think – “You know, I wouldn't give you up for a million bucks, but I wouldn't give a nickel for another one just like you!” They can be exasperating, but so can we all. So can we all.

“Today is a gift,” the old saying goes, “that is why it is called ‘the present.’” But it is hard to maintain this awareness, isn't it? If we're lucky those moments do come when we see it clearly, but soon enough the ebb and flow of life move us on and away. How do you hold on to

it?

We are given a clue, I think, in the sixth and seventh chapters of Matthew. “*The eye is the lamp of the body,*” Jesus says. “*If your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness.*” What’s that mean? Well consider . . .

In the world of race car driving, when new drivers are learning how to race, one of the first things they are taught is what to focus on when they go into a spin. The natural tendency is to focus on the wall which you’re trying to avoid hitting. The result is that you usually end up hitting it. New race car drivers are taught instead not to focus on the wall, but on where they want to go. The lesson is simple – your car will follow your nose. Translate that into the business of living, and it becomes – your life will follow your focus.

“*The eye is the lamp of the body,*” Jesus said. He might have said, “it is the window through which light enters our lives.” If the window is clean or open, light and warmth will come pouring in. If it is dirty or shuttered, darkness will prevail.

Both analogies work. Both point to the power of perception to shape our living. What you focus on . . . what you pay the most attention to . . . will determine to a significant degree what you experience.

Jeff Herring, a marriage and family therapist in Florida, likes to talk about what he calls “the five percent / ninety-five percent rule.” He says, “focus no more than 5 percent on what you don’t want, and 95 percent on what you do want.”<sup>1</sup> He gives some examples:

- ▶ Focus 5 percent on what you fear and 95 percent on getting educated and skilled to face it.

“We all have fears,” he says, “even people who appear to fear nothing. The trick

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Herring, “Wherever you focus, your life will follow,” Greensboro News & Record, August 4, 1998, p. D3.

is not to have no fear but to work at becoming strong and skilled enough to face and conquer your fears.”

- ▶ Focus 5 percent on the mistake you have made and 95 percent on learning from it.

“A new employee of a large corporation made a \$10,000 mistake in his first week on the job,” Herring says by way of illustration. “Upon being called into the CEO's office at the end of the day, he told his boss that he realized he would be fired and said that he was sorry for the mistake. The CEO replied, ‘Fire you? No way. I just spent \$10,000 training you.’ The man became a valuable employee.”

- ▶ Focus 5 percent on who to blame and 95 percent on making sure to heal.

Herring comments: “Getting stuck in blame sets you up to be lame. Focusing on healing allows you to move on with your life.” Makes sense to me.

Finally, he says:

- ▶ Focus 5 percent on what you must do and 95 percent on enjoying the process of it.

“I have to,” “I’ve got to,” “I wish I didn’t have to” . . . these are all phrases that focus on having to do things we don’t want to do. Better words that shift your focus would be: “How can I get all this done and enjoy the process?”

*“The eye is the lamp of the body,”* Jesus said. Life follows focus. *“The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed,”* Jesus said another time; *“people will not say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you and within you now.”* (Luke 17: 20-21) The Gospel According to Thomas records that a little differently. It says, *“in fact, the kingdom of God is spread out upon the earth, and men and women do not see it.”* In both versions, he was not talking about eyesight so much as he was about insight – the light that is within each of, that we allow to illumine our days and our nights, that focuses our minds and hearts on what is important.

Where does it come from? How do you find it? It's not a new problem. I think it was a source of enormous frustration for Jesus. Over and over he said to his disciples and those who came to him for instruction: *"Having eyes to see, can you not see? Having ears to hear, can you not hear?"*

Focus. It requires discipline and concentration – two words that point to one reality. If *"the eye is the lamp of the body,"* the window into the self, then what we look at, what we allow to dominate our days, what we permit to consume the vast majority of our time and energy . . . that is what we will become.

I ran across an article this past week which speaks about the reasons which folks who are unchurched give as to why they want nothing to do with organized religion. There are three – #1 because "it's boring"; #2 because "it's irrelevant"; and #3 because "all they want is my money." Can you relate to those? I can.

There are times for me when going to church is "boring," and if it's boring for me as the minister God knows what it must be like for you! There are times, as well, when I leave a service and I think – nothing in that was "relevant" for the kind of week I've had. And yes, there are times – especially during financial campaigns – when I think "all they want is my money." But alongside those feelings, I have to also share some other experiences.

There have been many, many times for me, when I'm standing back there at the door, greeting people as they leave. And I'm thinking to myself, "Boy that sermon really flopped . . . it just didn't work . . . I got absolutely nothing out of it" . . . and somebody will come up and shake my hand and say, "Thank you for what you said today; I really needed to hear it; it really touched my life." And then that little light bulb inside my head will turn on and I'll remember that worship is not about "me" or "my performance" . . . it's about the spirit of God which moves in spite of me and sometimes even through me. It's about the promise Jesus made when he said,

*“Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there will I be also.”* And he is, over and over again. I need to be where he is, if what I want is light to shine into my darkness.

*“The greatest gift of God is the gift of life. The greatest sin of human life is to return that gift ungratefully and unopened.”* Don’t let that happen to you. Pay attention to your focus. Open yourself to the wonder and the miracle which is now, the “present.” See those around you for what they are – gifts from the hand of God. “God gives us love,” the old saying goes, “someone to love God lends us.” We are on loan, each of us. Let us not take even a single moment for granted.