

First Things First

or

Choosing the Most Important Things

by Bill Scheidler

Introduction

This morning we want to talk about priorities. The word “priority” refers to something that is seen as more important than the other things associated with it.

When we talk about priorities, we are talking about the value that we ascribe to things in relationship to the other things in our lives. God wants us to value what is most valuable. He wants us to value what He values.

Philippians 1:9-11

*And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, **that you may approve the things that are excellent**, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.*

Other translations of verse 10:

“So that you may always approve better things...” –Williams

“That you may learn to prize what is of value...” –Knox

“So that you may discern what is best...” –NIV

“For I want you to understand what really matters...” –NLT

Jesus taught about “first things.” He taught about priorities. Jesus taught about what is the “more important.” What are your priorities? Not what is the Sunday School answer—“Jesus.” Actually by looking at how we live our lives we can see what our priorities are. Priorities require constant evaluation and adjustment.

Seven Priorities for the Believer

1. **Following Jesus is more important than following after the things that most people deem important (Luke 9:57-62; Mt. 19:16-22).**

Luke 9:57-62

Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, “Lord, I will follow You wherever You go.” 58 And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.”

*59 Then He said to another, “Follow Me.” But he said, “Lord, let me **first** go and bury my father.” 60 Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God.”*

61 And another also said, "Lord, I will follow You, but let me **first** go and bid them farewell who are at my house." 62 But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

Jesus actually addressed three potential wrong priorities in the lives of these "would-be" disciples.

Following Jesus must be first...

A. Over the security of a home (vs. 57-58).

"Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."

- You can have a most comfortable life (house, car, retirement plan).
- You can have the best insurance policy and be shielded against any probable or possible calamity.

B. Over the inheritance of this world (vs. 59-60).

"Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God."

- You can be a lawyer and go to hell for eternity.
- You can be a doctor and go to hell for eternity
- You can be the smartest or the richest man in the world and still go to hell for eternity.

C. Over social relationships (vs. 61-62).

"No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

- You can have the best of friendships.
- You can have a life full of social events.
- You can take the most exotic vacations.

If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.

How deep is your love for the Lord? Is it really your highest relationship (Mt. 10:37)?

If anything is more important than following Jesus, eventually you will cease to follow Him and you will go away.

Notice how differently the twelve disciples responded.

Matthew 4:18-22

And Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. Then He said

to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Then they immediately left their nets and followed Him. Going on from there, He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets. He called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him.

Notice that they left three things to follow Jesus:

A. They left their nets (the tools of their trade).

B. They left their ship (their livelihood).

C. They left their relatives (Mark 1:20).

And immediately He called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went after Him.

Notice another “would-be” disciple:

Matthew 19:16-22

Now behold, one came and said to Him, “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” 17 So He said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.” 18 He said to Him, “Which ones?”

Jesus said, “‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not bear false witness,’ 19 ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” 20 The young man said to Him, “All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?”

21 Jesus said to him, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” 22 But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

It is interesting that when Jesus listed commandments for this young man to observe, He omitted two very important ones—you shall have no other gods before Me and you shall not covet. Jesus put His finger on the thing in this man’s life that served as his god—his money. If we are to be Jesus’ disciple there can only be one God. All other gods must bow to His lordship.

Notice how differently Matthew responded.

Luke 5:27-28

After these things He went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, “Follow Me.” So he left all, rose up, and followed Him.

Matthew appears to have simply walked away from everything including his job, his livelihood and the money on the tables.

2. Judging ourselves is more important than judging others (Mt. 7:1-5).

Matthew 7:1-5

*Judge not, that you be not judged. 2 For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. 3 And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? 4 Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me remove the speck from your eye"; and look, a plank is in your own eye? 5 Hypocrite! **First** remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.*

New Living Translation

*Stop judging others, and you will not be judged. 2 For others will treat you as you treat them. Whatever measure you use in judging others, it will be used to measure how you are judged. 3 And why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own? 4 How can you think of saying, "Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye," when you can't see past the log in your own eye? 5 Hypocrite! **First** get rid of the log from your own eye; then perhaps you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye.*

We are so quick to make judgments about others. Jesus encouraged us to focus our energies on judging ourselves first, making sure that we have a right heart and the right motives as we work with others. This works in the business world, marriage, church relationships and all of life in general.

3. Being in right relationship with other believers is more important than functioning in our gifts and ministries (Mt. 5:23-24).

Matthew 5:23-25

*Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. **First** be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.*

Disunity in the body will destroy the effectiveness of any ministry or an entire church.

The following verse precedes Paul's discussion of the five-fold ministries given by Christ to the Church.

Ephesians 4:1-6

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

4. Loving God with all of your heart is more important merely trying to live a good life and keep individual commandments (Mt. 22:37-40).

Matthew 22:37-40

*Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the **first** and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two*

commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

If you love the Lord, you will keep His commandments. Striving to keep the commandments does not necessarily indicate that you have a genuine love for the Lord.

Matthew 23:26

*Blind Pharisee, **first** cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also.*

5. Giving yourself to God is more important than giving your money to God (II Cor. 8:3-6, 12).

2 Corinthians 8:3-6, 12

*For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, 4 imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. 5 And not only as we had hoped, but they **first** gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God...12 For if there is **first** a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have.*

If the Lord gets you, He gets all of you including your money. Our money, however, is not a substitute for the giving of ourselves totally to the Lord.

6. Seeking the Kingdom of God and His righteousness is more important than settling for this kingdom's inheritance obtained by a worldly system of ethics (Mt. 6:25-34, esp. vs. 33).

Pleasing God is more important than pleasing man.

Matthew 6:25-7:1

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? 26 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? 27 Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?

28 So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; 29 and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. 30 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?

*31 Therefore do not worry, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” 32 For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But seek **first** the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.*

God's principles always lead to God's reward. If you want something to worry about,

worry about pleasing God in all things. Please God **first** and you will ultimately have man's favor as well (favor with God and man). When a man's ways please the Lord, even his enemies are at peace with him.

7. Maintaining an up to date relationship with God is more important than correct doctrine or good deeds (Rev. 2:1-7).

Revelation 2:1-7

*"To the angel of the church of Ephesus write , 'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: 2 I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; 3 and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. 4 Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your **first** love. 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the **first** works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place — unless you repent. 6 But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.*

7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.'"

A. The Church at Ephesus had many positive traits.

1. They were working hard for the Lord.
2. They had correct doctrine.
3. They did not tolerate false teachers.
4. They were very busy with lots of activity.

B. The Church at Ephesus had one serious problem—they had left their first love.

Other translations:

But this I have against you—you have abandoned your first love. –TCNT

You no longer love me as you did at the first. –LB

You have abandon the love that you had at the first. –RSV

C. The solution for the church (Rev. 2:5).

They were to remember. They were to repent. They were to do as they once did. They were to begin to do the things that they did at the first in the relationship.

Our first love relationship with the Lord looks something like this. Once we:

1. Thought and talked about **the Lord** all the time.
2. Tried to please **the Lord** at all times.
3. Shared our most intimate thoughts, desires and feelings with **the Lord**.

4. Included **the Lord** in all our plans, present and future.
5. Talked to **the Lord** as much as possible.
6. Befriended **the Lord**, speaking only good of **the Lord**.
7. Loved to be in the presence of **the Lord** continually.
8. Loved to praise **the Lord** for even the smallest things.
9. Put **the Lord** first in all things (self-denial).
10. Were very sensitive to the feelings of **the Lord**.