When I was in my early twenties, I would sometimes drive my grandfather out to his vineyard. As we drove on the road, which was perpendicular to the rows of vines, he would often tell me to slowdown or stop completely so that he could get a better look at what was going on. When he was satisfied, I was allowed to speed up (until he told me to slow down again). The thing is I could never discern anything when I looked down the rows. It looked like a bunch of grapevines to me. Which technically they were but for my grandfather he could gather all sorts of information from these brief reviews. He could tell what the harvest was going to look like, if anything needed to be modified or changed, when he would need to irrigate and so on. The commentator Kevin Williamson once said that everything is simple when you don’t know a thing about it. That was my problem when looking down rows of vines. Because of my naivete it was all so simple. But it is also because of this lack of knowledge that the vineyard gave me so little information. What were just some vines to me were to my grandfather a veritable cornucopia of agrarian information.

And in many ways the same dynamic applies to being a Christian. The less we know about God the less likely we are to see his handiwork on this earth. In the letter we have from John today we read, “The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.” What exactly is meant by the world not knowing us is not perfectly clear but the lack of ability to know is a direct result of the world’s lack of knowledge of God. John then goes onto explain how those with knowledge of God will be transformed into his likeness. The basic equation of it is that if you know God you will be changed whereas if you don’t you will not. In fact, you won’t even be aware of the fact that you can or need to be changed.

In movies and television there is something known as shot length. Shot length is the amount of time a camera stays in one place focused on the same area. In practicality, what this means is that if you are watching a movie or television show and there is an image of a car driving on a road followed by an image of the person inside the car these are two different shots. The length then is how long you are watching the car driving before it switches to the image of the people inside the car and then how long you see the image of the people inside the car before the next scene and so on. Someone who was very bored did some research and found that in 1930 the average length of a shot was around 12 seconds meaning you would watch the car for 12 seconds before you saw the image of the people inside the car. However, by 2014 that number had been reduced to 2.5 seconds, about an 80% decline. If you equate shot length to our attention span, which I realize might be a little dubious, but if you do it means that our attention span has also dropped by about 80% in those 84 years or about 1% a year. I bring this up to point out how if John thought that people in his day and age had a problem knowing God then we probably have a bigger problem now because I am pretty sure you can’t come to know God in 2.5 seconds.

If you don’t believe me listen to this report: “‘Americans’ membership in houses of worship continued to decline last year, dropping below 50% for the first time in Gallup’s eight-decade trend,’ Gallup reported in a Monday post. ‘US church membership was 73% when Gallup first measured it in 1937 and remained near 70% for the next six decades, before beginning a steady decline around the turn of the 21st century.’” Now I am not saying that you can line declining attention spans and declining church attendance and say that one caused the other. After all correlation is not causation. Because following that hermeneutic you could also blame the decline in church attendance on the increase in movies starring Leonardo DiCaprio – something that is certainly bad but not necessarily responsible for everything wrong in the world. I do, however, think that our lack of ability to focus on things for a long period of time plays a role in declining church attendance because knowing God requires some concentration. For as the Psalmist famously says, “Be still and know that I am God.” If we find 2.5 seconds of focus to be a burden we cannot bear, how are we going to be still long enough to hear from God?

The Jesuit poet Gerard Manly Hopkins in his sonnet *God’s Grandeur* says, “The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.” To Hopkin’s mind we should see God everywhere and it should be so overwhelming that we can’t miss it. I mean he literally equates God’s grandeur to a shiny object. But so many people do miss God. And I think the reason so many people do is that they are like me looking down the rows of grapevines; they see nothing because they have not taken the time to grow and understand what they are looking at.

In business school I remember studying the case of New Coke. If you remember this fiasco all began in April of 1985 when, to great fanfare, Coca Cola rolled out a sweeter version of Coca-Cola called New Coke. It was developed largely in response to the fact that in blind taste tests people preferred the taste of Pepsi to Coke, Pepsi being the sweeter beverage. However, New Coke’s introduction did not go so well and within three months old Coke was brought back under the name of Coca-Cola Classic. So, what went wrong? Why if people seemed to prefer sweeter drinks did the sweeter version of Coke fail? Later research discovered that in blind taste tests the sweeter product always won but that this not necessarily mean that the sweeter product was the product people actually wanted when they were shopping for a soda. The artificial world of the taste test failed to predict real world results. I think we have something of the same phenomenon. If you put church next to most anything these days the sweeter product is going to win. And by sweeter, I mean the product that is bigger and louder and fits in better with our short attention spans. But here is the big difference between worshiping God and drinking New Coke: People seem to want to live in a world that is a permanent taste test. A world where we run toward the louder object and don’t want to take the time to see the virtues in the object that is quieter. There is always a two and a half second decision to be made and so God must be put on hold. But like John says today we don’t recognize the God filled world in which we live because we have not taken the time to know God and to grow in our love and affection for God.

Saint Augustine famously said, “I believe in order to understand.” What he meant was you have to start by believing and worshiping God and after that your understanding will grow and thrive. We need to make a conscious decision to leave the world of the taste test, the world that is always getting louder and faster to grab our attention so that we may go to the place where true meaning is to be found. We need to eliminate the distractions so that we may hear from the God of the universe so that as John says today, we may, “be like him, for we will see him as he is.”