



Into the Light

All things are possible with God
May—June 2013

Where Is My Focus?

By Bob Van Domelen

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. (Philippians 4.8)

It's the time of year when winter's hold is finally being broken (in this part of the country at least) and new life is emerging from what appeared to be dead. Before long, buds will appear on barren branches, unidentified plants will start poking up through dried up patches of earth, and long-closed doors and windows in homes will be opened to welcome fresh air.

The whole process of growth and rebirth is such that I think God plops us down right in the middle of what is happening and invites us to appreciate the wonder of it all. And I believe for those who are willing to observe and consider, He reminds us that we all have the ability to come alive, to shed the dead parts and unhealthy choices.

Many in prison find this a very difficult time of year because the environment in which they live is so dark, so despairing while life outside is blooming. But this is also the time of year I start getting letters from those who "once were lost but now are found." They have shed the bondage of their past choices yet manage to know that they must be aware and cautious of overconfidence.

I have physically been out of prison since 1988 and every year of freedom is a reminder to pay attention to the things God wants in my life. So just where is my focus meant to be? How do I recognize and avoid invitations to darkness and sin especially when things are going well and I might not be paying the attention I should be paying?

Brother Lawrence, a 17th century monk whose letters make up "The Practice of the Presence of God," repeatedly shared that God is in the simple, everyday experiences we all have. The problem is that too often I am not paying attention. Maybe you feel the same way.

Think about whatever is true

If you ask anyone honest enough to recognize the weaknesses they have in their lives, they will tell you that when a sinful choice is made often enough, it can seem to not be sinful at all. And when sin is controlling, a sinner is unable to see beyond the desire they have to have that hunger met. Children become victims, unwilling partners are forced to submit, and abusers satisfy themselves—leaving those they hurt in their wake. Truth will always, in the end, point to God's will.

Think about whatever is noble

I have found that when I am doing the noble thing, I am placing someone else's needs above my own. As a child, I associated noble with knights on white horses, standing up for those oppressed. There is no horse and there are no waving banners. There is, however, always the inner sense of knowing I did the right thing for someone. Noble deeds happen every day and in every sort of environment. Just think about it.

Think about whatever is right

Many of the letters I get are from people who struggle to see themselves as even capable of doing right. They want to, especially in terms of addressing their charges of sex-related offenses, but there are lots of people telling them that they will always do what they have done and that it is only a matter of time before they re-offend. Regardless of the small, insignificant right choices they make every day, the shadow of their crime can feel overwhelming.

I believe that self-identity is critical in the healing process and that a label such as sex offender needs to be set aside. However, I know lots of good people who will always use the label even if they are only referring to something a person has *done*. So I have made myself look at how God defines me and that's the label I will wear. Once chosen, my decision-making process will focus on the right I am capable of doing rather than the sins I have committed.

Think about whatever is pure

Pure, purity, respect for something that is not soiled. Because of the nature of this newsletter, however, I think it is appropriate to connect "pure" with how we view sexuality and sexual behaviors. God wants us to think about our sex life—not the self-centered behaviors or images found in pornography—because sex was created to be the most intimate form of communication between two people.

At the core of my sex-related offenses was the inability to stop seeing everything as *my* wants, *my* needs, *my* problems. While in treatment, whenever I tried to suggest that I really cared about my victims, I came face to face with the simple truth "If I really cared for them, I would not have hurt them as I did. I would not have created the conflict they have had to live with."

I recently read that God wants us to talk to Him about our sex lives and my first reaction was to back off. I think most guys would do the same. We think of sex life in terms of what we have done, our fantasies, our biological pleasure, and God is saying our view of sex is way too broken. That view isn't what He intended, so we need to ask for directions. Wait a minute. Isn't that another guy issue?

Think about whatever is lovely

If ever there was a word that men shy away from (except when describing a woman) it would be the word lovely. I am starting to think that might be a flaw in us men because we like words that are strong and masculine in definition. Women are the ones who say things like “What a lovely painting” or “That’s a lovely shade of blue.” Men say “Hey, nice picture” or “That blue would work.”

No one says we have to surrender guy words or attitudes but it isn’t such a bad idea to be open to a softer side, perhaps less rigid in how we see things and people.

