

Mindful

Psalm 8

Second Baptist Church, Memphis

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I think perhaps the most fear inducing question a wife can ask a husband is: Do you notice anything different about me? That is a question that can bring about a minor panic in me. The chances are so great to guess wrong in answering that question and the chances so small to guess right.

I think the best approach may be to say something in response like: *Of course I do. It's so obvious. It looks great.*

I will admit the sad truth that I don't always notice these things. I remember two years ago when we had just moved into our house. We had had the whole inside of the house painted, and everything was pretty much in its place.

I went to Nashville for the weekend with Sam for a soccer tournament. Heidi stayed here, and her mom came into town, and they worked around the house. When Sam and I got home Sunday afternoon, I had been home for about ten minutes when Heidi came up to me with a big smile on her face and said excitedly, *Do you notice anything different about the house?* Well, I panicked a little and did my best thinking, but finally I had to admit that no, I hadn't noticed anything different.

It turns out Heidi and her mom had replaced the dining room chandelier with Heidi's grandmother's antique chandelier, and it was shining brightly in the dining room. They had worked very hard to change out that light fixture, and I received a lot of grief for not noticing, although I protested that I would have noticed if she had given me more time. A year later I found out that they had also repainted the dining room a different shade of yellow and didn't tell me, and I had never noticed that.

Calvin Trillin wrote a book called *About Alice*, and it is a tribute to his late wife. The book is made up of essays about his wife that he wrote during his time as a staff writer for the *New Yorker*. Reading it can make husbands like me nervous. By husbands like me I mean the ordinary kind who don't always notice what we should. The kind who have less than a 50-50 chance of guessing correctly when our wives ask, *Do you notice anything different?*

In these essays that Calvin Trillin wrote about his wife Alice, you see that he noticed all the little things about her that most spouses just let slide by like water under a bridge. This may be why a young woman once wrote Calvin Trillin and told him that she sometimes looked at her boyfriend and asked herself, *But will he love me like Calvin loves Alice?*

What seems to have separated Calvin from the rest of the pack of husbands was mindfulness.

[Mark Ralls, "Mindful," *The Christian Century*, May 15, 2007]

We had the funeral Friday for one of our church members Lillian Grimes. Lillian Grimes was a smart, loving, beautiful woman. But for the last eight years of her life she was gripped by a type of dementia that got progressively worse.

Her husband of 59 years, Dr. George Grimes, cared for her. And I was deeply moved the other day, when Dr. Grimes was talking about when Lillian's health began to decline and he began to really have to do a lot of the normal small daily tasks for her that she would have normally done herself. And she would thank him and be very appreciative. And Dr. Grimes said about this time, *It was almost like falling in love all over again.*

Before I knew any of this, when I first came to Second, I didn't know anything about George and Lillian Grimes, but I remember seeing this man, Dr. Grimes, who seemed to be watching over his wife at church with extra attentiveness and mindfulness—making sure she got seated in the pew, stealing glances back at her while he went to go get a bulletin, keeping his hand on hers during the service.

Mindful.

Mindfulness is an attribute of God that has received very little theological attention. But here in Psalm 8 we are introduced to

the idea of the mindfulness of God. It starts out with acknowledgement of the majesty of God, which makes it all the more remarkable.

O Lord our Lord how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set the glory above the heavens. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that you have established.

Think about the vastness of the universe God created. Light travels at the speed of 186,000 miles per second. That is roughly 700 million miles per hour. The moon is roughly 23,000 miles from the earth. If we were to travel to the moon by plane, it would take us twenty days.

The sun is 93 million miles from the earth. To reach the sun by plane, your journey would last over twenty-one years. Think of how long the past twenty-one years of your life has been. Then imagine flying that long without stopping to reach the sun. For those of you who don't like to fly and prefer driving, it would take you roughly two hundred years, without any rest stops. It takes light only 8 minutes and 20 seconds to travel from the sun to the earth.

The nearest star is 4.5 light years from the earth. To reach it by plane would take approximately fifty-three billion years. The average star you can see unassisted with the naked eye is 100 to 1,000 light years away. I wouldn't even attempt to calculate the amount of time it would take for a plane to reach it.

But think of it: Light traveling at a rate of 186,000 miles per second taking one thousand years to reach the earth. That means there are stars you see at night whose light emanated from them in the days of King Richard's reign in England, and that light has been traveling at the rate of 700 million miles per hour ever since. That light originated seven hundred years before the United States became a nation.

Back in 1977 the spacecraft, Voyager I & II, were launched by NASA. It took 12 years for Voyager II to go by the planet Neptune. Voyager I & II have now been traveling for 31 years, and they are just at the edges of our solar system. It will take almost 200 more years before either will pass by the closest star. And 1000 years from now they will pass by the next closest star.

