



The Sacrament of Attention

Our phones offer escape, but discipleship calls us to stay present long enough to hear God and love people well.

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We live, increasingly, in two places at once.

Our bodies sit at a dinner table while our minds hover in an open browser tab. Our hands fold for prayer while our thumbs remember the muscle memory of scrolling. We attend a child's story, a spouse's worry, a friend's quiet confession—and yet some part of us remains tethered to the possibility that something else, somewhere else, is happening.

This is not merely a productivity problem, nor only a “kids these days” technology complaint. It is, at its core, an attention problem—and attention is not a neutral

resource. It is one of the most consequential forms of agency we exercise all day long.

So here is the thesis I want to offer, gently but clearly: presence is not just mindfulness; it is discipleship. When the restored gospel invites us to live with “[an eye single to the glory of God](#),” it is teaching more than religious focus in a narrow sense—it is teaching a whole way of inhabiting our lives, our relationships, and our worship with wholeness, clarity, and spiritual availability. And if that framing feels lofty, good. It should. But it should also feel doable—because the gospel rarely asks us to be impressive; it asks us to be *awake*.

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Whatever captures your attention quietly shapes your discipleship.

The Attention Crisis We Don't Like to Name

There are obvious culprits—busy schedules, social media, the breakneck speed of modern life. But those are surface-level symptoms of something deeper: what we might call the tyranny of elsewhere.

The tyranny of elsewhere is the subtle assumption that *real life is happening somewhere other than where you are right now*—in the next message, the next headline, the next update, the next comparison, the next microdose of novelty. It is a form of spiritual displacement. You are always near your life, but not quite inside it.

And because it's socially normalized, it rarely feels like rebellion. It feels like being informed. Being connected. Being responsive. Being “on top of things.”

However, the gospel's vision of a holy life is not primarily about being “on top of things.” It is about being in things—fully, faithfully, consecratedly present.

“An Eye Single”: Attention as a Spiritual Faculty

In Doctrine and Covenants 88, the Lord gives an arresting promise: “If your eye be single to my glory, your whole bodies shall be filled with light.” That promise is

recorded in [Doctrine and Covenants 88:67](#). He then adds the kind of line we might read quickly, even though it should stop us: “Sanctify yourselves that your minds become single to God.” That instruction appears in [Doctrine and Covenants 88:68](#). This echoes [Matthew 6:22](#) and [Doctrine and Covenants 82:19](#).

Notice what’s happening doctrinally.

1. “Single” is not merely “serious.” It is not just intensity. It is integrity—*wholeness*. A mind that is not fragmented into ten anxious windows, a heart that is not constantly split between reverence and restlessness.
2. Light is not only a reward; it is a capacity. The promise is not merely that God will be pleased. The promise is that you will become the kind of person who can receive, discern, and “comprehend.” Attention is the mechanism that God gives us for receiving that growth from Him.
3. Sanctification includes attention training. Sanctification comes through the Holy Ghost as we repent and keep covenants. When the Lord says, “sanctify yourselves,” He does not only mean “stop doing bad things.” He also means “become the kind of person whose inner life is ordered toward God” so we live in a way that the Holy Ghost can dwell with us.

In that sense, presence is not cosmetic. It is covenantal.

Mindfulness, but With a Name and a Direction

It’s worth acknowledging: the modern mindfulness movement has rediscovered something true. Purposeful attention in the present moment—focus, concentration, awareness—really does change us. Many people feel, correctly, that distraction is costly.

In fact, research has repeatedly found that [when our minds wander](#) away from what we’re doing, our happiness tends to drop—even when we wander to “pleasant” thoughts. And intriguingly, other research suggests that many of us find it so uncomfortable to be alone with our own thoughts—even for a few minutes—that we will [choose almost any stimulation](#) rather than simply sit, reflect, and attend to the interior world.

So yes, mindfulness is real.