Think about whatever is admirable

At first I thought admirable and noble were pretty much the same thing but though they share some characteristics, noble is often the quiet, not-everyone-has-to-know choice, while admirable is a choice recognized by others.

Then it occurred to me that maybe I need to look at individuals I would consider role models and ask what makes them role models. What do they do that I would like to do? How do they talk? What is their Christian witness? Once recognized, my job is not to *become* that person. My job is to see how those choices can become *my choices* with a “Bob” stamp attached to them.

Some might argue that this is too difficult to do in a prison setting but I would disagree. There are always individuals who stand out and for the right reasons. Even in my time of confinement I found myself watching others, thinking about how they handled things, said things, or simply were. Most of the time, I saw my life as more complicated because *I made it more complicated*. In the end, however, some shared that I was a role model for *them*—and I never knew it. Noble? Me? Maybe, but thinking about what is true, right, and pure was more important to me than trying to be a model for others. And guess what? I was simply trying to do what I felt God was calling me to do. I was trying to be His in every way I could.

Think about whatever is excellent or praiseworthy

Without too much of a stretch, I would suggest that whatever is of God is both excellent and praiseworthy. I would also suggest that both words, in fact all of the words in Philippians 4.8 are POSITIVE words, words that elevate rather than push down.

It’s no secret that anyone with sex-related offenses finds life in prison or on the streets more difficult than others do. It is, I think, a mistake for anyone to believe that they can take on a community by sheer willpower and make that community accepting of them. It is a truth, however, that every individual can focus on self, recognize both strengths and weaknesses, and make change where change is required.

I can be no more or less of a man than I seek to be each and every day. The question is simple: Where is my focus?

Bits & Pieces

The following are taken from letters I have received since the last issue of this newsletter. Some are meant to offer hope and encouragement while others call out for us to be in prayer.

I once asked the Lord how he planned to hide the nature of my crime while I served him after I got out. He gave me the answer “I don’t.” If this was his plan then I saw no reason to hide the fact. I have lost three great job opportunities, a few friendships, and some church memberships by being honest, but I have yet to be sorry.

In being reminded that I am a servant (slave) of God, it does not actually matter if I am worthy. If my Master says I am to do something or to say something, I am to obey. It doesn’t matter if I feel unworthy. If a master sends his slave with a message for a king, the servant’s worthiness doesn’t matter— only who the Master is!

These sex offender residency restriction laws still hurt! I can understand the strong desire and need to protect the children of the world, not only the children, but also women, too. My confusions are that society will accept murderers, robbers and burglars to live next door to them regardless of how many times they reoffend.

The pain and shame of an addiction to child pornography extends to everyone we love and even those we love a little less. Praise God for his freedom in Christ and his everlasting love and mercy.

Inappropriate images can be a challenging thing for me at times, but I jump to something appropriate to replace the bad with good. I love Romans 12:21 because some think that just not doing something is the way to go. But the best way to go is to have a replacement or intervention in place, all ready to go just in case. It reminds me of that parable of the man who overcame a demon, but when the demon came back with seven others, they found the place clean with no activity.

I believe God would prefer me to be an honest sinner than a liar *and* a sinner. That’s why the temptation I recently faced, where it was like a force rather than a fancy, was such a crisis. It was literally one way or the other. Of course, I could always do the sin, repent, and be forgiven but something in me would be broken, the crack would be there. It could be like a broken bone that heals stronger than before *or* I could limp forever. More than anything, when it comes right down to it, I have to face the sin and ask “Is this what you want to put in place of Jesus?”

I’ve never had a friend where sex didn’t enter in. Could it be that I just don’t the how to have friends? That somewhere along the way sex and friendship became enmeshed or intertwined? To tell you the truth, the question of what God thought of how I saw friends never entered in because I asked God for the perfect person for me and this man moved in my cell. I thought he was God’s answer. Then again, was he a lesson for me in having friends and how to deal with separating friendship from sex?

Sometimes it’s hard here. What I mean is, I sometimes don’t feel like I can do any more time. I guess I just have to remind myself that I’d made it 14 years already. I can do it, just take it one day at a time.

