



## **MAKING GOD'S PRIORITIES YOURS**

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Good day and welcome to Let the Bible Speak – a half hour bible study program presented by the church of Christ in your community. If this is your first time joining us, we're here to study the scriptures and let them speak concerning the spiritual issues and questions that we face. You will never hear us ask for a single dime. We do not pedal products or ask for donations. We are simply glad you're willing to take a few moments to look into the word of God together. We would encourage you to visit an assembly of the church of Christ and see what I believe will be a marked difference. Our worship is simple and reverent as we strive to follow the scriptures as our pattern for faith and practice.

Today, for a few moments, I would like for us to talk about our priorities. All of us have priorities in life and those priorities will help determine our success, not only in temporal life but more important -- spiritually. What are your priorities? What takes precedent in your life? What demands first place when it comes to how you allot your time, your talents, and even your treasure? If we prioritize things over lesser importance over those things of greatest importance, life will be much more challenging and problematic. For example, there is nothing wrong with some kinds of entertainment and recreation. But if we place those pursuits over serious matters such as paying our bills and putting food on our family's table, we will find ourselves in trouble. With all of that said, did you know that God has priorities? The bible teaches that there are things that God considers fundamental and therefore they need to be taken care of first and then allow everything else to follow. In Matthew 6:33, in His Sermon on the Mount, when speaking of our worrying about temporal things instead of trusting in our Heavenly Father, our Lord said, "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." This is just one of many times where the Lord tells us what should come first in our lives.

One of the great challenges of life is determining the things that must take priority. Even if we know what our priorities should be, living that way is often hard. But failing to recognize the most important things and make them the priority, in the long run, leads to even greater difficulty. If you want to be successful in raising a family, running a business, acquiring an education, or being physically fit and

healthy, we must learn to set priorities and put those things before others. That's even more true in our spiritual affairs. Have you noticed that the Lord taught on several occasions about getting our priorities straight. If we are to possess the mind of Christ, and be like Him, then our priorities must be the same as His.

First, I want to point out that Jesus taught the first thing we should seek after is the KINGDOM of God. After all, this was Jesus' pressing priority during the 33 and a half years he lived on earth. Jesus did not come into the world seeking the kind of fame and fortune and frills that humans usually spend their lives pursuing. Jesus, rather, lived a humble life. As God, He already owned everything before He set foot upon this earth as the incarnate Son, but as a man, He possessed very little. He had no permanent home. He did not settle a piece of land and build an estate. He did not live His life planning how to get more and build better. He didn't concern Himself with keeping up with the fads and fashions of the world. And even though I'm sure the Lord enjoyed His creation while here and found rest and rejuvenation from time to time, the sum of His life was a determined quest for the Kingdom He came to assume. His first and life-consuming concern was doing the will of God and accomplishing what His Father had sent Him here to do. He spent the short years of His life looking toward and beyond the cross to the crown that one day awaited Him.

When Jesus made His famous trip to Samaria in John 4, His disciples went into the city leaving Him at the well where we met that woman whose life He forever changed. After she had gone and the disciples returned, their concern was whether Jesus had eaten. They urged Him to eat and thus take care of His physical needs. Jesus, however, replied in John 4:34 "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work." Now, this doesn't mean that Jesus never ate food for He did, just as any other human had to do to physically live. He was rather teaching His disciples an important lesson about what His life was about and, by extension, how we should look at our own lives.

When He preached the Sermon on the Mount, as recorded by Matthew, He taught the same principle to those who would follow Him. In Matthew 6, beginning in verse 25, He said ""Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? "So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things."

Now, was Jesus teaching that it's wrong to eat or to buy or make clothing? Of course not. That would contradict things we read about His own life for Jesus wore clothes, ate food, and worked with His own hands in a carpenter shop to provide those things for Himself. He's talking about an inordinate emphasis upon temporal things and a preoccupation with physical life which is temporary and fleeting so that the spiritual realities are obscured and even forgotten. As He once said, "what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses His soul." Rather, those things should be minor and secondary in our lives. We should trust God to make those things accessible and available to us if our focus and overall concern in life is that which is eternal and spiritual. He says the godless Gentiles worry and fret over money, food, clothing, and making ends meet in life. But His people are to be different. He goes on in verse 33

to say, "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."

If we're honest with ourselves, and we are Christians, can we say that our life is wrapped up in pursuing the rule of Christ in our own hearts and in the hearts of others? Are we obsessed with eternal life and advancing the reign of Jesus of Christ in this world and treat the physical needs of life as a secondary concern or is the other way around? Does your life, as Jesus warned in Luke 12:15 "consist in the abundance of the things you possess" or is Christ and His kingdom, His church, your life? That almost sounds radical to the ear of someone living in a Western first-world culture, but Jesus' teachings are radical, and they demand full surrender and sacrifice or we're not really His disciples. You see, it's not wrong to work for a living or even to enjoy recreation and so forth. In fact, the bible strictly commands that a man DOES work to provide for His family (2 Thessalonians 3:10). But when we make our life's pursuit the kingdom and righteousness of God; when that becomes the priority; then everything falls into its rightful place. If we don't make the Kingdom of God the priority, we will never truly realize His kingdom and we will fail in the Christian life. Many a professing Christian is of little use to God and is a failure in the realm of faith if for no other reason, they do not truly seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

