

Two Statues: A Graduation Sermon for All Ages (Matthew 22:35-42)
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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/two-statues-a-sermon-for-all-ages

In May 1954, Roger Bannister, from Great Britain, was the first man known to run a mile in under four minutes. (How many of you are runners?) Until then, people genuinely believed no human could run a mile in under four minutes. Forty-six days later, Australian John Landy became the second man to do it, breaking Bannister's record by 1.4 seconds.

Two months later, in August 1954, the two fastest-mile runners in the world met for a historic race at the British Empire Games in Canada. The race was dubbed *The Miracle Mile* and *the Race of the Century*. One hundred million people listened via radio, and millions more watched on television to see who would win this epic match.

At the gun, Landy had a strong start, leading the race until the final curve. Because of how the sun was set in the sky, Landy could see his shadow and Bannister's shadow on the track. Based on the shadow, he estimated he was some 10 to 15 yards in the lead. To confirm this, Landy did what runners are told never to do. He looked back. He turned his head to gauge Bannister's position. Seeing the glance, Bannister dug in, passing Landy on his blind side in the final stretch, beating him by .08 seconds.

Television crews and reporters captured the dramatic ending in photos and video. You can google and watch the entire race. And today, a sculpture of that race stands near the spot where they raced. It is not a sculpture of Bannister crossing the finish line. Instead, it is a sculpture of Landy glancing back at the shadow while Bannister passed him. Regarding this sculpture years later, Landy quipped, "While Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt for looking back, I am probably the only one ever turned into bronze for looking back."ⁱ

On that day, both men completed the mile in under 4 minutes. A grand achievement deemed impossible just two months earlier. Yet, what was immortalized was not the record-breaking times for both men nor Bannister's victory. Instead, it was Landy's fraction of a second distraction from what mattered most.

I don't know about you, but I don't want bronze statues around town of the moments I got distracted by the shadows in life and missed what really mattered. This city isn't big enough to accommodate that many statues.

I'm not a runner. I'm not sure I would even run if someone were chasing me. I'd probably opt for playing dead or killing them with kindness. But I'm told runners aren't supposed to look back because it signals a negative shift in the mindset of an athlete. When a runner looks backward, it is typically because they are afraid someone is catching up with them. Now, they are no longer running to win. Instead, they're running to avoid losing.ⁱⁱ It is a subtle but significant shift in focus.

Graduates and friends, it is really easy to get distracted by the shadows in life and lose our focus on what matters. Many of these shadows come from the Land of er – the Land where you will never live up to your expectations or anyone else's. In the Land of "ER," comparison is King. It is filled with the pressure to be richer, stronger, prettier, smarter, skinnier, happier, faster, christian-er, just better in general. The Land of ER is a place where we let everything, but God define us. We're running, looking back, distracted by the shadows of comparison, trying not to lose the race of life rather than focusing on what really matters.

Many of these things aren't bad in and of itself. Sometimes we want wrong things. More often, we want good things in unhealthy ways. We want some things too much, and we desire other things too little. Even good things can become the shadows that cause us to lose our focus on what or who really matters in life.

In his viral 2019 valedictorian speech titled "16th Second", high school senior Kyle Martin shared the lesson he learned from trying to get to the top of his graduating class. Regarding winning valedictorian, he said, "At our senior awards ceremony, it felt so good. It's so good, for about 15 seconds. Fifteen seconds of my heart racing and my adrenaline pumping. Fifteen seconds of 'Yeah, I won!'. 15 seconds of being at the top of the pile of all my accomplishments. It felt euphoric. But there must come the 16th second. And on that 16th second, I sat down on my seat; I looked at my silver stole that says valedictorian, and I thought, 'That's it? What just happened? Why am I not feeling anything else?'"

"To be honest," he said, "I don't even know what I was expecting. A parade of balloons to drop? Or maybe I was hoping that all of my problems would fade away in comparison to this amazing achievement. But none of that happened, not even in my heart."

Looking back on his senior year, he realized that the stress of the year to chase his goal of becoming valedictorian and giving a five-minute speech was paid for at the expense of the most important relationships in his life. Kyle shared, "Working hard is good. It is, in fact, biblical. But it should not be done for the sole purpose of a goal at the expense of relationships. Nothing is more important than your healthy relationships. Nothing. Not your goals, not your successes. And here is why: relationships are where we get to influence, impact, and change people's lives. Your life cannot be meaningful without them. We are put on this earth by our Creator, and we all have a purpose. As you live your life on this earth, you can do no greater good for a person than to love them so much that you point them to Jesus Christ. But first, he should be your first relationship that you cannot neglect."ⁱⁱⁱ

Kyle had been distracted by the shadows. Not that getting good grades isn't a healthy pursuit. Not that becoming valedictorian is a wasted goal. It's a great goal and an amazing accomplishment. But the priority Kyle gave it in his life caused him to lose his focus on what truly mattered – his relationship with God and with others.

Kyle was right. Relationships matter most. How do we know he's right? It isn't because he was valedictorian. It is because Jesus himself said the very same thing.