My time in prison so far has taught me that even this is a gift. Parts of prison are sweet and parts are bitter but all of it is a gift. I don't like being away from my family but I do love the fellowship here though—not just with other believers but in the closer relationship I have begun with Jesus. Notice I said that *I have begun* this relationship. Jesus had begun the wooing a long time ago. I only now am in a place to focus on him and he has my total attention.

The warden is always preaching that we have to better ourselves. When you have a sex offense charge, they won't let us become better. That's why most of us say our lives are over here.

The problem I sometimes have is that I've been thinking the wrong way for so long that it actually feels abnormal to think God's way. However, when I do, things always turn out so much better in my spirit and often even in my circumstances. Now if only I can make this more of a reality in my life.

The more I trusted and obeyed what the Lord was saying to me regarding little changes in my life, the more those small choices affected my path. So it is today with me. It's not the large weaknesses or faults I focus upon, but the small ones. In these victories, I see greater growth. By eliminating resentment, bad attitudes toward authority, or just reaching out in a selfless act of kindness, there is growth. I am not where I want to be but I've grown past where I was last year. I encourage people to not give up and to press into God's presence.

Confessing to my Father was, of course, the first step which for me was easy. After all, I knew God has always loved me unconditionally and that he would always forgive me. I desperately hoped that would be the end of the confessing I would have to do but I soon realized that I had to further confess to my pastor and to the elders of my church, then to the authorities, my family and friends. I was incarcerated at the day of my confession and was convicted and sentenced according to my confession. I mention this because I still believe my confession was and is the key to the freedom that God has given to me.

I want to thank you for this newsletter and for your meaningful support and blessing of those of us who are forgotten by society. What a surreal feeling it is to have been quietly erased from so many loved ones memories. But God has not forgotten any of his faithful ones and in that I rest.

Seems like change for the good takes a long time, where change for evil is much quicker. I guess that's due to the fallen nature of both man's heart and the world.

I think my most important experience of God is when I can see through the selfish denial of sin and realize the strength and beauty of love. The allure of sin is garish, a glittery imitation of the real. It's not that desires are so wrong but rather that they had been twisted out of shape. Unfortunately, the allure can get so bad that we sometimes go past healthy desire and long for the twisted things of life instead.

We agree Christ is our Savior,
but is Jesus really Lord of our lives?

Our Prayer Corner

Prayer is an incredible gift we can give one another, for there is no better thing than to lift our lives, hopes, and dreams to the altar of the Lord.

Let us pray . . .

- First and always foremost, for our victims, that each day for them is a new day, a day without fear, and a day of healing.
- For all struggling with temptation that feels overwhelming, that they find God's grace and mercy more than enough.
- For who wonder if it gets better, it does.
- For those seeking church support, that they not be frustrated when it seems out of reach.
- For those who struggle with treatment, that they daily see differences in their thinking.
- For churches and pastors, that they recognize "modern day lepers" as worthy of love and support.
- For family members, that they remember that they *are* a family—imperfect but a family.
- For those in civil commitment, that they find encouragement and hope.
- For all who serve in ministry to those in prison, that they are able to see God's presence in each and every person they serve.
- For this ministry, that Broken Yoke Ministries continues to be blessed with the financial support needed to meet basic expenses like this newsletter.
- Finally, for those who are still abusing and are reading this newsletter because God made that possible, that they will do whatever it takes to stop the cycle of abuse and harm caused to their victims.



Please keep me in your prayers on Friday, May 31, as I will be presenting "Churches & Sex Offenders" at this summit. Pray that the workshop message will be full of hope and encouragement as well as an invitation for churches to find ways to minister to both victims and those with sex-related offenses. (Bob)

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CHANGE ADDRESS REQUESTED

A Little Humor . . .

A teenage boy is getting ready to take his girlfriend to the prom. First he goes to rent a tux, but there's a long tux line at the shop and it takes forever.

Next, he has to get some flowers, so he heads over to the florist and there's a huge flower line there. He waits for what seems to be forever but eventually gets the flowers.

Then he heads out to rent a limo. Unfortunately, there's a large limo line at the rental office, but he's patient and gets the job done.

Finally, the day of the prom comes. The two are dancing happily and his girlfriend is having a great time. When the song is over, she asks him to get her some punch, so he heads over to the punch table and there's no punch line.