There's an old illustration that's been repeated many times that says a professor stood before his students one day with an empty bucket. He filled it full of rocks and asked them if the bucket was full. They were clever enough to figure out the real question and they rightly said "no". He said, "that's correct". He then poured small pebbles into the bucket until they fell among the large rocks and came to the top. Again, he asked, "is the bucket full?" They said, "not yet." He then poured sand onto the bucket until it reached the brim. Once again, the students said, "it's still not full." He then poured water into the bucket until it spilled over the top onto the desk and asked, "how about now. Is it full?" They said, "yes, it's full". He said, "Good. Now, what does this teach us?" Someone spoke up and said, "this is about time management." If we learn to apportion our time, we can always accomplish more..." "No," the professor replied. This is not a lesson in time management. It's a lesson in priorities. The lesson is that if you are going to get the bigger things into the bucket, you must put them in there first." And that's the way it is with life. That's the way it is with Christ and the things of the Spirit. That's the way it is with the church and the life and duties of every Christian. People see religion as a niche or one of many categories in their life. We apportion and compartmentalize our lives and set religion in its place, but Christ, you see, is to be everything. His kingdom, which is expressed in His church and its mission and work, is to be our everything and then everything else can just find its place. Is that how you live your life? Is that how your priorities are arranged? If not, then your priorities are not God's.

There's something else that must come first in our life, according to Christ, and that is our inward character. Jesus severely scolded the Pharisees of His day for their preoccupation on the external deeds of their religion to the neglect of the inward character that should have been the basis of their religion. In Matthew 23, read beginning in verse 23: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!" "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also." "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."

Now, here again, we have Jesus teaching us about priorities, not mutually exclusive things. The Lord is not saying that external ordinances or outward manifestations of faith are not important. Certainly not! That's how many people use verses such as these but please notice Jesus was not discouraging obedience to the outwardly manifest deeds of the law. He wasn't brushing those aside or making them insignificant and inconsequential. Unfortunately, many have been led by false teachers to believe that what we do or how we worship or how we outwardly live our lives, even dress ourselves, is unimportant as long as we're nice and mean well. That's totally false and misrepresents what Jesus was saying. Notice that He talks about those things that pertained to the law they were living under at that time, the Law of Moses, such as paying tithes of various things, and He does not say "you shouldn't worry about all of that". Rather, He says "These you ought to have done..." So, what **IS** He saying? He is saying that they were concerned about doing those things without being concerned about things that were more fundamental, and that is the reform of the inward character. In doing those things (which was good and right) they were leaving undone the things that were foundational such as justice, mercy, and faith.

The problem we still have today, is that people try to make these things mutually exclusive. They're not mutually exclusive but they are interconnected if they are properly observed. Does God care how we worship? You'd better believe He does! How we worship; the actions we offer to God as worship and service; those are sacred and serious business! And God does not accept worship that is not within the teaching of His word. But also note, that worship that does not come from a sincere, humble, and converted heart is an abomination to God regardless of how outwardly correct it may be. Unscriptural worship from a nice and friendly person is wrong and rebellious but orthodox worship from a mean and hateful and worldly person is just as wrong and offensive to God. The bible teaches that a woman is to let her hair grow – to have long hair (1 Corinthians 11:15) and she is to dress in a way that is becoming of a godly and submissive woman (1 Timothy 2:9-10) and a woman who refuses to do so is disobeying God. But as I heard one man say, "if a woman hair long enough to sit on it and a dress that sweeps the ground and a long tongue to match, she's not saved." That's correct as well! You see her long hair and her modest dress is to be an outward manifestation of what is on the inside. If it is an outward display that contradicts what is on the inside, it is a disgusting display of hypocrisy. There is nothing more repugnant. But then there is nothing more lovely and more beautiful than a woman whose modest appearance is the reflection of a godly, humble, restrained, and modest inward spirit! It is true of women AND men, that when we only concern ourselves with the outward demonstration of our religion instead of allowing that outward demonstration to naturally emanate from a Christlike heart, then we are no better than the Pharisees and our religious show is just as contemptible as theirs.

So, what's the answer? Throw the baby out with the bathwater? Ignore the way we should be conducting ourselves and the duties that God expects us to perform? No! Rather, as Jesus said, "FIRST, cleanse the inside of the cup and then the outside will be clean." Very much related to this, Jesus once said that we are not to judge lest we be judged. (Matthew 7:1) Well, was He saying that it's wrong to discern between right and wrong and wrong the adjudicate the actions and words of other people based on what the word of God teaches? No, that's not what He was saying at all. If that were the case, church discipline would be wrong, yet the bible teaches church discipline. (1 Corinthians 5) We would not be able to mark and avoid false teachers yet, the bible tells us to do just that! (Romans 16:17-18) So, what is He saying? He is teaching that we need to first make sure our heart is right and we're trying to live our life in keeping with the law of God before we concern ourselves with whether someone else does. That doesn't mean live and let live and just keep your own doorstep clean and let everybody else do as they please. It means, don't be a hypocrite. Examine our motive by first examining our own life. When you point out the error and try to clean up the sin in someone else's life, make sure you're just as concerned

about where you stand before God. Otherwise, we're simply a hypocrite. Again, these are not mutually exclusive things. We are to judge ourselves before we judge another. And when we first judge ourselves, we will then have the humility and attitude to administer the right kind of constructive criticism and render the kind of godly aid that will lift people out of sin and point them to the Savior.

If time permitted, we would look at another thing Jesus taught us in His great Sermon on the Mount that should come first and it's very much related and that is if we have offended our brother, we are to prioritize that relationship and go and be reconciled and THEN come and offer our worship or our gift to God. (Matthew 5:21-24) The principle here is essentially the same. Get your heart right, and you'll then get the other things right. That's why God looks upon the inward man. It's not that He's unconcerned about the outward behavior for He is. But the outward behavior that pleases God only comes from a person whose heart is converted and being molded into the fashion of Christ. He delights in the outward service of those who seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; those who are of a clean and pure heart; those who show mercy, justice, and faith. Are God's priorities your priorities?

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