The religious leaders of his day gathered around Jesus to ask him a question. We don't know what prompted the question put to Jesus. Maybe genuine curiosity as Mark's gospel believes, perhaps a desire to get Jesus in trouble as Matthew's gospel infers. What we do know is that Jesus' answer to the question, as recorded in Matthew 22, is one of the most important in all the pages of Scripture. Jesus was asked,

"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" This was a tricky question. There were over 600 cherished, Jewish laws. But Jesus was not stumped. Without hesitation, he answered saying,

'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment.

This answer would have pleased the Jewish leaders as Jesus goes to the very heart of the Jewish faith, quoting beloved Hebrew scriptures. But then, Jesus continues with a new angle on the old law by permanently linking it to another old law saying, *"And a second commandment is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*

Now, to love God was clear enough – no one argued this - but to say love one another in the same breath puts both commands on an equal footing. One is not more important than the other; they are dependent. By loving God, we love our neighbor. By loving our neighbor, we love God. You can't do one without the other.

Jesus concludes his answer to the religious leaders by saying, *"On these two commandments (loving God and loving neighbor as oneself) hang all the law and the prophets."* The law and the prophets were the only sections of the Bible recognized as Scripture during Jesus' lifetime, so Jesus was saying that these two commandments summarize the whole Bible! Everything – every law, every story, every command is about loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Before we go any further, we need to understand what Jesus means by the word *love*. We use it often. We talk about loving our dog, loving ice cream, or loving summer break. When we use the word love like that, we express our affection and warm feelings for whatever it is that we are loving. So, when we think of love as affection, it's no wonder we have difficulty loving those who annoy us, those who have hurt us, those who are difficult to love.

When Jesus talks about love, it primarily means love of commitment and determination, a love of choice and action. We may have warm feelings of gratitude to God when we consider all God has done for us, but it is not warm feelings Jesus is demanding of us. Instead, it is an uncompromising, unwavering commitment. It is a singular focus, not distracted by the shadows.

If love means this, it doesn't mean we must feel affection for others, including our enemies. Instead, love is our commitment to work for good in their lives. To love means to turn toward another person and extend a hand to them, even if it costs us something.

These are the greatest commandments. These are the things that matter. Loving God and others should be the focus of our lives. Anything that draws our focus away from this, even good things, is a shadow in the race.

Back to John Landy. Two years had passed since Landy broke the four-minute mile record; two years had passed since the infamous look back that cost him the "Miracle Mile" race against Bannister. Now, Landy was running in the final at the 1956 Australian National Championships. Running in this same race was Ron Clarke, the young Aussie who would one day hold every world record from two miles to 20 kilometers. During the race, Clarke fell after clipping another runner's heel. Landy, close behind, leaped desperately to clear Clarke's body, but his spikes landed on the inside of Clarke's arm.

As other runners streamed past, Landy stopped, ran back to Clarke, and helped him to his feet. He brushed the cinders from Clarke's knees, checked his bleeding shoulder, and apologized. Clarke, not badly hurt, urged Landy to keep going. They both took off, but they were now at least 50 meters behind the rest of the field.

In that last half mile, Landy sprinted hard, his lungs and muscles burning. The crowd was on its feet, cheering when he finally caught up to the front two runners, stormed past them, and won the race. I know, it's like a Disney movie, but true. As Landy did a victory lap, the applause continued. Nobody cared he hadn't broken the world record. They'd witnessed the greatest mile race in history.

One journalist wrote after the race, *"Yours was a classic sporting gesture. It was a senseless piece of chivalry, but it will be remembered as one of the finest actions in the history of sport. In a nutshell, you sacrificed your chance of a world record to go to the aid of a fallen rival, and you achieved much more than any world record."*^{iv}

Some might say Landy once again was distracted from the most important priority – winning the race and breaking a world record. But others, Landy included, said otherwise. Racing toward the finish line, ignoring the pain he accidentally inflicted on another, would have been the distraction, the shadow. But if Landy was chasing the dream to be the best runner he could be, it wasn't the final time that matter. Instead, it was the character of the person who crossed the finish line.

The bronze statue of Landy looking back is still on display in Canada. But there is another bronze statue of Landy. This one sits adjacent to the Olympic Park in Melbourne, Australia, and is called *"Sportmanship."* It captures the moment Landy thought of another more than himself by extending a hand to Clarke, the moment Landy focused on what truly mattered.

Graduates - run the race of life well. Don't camp out in the Land of Er. Try not to be distracted from what really matters. But when it happens – not if, but when - when you find yourself distracted by the shadows and the comparisons, when your focus is lost from what really matters, remember John Landy's story. There is always another race ahead and the hope of a new statue. So, keep running, eyes and heart focused on what matters most – loving God with all that you are and loving others. Congratulations, Class of 2021.

ⁱ <https://meetingintheclouds.wordpress.com/2011/11/02/lost-focus-john-landy-looks-back/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.womensrunning.com/training/road/problem-looking-over-shoulder-during-race/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.godupdates.com/kyle-martin-best-valedictorian-speech/>

^{iv} <https://meetingintheclouds.wordpress.com/2011/11/04/right-focus-john-landy-goes-back/>