But the gospel adds something essential: mindfulness is not only attention to the present; it is attention consecrated toward God and toward people. It is presence with purpose—awareness shaped by love, gratitude, worship, and covenant loyalty. Or to say it plainly: disciples don't just "live in the moment." They learn to live in the moment *with God*.

Distraction as a Form of Spiritual Avoidance

If presence is the practice, what is distraction—spiritually speaking?

Often, distraction is not primarily laziness. It is avoidance.

- Avoidance of silence—because silence reveals what we've been carrying.
- Avoidance of weakness—because stillness makes us honest.
- Avoidance of other people—because deep attention requires vulnerability.
- Avoidance of God—because God, more often than not, speaks in what we rush past.

This is why phones are such a uniquely modern test of discipleship. They aren't only tools; they are portable exit doors. With a tiny gesture, you can leave the room without leaving the room. You can opt out of the emotional demand of the present moment and relocate to something easier, shinier, safer.

This is also why "just use your phone less" rarely works as a long-term solution. The deeper work is to ask: What am I trying not to feel? What am I trying not to face? What am I trying not to hear?

Because the gospel is remarkably patient, but it is not casual about this: the life of faith is a life of *turning toward*—toward God, toward neighbor, toward responsibility, toward revelation.

The Covenant Verb We Keep Skimming: Observe

One of the most quietly illuminating patterns in scripture is how often the language of obedience is tied to attention.

Consider [Mosiah 4:30](#): King Benjamin pairs a stern warning with a very practical diagnosis—“watch yourselves, and your thoughts, and your words, and your deeds, and observe the commandments of God.” That is not only about *rule-keeping*. It is about awareness. It is about living awake to your inner life, your outer impact, and your spiritual drift.

Similarly, the New Testament repeatedly pairs prayer with watchfulness: “Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving” in [Colossians 4:2](#).

And then there is Mormon—introduced as “quick to observe” in [Mormon 1:2](#). That little phrase almost functions like a character credential. Before Mormon becomes a historian, a commander, a prophet, he is first an attentive soul. Which raises a sobering counter-example: later, Mormon laments that his people “did not realize that it was the Lord” who had spared them previously in [Mormon 3:3](#). In other words, they missed the divine signature on their own story.

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We could call this the tragedy of unattended grace—when blessings arrive, warnings are given, invitations are extended, and we remain too distracted to recognize what is happening. The scriptures do not treat that as a minor inconvenience. They treat it as spiritual peril.

A Brief Note on Phones: It’s Not Only About Content

When people talk about phone distraction, the conversation usually fixates on content—bad content, frivolous content, addictive content. That matters. But there is another layer that is arguably more insidious: even “neutral” phone presence can fragment attention.

Some research suggests that the mere presence of your smartphone can [subtly draw on limited cognitive resources](#)—what some scholars have called a “brain drain” effect. At the same time, it’s also worth noting that not every study replicates these findings perfectly, which is a good reminder that [human attention is complex](#) and context-sensitive.

Still, most of us don't need a laboratory to confirm what our souls already know: when our attention is perpetually split, our relationships thin out. Our prayers become more performative than present. Our worship becomes more distracted than devoted.

And perhaps most importantly, our capacity to *love people well* diminishes—not because we stop caring, but because we stop noticing.

Step 1: Pay Attention

So what do we do?

Let's begin with the simplest, hardest, most foundational discipline: Purposefully pay attention in the present moment. Focus. Concentration. Awareness. This can sound like a self-help slogan until we connect it to the heart of restored doctrine: the Lord's invitation to live with an *"eye single"* and a *"mind...single to God."*

To "pay attention," in a gospel key, means at least three things:

1. Attend to what is real. Not what is curated. Not what is imagined. Not what is feared. What is *here*.
2. Attend to what is holy. The Lord's hand in the ordinary, the needs in the room, the promptings that arrive quietly.
3. Attend to what is forming you. Because your attention does not merely follow your desires; over time, what we give heed to shapes our desires.