In all the vastness of God's creation, what is man? What are human beings?

And you don't even have to go into space to sense the majesty of God's creation. Scoop up a teaspoon-full of topsoil from the forest floor and, with the help of a microscope, you could probably find upwards of 1,400 beetles and springtails, not to mention about two billion fungi, algae, and protozoa.

Or look at the birds of the air. Arctic Terns fly a 10,000 mile round trip each year from their winter home in the Antarctic to their summer home in Asia. Meanwhile the Northern Fulmar spends its entire life out on the ocean, having an amazing

ability to drink seawater. The Fulmar has an entire desalinization factory in its beak, removing the salt from the water, excreting it through a tube on the top of its beak, and then drinking the now-fresh water.

[thanks to Scott Hoezee, Calvin Christian Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, MI for this fact]

The universe is full of wonder. And it is humbling to behold. The surprising thing is that even though this psalm is talking about the majesty of God and God's creation and reminding of us our smallness, Psalm 8 is not designed to make us feel like nothing.

Here's what Psalm 8 says. The Creator God who is greater than the heavens—who set the moon and the stars in their place—is nevertheless mindful of each one of us. Mindful of us. Noticing what's different. Watching over us with special attentiveness. Always stealing glances in our direction.

And that reality, that God is mindful of us, is as remarkable and as wondrous as the creation itself.

The psalm says: *What is man that you are mindful of him? What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?*

As I said, mindfulness is a divine attribute that has received little theological attention. Mark Ralls suggests in writing about this that perhaps mindfulness does not get a lot of

attention because it so easily absorbed into the broader category of love. In other words, mindfulness is a part of love.

But here's the distinction:

Mindfulness is love that refuses to be distracted.

It is a staunch refusal to fall into absentmindedness.

It is a determined refusal to fall into just not noticing anymore.

Mindfulness is a focused and sustained attention toward the one you love.

Mindfulness is actually not about the mind. It's about the will. It is choosing to pay attention and to cherish and then choosing—over and over again—never to back away from that initial decision. In the best of marriages, the best of friendships, the best of parenting, one of the key components is mindfulness.

And above all else, God is mindful of you. You have God's attention. The nearest star in the universe God set in place with his fingers is 4.5 light years away, but God is mindful of you. God notices you. God chose to pay attention and then chooses over and over again not to back away from that.

I was thinking last night of stopping here and addressing our graduating seniors. I was going to tell you that we who are so loved by God have the responsibility of being mindful of others like God is of us. And so that is your task as you move on into the next stage of your life—to be mindful of others as Jesus was.

But here's what I think. And I think it just may be God teaching me this. Before you can do any of those good deeds, your main task—my main task—is to accept the reality of what I've been talking about all along here: that the great God of the universe is mindful of you, is paying attention to you.

Because if you and I can truly understand that and accept that and see ourselves in that light, it will surely change our lives and cause us to live in a new way. And if you and I can't accept that, that God is truly mindful of us, then the inability to accept that will stay with us and haunt us.

Tom Long tells the story of returning from lunch one day to find an old friend waiting for him in his office. Putting his feet up on his desk, the guy lights a cigarette and tells Tom, *Tom, I've been feeling a little blue lately. Don't get me wrong. I've got a great life, done a lot of great things, but I think the problem is that I'm not committed to anyone or anything.*

Tom looked at the man's trembling hand, and thought about his response. His first instinct was to tell the man to go out and grab life by the horns, to get involved, join an organization, to really make a difference. But then he looked once more at the man's trembling hands.

You tell me that you are committed to no one, I wonder if there is anyone who is committed to you, Tom said.

The man put his cigarette down and said, *It is hell when you don't belong to anybody.*

You do belong to the majestic God. That God is noticing you, paying attention to you with a special attentiveness. And the inability to accept that and really know that in your heart really can haunt a person.

At the beginning of my sermon I talked about Calvin Trillin's book of essays about his wife Alice. Near the end of the book, Trillin relays an experience his wife had while volunteering at a camp for terminally ill children. Alice befriended a young girl who was severely disabled. This girl, Lucy, was, in spite of her severe disability, courageous and optimistic.

One day, while Lucy was absorbed in a game of Duck, Duck, Goose, Alice spotted a letter that Lucy's parents had written her at camp. She could not resist reading the first few lines. It said: *If God had given us all the children in the world to choose from, Lucy, we would only have chosen you.*

Alice passed this letter on to a fellow counselor, whispering breathlessly, *Quick, read this. It's the secret of life.*

Psalm 8 tells us that, improbably, unbelievably, that is how God feels about us. God chooses to cherish us and never wavers in that decision. And when you have someone who loves you like that, who is mindful of you like that, it will change your life.