

A Life of Great Consequence



Gary Wilkerson May 18, 2015

I grew up in New York, but when I was in high school my family moved to east Texas. During my first year there I wasn't known as Gary but as "Yankee." The longer I kept my New York accent, the more puzzled looks I got, along with a question: "What did you just say?"

As I unlearned my Brooklynese, I learned farm work — killing snakes, riding horses and herding cattle. And as I made friends, I began to like life in Texas. But there was one thing I could never bring myself to tolerate: the Dallas Cowboys, known as "America's Team." My heart was still with New York's rough-and-tumble Giants and Joe Namath's Jets. Eventually, my dislike for the Dallas Cowboys caused a genuine spiritual crisis in my life.

I was still a teenager when I met Kelly, a beautiful girl from Kilgore, Texas, who would become my wife. I did backflips over this yellow rose of Texas, especially when I heard her sing. The beauty of her voice wasn't just a matter of opinion; Kelly was an all-state singer in choir. This songbird wowed me one afternoon at my family's house as she put her arm around me and sang, "Over the Rainbow." "Wow, God," I thought, "thank you for sending me this girl!" That moment solidified my decision to marry her. Yet no sooner had I decided this than Kelly shared some news with me: "I've been chosen to sing at the Super Bowl. And the Dallas Cowboys will be playing!"

Kelly had been asked to be in a backup group for John Denver when he sang his hit "Rocky Mountain High" at the game. Yet that exciting news didn't matter to me. In my mind, my girlfriend would be singing for the Dallas Cowboys — whom I loathed more than anything!

In a panic, I said things I didn't even believe: "Kelly, don't you know 'Rocky Mountain High' is about smoking pot? How could you do that as a Christian?" Confusion crossed Kelly's face — and I realized how weird I was coming across.

Here I was in love with this gorgeous girl with a gorgeous voice...and I was about to let a *football team* come between us. Thankfully, I didn't let my petty grudge stand between the woman I loved and her dream, and to short-circuit thirty-six years of marriage.

Little things in our lives can sometimes derail God's bigger purposes for us.

Solomon wrote, "Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that spoil the vineyards, for our vineyards are in blossom" (*Song of Solomon 2:15*). He's warning that oftentimes it's the little, nagging issues that keep us from walking fully in God's calling to abundant life in him.

Do you remember when you gave your life to Jesus? Like other new Christians, maybe your heart was filled with laser-like purpose. You experienced God's healing love, and you longed to share it with others, evangelizing, reconciling and serving. As you moved forward in this new life, you began to better discern your role in God's kingdom and your gifts for serving him. Maybe you even sensed a calling to ministry of some kind.

But then you noticed something peculiar happening. Almost daily, your singular focus on Jesus got crowded out by other demands. Little things popped up, capturing your attention and distracting you so that slowly you lost your

focus on Christ.

My father, David Wilkerson, was very familiar with this aspect of the Christian life. He was determined to have an intimate life with God through prayer, and nothing could interrupt that. Dad prayed between two and four hours every day of his life, sometimes setting aside a whole day for prayer and letting us know not to interrupt him. We knew it wasn't a time to ask him for help with homework. My dad meant it when he told my mom, "I don't care if the President calls. Unless there's a life-or-death emergency, please don't knock on my office door." She understood and protected that time for him.

The need for laser-like focus is demonstrated by the famous Wallenda family. They're tightrope walkers dating back seven generations. Just over a year ago, Nik Wallenda added to his family's legend by walking on a high wire across a gorge in the Grand Canyon. The wind was fierce that day, and Nik was unsure about the event. But once he made up his mind, he had a laser focus. He emerged from his quarters with an expression that inspired awe. The entire media grew quiet, and the cameras zeroed in on Nik's face. His every breath was in sync with his task. The blowing winds that day were no match for his focus; pole in hand, he strode forward to the wire — and walked all the way across the gorge, never distracted for an instant.

Nik Wallenda's focus is literally a matter of life or death. Yet we in the church of Jesus Christ have an even higher calling—but do we have his laser-beam focus? How often has our distraction turned into days, months, even years of meandering and mediocrity?

John the Baptist would not let himself be distracted, leading a life of great consequence.

