

What is Attentiveness?

Paying Attention

I recently had three conversations with three successful InterVarsity staff members. They are three individuals searching for a quality of life or a way of living that is deeper, more meaningful, and more authentic. They are three people trying to pay attention to their souls.

- “In order to be a successful InterVarsity staff director, I have to become someone I am not. I have to put on a male, extraverted, goal oriented numbers conscious mask of competency. I am rewarded with praise from supervisors, donors, students, and fellow staff, but inside my soul is dying. I don’t want to live this way anymore,” she said. “I want to live as a more authentic person.”
- “We have worked nonstop since late summer on new student outreach. More students have come to faith on campus this fall than at any other time in our history. I celebrate and thank God for those decisions. But I wonder what it means. It seems there is no time to stop and even think about what it means. We just keep pressing forward. I am not sure what I am even looking for. I just know that I am beginning to feel like a superficial robot grinding out ministry. I want something deeper but I’m not sure how to find it,” he said.
- “In the Great Divorce, C.S. Lewis has an image that captures how I am feeling,” she said. A talking lizard is clamped onto the shoulder of a man. The lizard is keeping the man from becoming the glorious person he was meant to be. I think the lizard that keeps me from becoming my true self is fear of disappointing my students, my roommates, and my supervisor. I don’t want to fail again. But I also want to believe Jesus can free me from that fear. Somewhere deep inside I have hope.”

A Spiritual Discipline

Attentiveness is a foundational spiritual discipline. It comes from a Latin word which literally means to “stretch towards.” The notion is of “stretching” your mind towards something or of focusing your thoughts and energies upon something. As you pay attention, you are “taking care of” or “waiting upon” another.

The opposite of attentiveness is “distraction.” That word means “to be pulled in many directions at once.” The affect of distraction is to feel anxious, overwrought, and fragmented. Individuals sometimes say to me, “I feel like I am coming unglued.” Distraction is what **Martha** experienced in Luke 10 when a caravan of hungry disciples showed up at her door needing to be housed and fed. Attentiveness on the other hand will eventually lead us to a place of centered calmness. When we are attentive to the Lord, we know who we are and whose we are.

The discipline of attentiveness is based upon the desire the Lord Jesus has to live in intimate, moment by moment fellowship with his followers. He says, “I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who remain in me as I remain in them will produce much fruit. (John 15:5) As we

practice the discipline of attentiveness, we look for the invisible presence of Jesus in every situation throughout the day and seek to align ourselves with him.

Attentiveness in Practice

- My friend and I were seated outside on a warm summer day on the patio of a local seminary. She was telling me about her summer activities. I was trying to listen carefully and pay attention to her words as well as to her body language. As she talked, a delivery man unloaded a pallet of water bottles to the office directly behind her and I began to wonder what brand of water the folks in the office drank. A hummingbird flew past my field of vision to the right and I was tempted to follow its flight path through the garden. In each case I silently prayed, "Lord Jesus, help me to listen well to your friend who is trying to discern how to follow you. At another point in the conversation, I noticed she became irritated over something that was said to her by another friend. I prayed, Lord Jesus, if that irritation is something we should explore, give me a question. And a question came. So it went for ninety minutes as I tried to be attentive to my friend as well as attentive to Jesus and the work he was doing in her.
- Attentiveness is also employed by the staff director who creates a five minute reflective break for her staff team at the end of each training day session. By giving fellow staff members a few moments to review not just what they heard but what emotions were stirred up inside of them during the session will help them discern the work of the Spirit in their lives.
- When sharing the gospel with a non Christian friend, you can be attentive to the voice of the Spirit by praying before, during, and after the conversation. Learn to internally step back as your friend is speaking and listen or offer them up to the Lord.
- Most of us are completely unaware of what is happening in our hearts throughout the day. We just react to the internal impulses we feel. Learn to pay attention to your inner world of thoughts, feelings, longings and desires. Stop for fifteen minutes each day to check in with Jesus. Ask yourself, "When did I experience his presence today?" Thank him. Also ask, "When was I absent from the Lord today?" Say, "I'm sorry."

Attentiveness and Faith

Attentiveness is an exercise of faith. As we try to pay attention to the presence of the Lord with us when we talk with friends, participate in meetings, prepare talks, and live our life, we are putting our trust in the promise of Jesus that he will be with us always. Attentiveness is a way to actively look for Jesus in our midst. And those who seek shall find.