DISTRACTED

Will Penner

“In the Habit” session for use with devozine meditations for July 14–20, 2014.

MAKING THE CONNECTION
“Jesus constantly left the crowds to go off alone and to commune with God. He practiced focusing on God’s desire for his life so that he would have the wisdom, clarity, and power to redeem humanity. If Jesus needed time alone with God, how much more do we need it? Despite all the distractions around us, God wants us to focus our minds and hearts on that which will give God glory and edify God’s children. The idea is counter-cultural. If young people don’t hear it from us, they’re not likely to hear it from anyone else.” —Will

MEET THE WRITER
Will Penner has been in ministry with young people for more than two decades in Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches, in public and private schools, and as a popular speaker at youth retreats, camps, and conferences. He has served as the editor of both leading professional journals of youth ministry and has authored or edited a number of youth ministry curricula and books, the latest of which is *It Happens: True Tales from the Trenches of Youth Ministry* ([http://www.amazon.com/It-Happens-Tales-Trenches-Ministry/dp/1937734048](http://www.amazon.com/It-Happens-Tales-Trenches-Ministry/dp/1937734048)). Most important, he is the husband of his amazing wife, Christine, and the father of five children ranging in age from five to twenty-two.

STUFF YOU WILL NEED
- newsprint
- markers
- paper
- pens or pencils

PLUGGED IN
+ The classic scene from *Stars Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*, in which Yoda raises the X-Wing from the marsh, could spark an interesting conversation about concentration. During the opening few moments, Luke is distracted during his training. Play the film clip at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_QcRPNfUuE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_QcRPNfUuE).
This scene from Pixar’s *Up* introduces Dug the Talking Dog and his propensity for distraction whenever he sees a squirrel. ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrAIGLkSMls](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrAIGLkSMls))

**CHECKING IN**
Ask group members this question:

*What do you like to do in your spare time?*

Ask a scribe to record their answers on a large sheet of newsprint. Push group members to think about what they do during the in-between times as well—what do they do at the bus stop, in between classes, before or after school. Also ask how they fill time when they feel bored, even when they’re supposed to be focused—for example, in the middle of class or when they’re supposed to be working or doing homework. If time allows, put stars by or circle the most common ways people spend their free time.

**EXPLORING THE WORD**
*Scripture: Psalm 77:1–12, Philippians 4:4–9*

Our minds are like magnifying glasses for our souls. What we focus on expands and fills the pores of our being. When we fix our minds on aspects of our lives that seem to be going poorly, we start seeing life from a pessimistic perspective. When we focus on aspects of our lives that we perceive to be going well, we feel more optimistic. People who focus on the positive tend to find more that is positive to focus on, and people who focus on the negative tend to find more that is negative to focus on.

Henry Ford said, “Whether you think you can, or you think you can’t—you’re right.” What we think about tends to expand not only into more patterns of thought but also into action. Self-help books are full of stories, statistics, and other evidence to demonstrate the power of visualizing what we want. Those of us with crystal clear goals are more likely to achieve them than those without clear goals. People who actively daydream about skills they want to improve learn those skills at a faster rate than people who do not. The same holds true for people who want to live godly lives. Focusing our energy on godly qualities helps to bring them about more quickly and more fully than we would otherwise be able to achieve them.

Most of us spend less time devoted to prayer, Bible study, fasting, meditation, worship, or other spiritual disciplines than Christians did in previous generations. We are a culture built on entertainment, consumption, and diversion. If we can change the way we feel, we do it. If we can do it quickly, all the better.

Ask group members to look back on the list of what they like to do in their free time.

*Which items on the list actively lead people to more godly living?*
*Which ones predominantly distract people from godly living?*
*Which are fairly neutral?*

Encourage people to notice how much more effective we would be as Christian disciples if we took a portion of the time we are currently engaged in destructive or neutral activities and spent the time meditating on God’s Word.
Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Ask group members to write down three things they could do over the next week to help them begin to shift their focus toward God and away from destructive or neutral activities. After a few moments, ask people to turn their paper over and to write at the top of the page, “Gratitude List.” One easy way to turn pessimism into optimism is to make a gratitude list. Invite people to start by listing things for which they are grateful: being alive, the ability to see and hear, parents who love you, enough food to eat, and so on. Suggest that when life seems awful, writing a gratitude list is a good way to keep from getting distracted by the negative and to turn our attention to the positive.

SHARING IN PRAYER
Invite group members to pray in silence as you offer this closing prayer:

“God, this world is full of so many distractions. Even when we try hard to focus, we seem to be distracted by every squirrel that comes along: (list some of the items the group listed). Regardless of what steals our attention away from you, help us to redirect our hearts and minds so that we meditate on qualities that build your kingdom through, in, and around us. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.”

TAKING IT FURTHER
Help group members find ways to improve their concentration. Suggest that they begin by reading and trying out the ideas offered in these articles:

• Forbes lists “Three Ways to Improve Your Focus.” (http://www.forbes.com/sites/dailymuse/2013/01/15/3-simple-ways-to-improve-your-focus/)


• Huffington Post’s “How To Focus: 4 Proven Tricks To Improve Concentration” suggests improving concentration by taking care of yourself physically. (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/28/how-to-focus_n_3795523.html)

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