The Gospel of John tells us, "A discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. And they came to John and said to him, 'Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness — look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him'" (*John 3:25-26*). John's followers were speaking of Jesus. Evidently they had theological concerns about him. Maybe they'd heard about his miracle at Cana and thought he mishandled the cisterns.

John wasn't going to be distracted by the debate. He knew that something greater was at stake than doctrinal sticking points. He answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven" (*3:27*). In other words: "Can someone work a miracle like this if they haven't been sent by God? That kind of power comes only from heaven."

What John says next is powerful: "You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him'.... He must increase, but I must decrease" (*3:28, 30*). John's focus in life was clear: His holy calling was centered completely on Jesus. For that reason John the Baptist was known as a great man.

The problem for many of us today, in our success-driven culture, is that we seek great things for ourselves. Well-intentioned ministers seek to build a twitter following. Christians want to be heard even if it means having fifteen seconds of stupidity on YouTube. We may convince ourselves we're pursuing things for God, but is Jesus really our focus? Without rigorous examination of our hearts, we won't be able to discern whether we're pleasing our Master or following an inner longing for validation.

The prophet Jeremiah addressed this question directly: "Do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not, for behold, I am bringing disaster upon all flesh, declares the LORD. But I will give you your life as a prize of war in all places to which you may go" (*Jeremiah 45:5*). Jeremiah makes clear that God measures greatness much differently from the world. Note that he doesn't say, "Do not be great. You'll get spiritual brownie points for false humility." No, as Jesus himself says, greatness is measured in how well we serve others.

John the Baptist is a biblical example of how to resist worldly distractions and pursue true greatness. He testified, "The friend of the bridegroom... rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice" (*John 3:29*). John is describing a servant's role. Contrast that with the derogatory saying we often hear today: "Always a bridesmaid, never the bride." In Jesus' day, the supporting role in a wedding was a place of honor and respect because of its incredible demands. In fact, it called for a person of great stature and responsibility.

In that time, the friend of the bridegroom was in charge of the whole marriage event. He invited all the guests. He planned and organized the wedding ceremony. He hosted and oversaw the reception. He even arranged the honeymoon, going ahead of the couple to make sure everything was in place for his friend and the bride. And he

secured their new home, preparing it for the couple to live in. In short, the friend of the bridegroom was responsible for it all.

His role was a rigorous work of love and grace, from beginning to end. Finally, he stood at the door of the couple's new home, waiting in the dark as the exuberant wedding procession made its way through the streets amid joyful music and dancing. What a glorious moment when the bridegroom called out in the night, "I am here," and his friend answered faithfully, "And I am here!" helping to guide the procession to the door.

John the Baptist wasn't saying, "Theology isn't important."

John was saying, "How can you be fixated on minutiae like this if you're truly focused on the essentials? Jesus is going to give his life as a sacrifice, rise from the grave, and return for a bride whose faith is spotless and without wrinkle. Can you not see what God is doing in your midst?"

John had good reason for his laser focus: He knew he was about to die. King Herod's household had begun calling for his head. Now it was as if John were telling his followers, "I have only a few days left, and I've got one thing on my mind. I want everything I say to be fueled with this urgent message: 'Turn to Jesus.' I want my passion to be for the one true thing!"

When my son Evan was bound up by drug addiction and was essentially homeless, I didn't spend my days debating whether I should trade in my old car for a new one. I had one thing on my mind: my son's well-being. Even important issues of life paled in comparison.

John the Baptist had one overriding passion, and it is contained in this beautiful verse: "The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete" (*John 3:29*). Knowing his own time was short, John could rejoice over one thing: Jesus had come to proclaim the kingdom of God!

We all play John's role in God's kingdom—to pave the way for people to receive Jesus. When that is our singular, laser focus, all else falls into its rightful place. And God promises to empower us in our service to him. As John the Baptist testified, "He whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure" (*3:34*).

You can have God's own Spirit without measure, to guide you in the purposes he has planned for you. Have you been distracted from your one purpose? Make Jesus your focus again. You are called as a friend of the Bridegroom — and the sound of his voice brings rejoicing!

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