This is why the command to "watch" yourself in [Mosiah 4:30](#) is so psychologically astute and spiritually mature. It assumes that sanctification is not accidental. It is practiced.

Step 2: Narrow the Eye

A scattered life is not usually healed by dramatic overhauls. It is healed by small, repeated acts of singleness—micro-choices that train the soul to stay. Here are three "eye-single" practices that are simple enough to try and meaningful enough to matter:

- 1) Consecrate the first look

Many of us begin the day with a reflex: eyes open, hand reaches, feed loads. Consider a different liturgy: prayer before phone. Scripture before scroll. A few minutes of quiet before input. Not because phones are evil, but because the first thing you look at often becomes the first thing that organizes your mind.

If you want your mind to become “single to God,” it helps to begin the day by letting God be real before the world is loud.

2) Build phone-free “altars”

Altars are places where we offer something to God. In modern life, one of the most meaningful offerings might simply be *undivided attention*.

A few practical examples:

- Meals: phones away—not face-down on the table, but *gone*.
- Bedtime: the last five minutes belong to gratitude, not content.
- Church: treat sacrament meeting as attention training, not background audio.
- Ministering: let the visit be a human encounter, not a multitasked event.

These are not rules; they are rituals. They are ways of saying, “This moment is sacred enough to deserve my full self.”

3) Practice “holy noticing”

Once a day, choose to notice one person more carefully than usual.

- Ask a real question and wait for the real answer.
- Remember a detail and follow up later.
- Offer a sincere compliment that is specific—not flattering, but seeing.

This is presence as charity: *to love is to attend*.

Step 3: Witness the Life You’re Actually Living

There is a reason “witness” language runs through covenant life—baptismal promises, sacramental renewal, temple ordinances. Witnessing is not only what we do in courtrooms; it is what we do with our lives.

To witness, spiritually, is to be able to say: *I was there. I saw. I remembered. I did not miss what mattered.*

This is one of the quiet gifts of being present: you begin to accumulate a life that feels cohesive rather than scattered—because you were actually *in it*. And in a subtle but real way, this is where gospel presence differs from mere serenity: we are not practicing attention simply to feel calmer; we are practicing attention to become more faithful.

“Forever Is Composed of Nows”

In a First Presidency message, President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, then second counselor in the First Presidency, quoted the line “**Forever—is composed of Nows,**” and then reflected on the spiritual significance of living in the middle—where real life, real growth, and real discipleship actually happen.

That is not just poetic. It is doctrinally provocative.

Because if forever is composed of nows, then the question is not only whether we will be faithful in the grand arc of our lives, but whether we will be faithful today—in this conversation, this ordinance, this irritation, this child’s question, this prompting, this quiet moment when the Spirit tries to get our attention and we are tempted to escape.

Holiness rarely announces itself with fireworks. More often, it arrives like a still, small knock. Presence is how you answer the door.

A More Luminous Ordinary

Imagine, for a moment, what it would feel like if a ward, a family, a friendship network quietly committed to being more present—not in an intense, performative way, but in a steady, covenant-shaped way. Sacrament meeting would become less about enduring and more about receiving. Ministering would feel less like an assignment and more like belonging practiced—seeing and naming one another, showing up with love, walking

each other toward Christ. Homes would sound different, too. Fewer keyboard clicks and notification chimes. More laughter. More unhurried conversation. More silence that isn't empty, but spacious—silence where prayer can actually land.

And perhaps, over time, we would discover something hopeful: that attention is not only a scarce resource being stolen from us; it is a gift we can still offer, intentionally, to God and to one another.

Not perfectly. Not constantly. But sincerely—and increasingly.

Because in the gospel, being present is not merely a wellness technique. It helps us keep commandments, practice gratitude, notice grace, and live with an eye single to the glory of God.

And that kind of singleness does something beautiful: it fills the ordinary with light.

About the author

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