As many of you know my daughter Meredith and I spent a few days taking a trip to Great Smokey Mountain National Park. Thanks to Google maps we went through a number of very rural areas. Google Maps’ philosophy seems to be “why use the interstate when we can route you through someone’s backyard where you can disturb their chickens.” Anyway, in a number of these very rural areas we encountered numerous “Christian” signs and placards. After a while of seeing and reading them Meredith asked, “Why are the signs so angry?” These signs had various messages, but if I were to summarize, I would say they were mainly made up of three components. First: Jesus was going to be coming back very soon. Second: The reader of the sign was not prepared for this eventuality. Third: Since the reader of the sign was not prepared, they were going to spend eternity in hell where an eagle would eat their liver on a daily basis. Okay, I stole the eagle and liver part from Prometheus, but you get the idea. Putting aside the debate on whether or not this was an effective evangelism strategy, it made me uncomfortable for another reason. And I may be misreading what these posters were trying to convey but, in many ways, it seemed like they were separating heaven from God. They made God’s only role that of being a sort of divine bouncer who get to decide who gets into the heavenly nightclub. It seemed to me that it was creating a scenario where we would approach God in the same way High School Students approach their ACT test. The students put effort into their ACT’s not because they care anything at all about the actual test, they do it so they can get into the right college – it is a means to an end. When our primary focus is on something besides God then He becomes nothing more than an exam to be passed rather than the creator and sustainer of the universe who should be loved and adored. If we have the wrong focus, we pay attention to God only to the extent that he helps get us what we want. But this is not right rather God should be our first priority. And this is not just something that I am making up, we actually see something similar in today’s Gospel lesson. Jesus points out the problem with focusing on the wrong thing and using him as a means to an end.

The passage we have takes place shortly after the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus and the disciples have slipped away and the crowds are looking for him. When they finally find him, Jesus questions their motivations for seeking him saying, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” Jesus perceives that the crowds did not seek him out because they wanted to grow closer to God but rather because they were hoping that the buffet would open soon. And this sort of reaction from Jesus is not unique to this story. If you look at the miracles Jesus performs you notice that often times Jesus is not that excited about what he has done. He doesn’t complete one and say come back next Thursday and watch me saw a pharisee in half. No often times he either tries to avoid doing them or he tells the crowds that the miracles are not the point. And still other times after performing a miracle Jesus tells the recipient of the miracle to keep their mouth shut like in Matthew 8:4 where after curing a leper he says, “See that you say nothing to anyone.” And I think at least one of the reasons Jesus does this is to serve as a reminder of what is most important. The miracles are signs, they are not the main show. And if you ever pay much attention to John’s Gospel you might notice that when Jesus performs a miracle John doesn’t label it as such rather, he calls it a sign. Like after turning water into wine John states, “This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory.” Meaning that the miracles or signs are only important to the extent that they point to some greater truth about Jesus or as John puts it, they point to God’s glory.

Let me tell you a little story and see if I can illustrate why we should not focus primarily on the signs or biproducts of God but rather allow them to life our gaze heavenward. And I apologize in advance for this not being the most wholesome of stories. When I was in college there was a guy in my fraternity who was not terribly well liked or respected. Part of the reason for this is that once he joined, he gave himself a nickname and insisted that everyone call him by this moniker, sort of like when George Costanza wanted to be called T-Bone. Anyway, the one thing that did catch people’s attention was that he had a lot of money. Now and then he would be at the bar across from Santa Clara’s campus and have a few too many and start a tab on his credit card. When he did this some keen-eyed member would notice and immediately make a phone call to our fraternity house. It was so long ago that you had to use a payphone to connect with the landline at the house. Well within minutes the word would go out and 20 or so SAE’s would show up at the bar eager to put drinks on this guys tab. He gathered a crowd but it was not because anyone had great affection for him. They showed up for the free drinks. And when those ran out everyone went back home with the same feelings they had about this guy previously.

If Jesus went around only curing the sick, he could have built an incredible following, but as soon as the curing pump was turned off the crowds would disappear because they did not come to grow in their love and affection toward God but rather just wanted the free stuff. There is of course nothing wrong with the stuff of God’s creation but only if we do not turn it into an idol. That may be why Jesus can seem a little hesitant about the miracles he performed because of the risk of those becoming the message. Of course, this does not mean that God cannot or does not want to heal us or do other things for us; rather he wants the attention to be focused on the right thing. And that is much the same problem that I encountered this past week with the yard signs that seemed to forget God in the pursuit of heaven. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.” Life is about getting the order right, because if we don’t everything falls apart. By focusing exclusively on the ephemeral, we will lose the ability to correctly order our loves in this world.

And one of the definitions of sin is disordered loves. That is, we love something more than we love God. And the problem with loving something more than God is it does not allow room for God to be God. If we love the miracles or other things more than God then we can miss God. Because if the miracle does not happen, we may try to find a new god who has a more consistent record when it comes to miracles. And maybe this is the reason for the increased secularization in our society. If God is defined by what he can do for us in terms of material comforts, then Amazon becomes his competitor. But when we define God correctly everything falls into line. We do not worship him so that we can get into heaven or get the free buffet rather we worship him because that is his nature, that is our reaction to his glory and our goal is to grow into his likeness this day and forevermore.