

Christian Priorities

Let's start with some hard truth; with the "bad news." Our priorities do get out of whack from time to time. Notice: I'm not talking about the other guy. Yes, I know his/her priorities are often out of whack, but what about the fellow in the mirror? I know it's incredibly difficult to admit, but there are plenty of times in our lives when we put the wrong things first. This is what got Cain into trouble. God had no regard for Cain's offering because Cain's priorities were all wrong. Note: The text never says that God *preferred* Abel's offering over Cain's, as if it were a contest. Nope. It wasn't a contest at all. It was about how each man was showing his thanks to God for all that God had so richly and abundantly given to them. God loved Abel's offering because Abel put God first. His offerings were proof of this. He gave the first cut; the best cut back to God in thanksgiving. Cain, on the other hand, took care of himself first, and then gave God what was left over; what he could do without; what he could spare. God is a jealous God. You don't have other gods before Him. Cain's stuff had become his god. And when God let him know that his priorities were out of whack, Cain only made it worse. He doubled down. Instead of repenting and changing what needed to be changed (himself), he sought to take out the "competition." Again, all this showed was that Cain was the most important person in Cain's life. Not mom and dad, not brother, not even God. *Semper Me!*

This "wrong priorities" problem is also front-and-center in the parable that Jesus tells to His disciples; those disciples who were arrogantly trusting in themselves and how "awesome" they were, *treating others with contempt*. "We're Jesus' apostles. We've been with Him from the beginning. We're not like all those other Johnny-come-latelies." Ah... yes. The old country club mentality. Boy... thank God we're not like those guys, right? Jesus teaches very plainly that the proverbial Pharisee, who treated others with contempt (just like they were doing), wasn't justified by God because the Pharisee's priority wasn't God's justification. Priority number-one was himself and his good works and the feeling of superiority that he was putting his trust in. You hear it in his own words. "I do this; I do that. Thank you that I'm not like those sinful schlepps." *That wasn't a true thank you to God!* That's just a back-handed way of trying to highlight and elevate the self by dumping on everyone else. This guy's priority was presenting himself to God as "better" than all the other sinners. Just like Cain; just like those apostles were doing, the Pharisee treated sin and justification as some sort of contest. Like the old saying goes, I don't have to outrun the lion; I only have to outrun you. The fruits this guy was bearing out showed quite clearly that he neither understood the truth and depravity of sin—his own sin—nor the truth of God's undeserved mercy. His foolish and self-centered, prideful priorities had rendered him deaf to God's Truth.

The tax collector, on the other hand, had **NOTHING** to offer to God... nothing but God's own promise of mercy. And it wasn't an act either. It wasn't lip service. The tax collector—the lowest of the low—knew his place. He knew and he understood the reality of his sin and his standing before God. He knew (and firmly believed) that he did deserve *nothing but present and eternal punishment*. He didn't try to strike a bargain with God (like we sometimes do). He didn't argue. He didn't attempt to justify himself and his sins, as if things were somehow different in his particular case or *“at least I'm not as bad as those prostitutes or drug dealers or Baal worshippers.”* Rather, he is very **short, frank and to the point**. In true contrition and sorrow, he calls out to God to be merciful to him, a sinner. In fact, the original Greek tells us that he called himself *“THEE sinner.”* How's that for a confession? Ain't no one worse! *“God, be merciful to me... THEE sinner.”* That's it. Do you notice how God's gift of mercy was **priority number-one**? There's a reason for that. It was his only hope. This guy's **only** hope was to—in repentant faith—hold God's feet to the fire, so to speak; to hold God to His Word and Promise to be merciful to all those dead in their sin. *“I tell you, this man went away justified.”*

And us? Ask yourself: If you had to prioritize between being in the presence of the Lord at His holy feast table, where He kneels down from heaven and nourishes you with His own Body and Blood, and cleaning the pool or mowing the lawn or fishing or golfing or just plain sleeping in and taking a little “me time,” **what comes first? What are your priorities?** The answers to these questions are real “no-brainers,” but you and I both know that the fruits we bear often reveal the fact that we put the **wrong things first.** The fruits we bear can (and do) speak louder than our words.

And churches are just as guilty as the individuals who make up the church. Many a congregation is all about the wrong things first. ***“The customer is always right,” right?*** And this is where Christ and His means of grace wind up getting pushed to the periphery. The focus becomes the “customer” and “market share.” The focus gets put on the offerings and the finances. We don't want to offend our biggest givers, right? The focus gets put on feelings and emotions and entertainment. Don't get me wrong: Things such as food banks, kids' programs, and potlucks are all good. There's nothing wrong with them. There's nothing wrong with wanting people to have joy and peace when they're in the Lord's house and in His presence, with angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven. ***I hope you do have joy!*** However... the problems arise when all these unrighteous things become the most important thing; the main focus. *“I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins, that He was buried, that He rose again on the third day....”* There it is! If this isn't the church's number-one priority (and that includes us), **then the priorities are all out whack.**

So... let's practice what we preach. "*Make disciples of all nations....*" How? By "*baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching all that I have commanded you.*" Our Lord Christ presents no other option and leaves no wiggle room in His mission statement for the Church. ***He sets forth the number-one priority; that which is to be of first importance.*** All the other things that we can (and often do) get focused on can (and do) make disciples... ***but disciples of what?*** Look to this cross. **Here is the one and only thing that can and does save all men, regardless of how low we may sink in our sin.** There is no sin too great that our Lord hasn't already died for. "*It is finished!*" Here is God's unconditional mercy for sinners—all sinners, great and small. All sin for all time has been paid for in full with Christ's blood. All your sin for all time has been paid for in full with Christ's blood. Here is this mercy, grace, and love of God for the sinner—for you—in the flesh, nailed to a bloody cross. Man... how do you adequately say thank you for that?!

All of the Father's just and righteous wrath was poured out on Christ, and not you. That's mercy! It's mercy because there's nothing you can do to pay for even one single sin, let alone a lifetime of them. God, in His mercy, doesn't give you what you deserve—temporal and eternal punishment—and He does so because He gave Christ all that He didn't deserve, and Christ willing endured it all, even death on the cross... for you. That's love. "*God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life.*" Everlasting life: That's grace. ***That's God giving you what you don't deserve.*** Folks: This is what it's all about, whether we're talking corporately as a church or as an individual Christian. "*I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it [the Gospel] is the power of God for salvation to all who believe.*" "*I have decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.*" This is the mission and priority of the Christian and the Church: The Gospel of the crucified and risen Christ; the Gospel of this same victorious Christ who keeps His Promise to be with us always. Look no further than His sacraments for the proof.

Look to this altar. Look to this font. Look to the pulpit, the lectern, and the communion rail. ***Here is your crucified, resurrected Lord Christ, right where He promises to be, now to the very end of the age!*** Here is His free and unmerited Gospel of salvation in very real and tangible forms: Water, Bread, Wine, words you can physically hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly-digest. Here is the Gospel of your salvation, and your Lord comes to bring these to you. (***Can you imagine if God treated us like we treat Him? What would your life look like if you weren't God's number-one priority?***) It doesn't matter if it's raining or too hot or too cold. Your Lord is never too tired or too busy to be here with His gifts. Not even the threat of a virus keeps your Lord from you. Your Lord doesn't socially distance from you, and here's the proof [*Font/Altar*]! Your Lord desires the death of no man, ***no matter how sinful, rebellious, or apathetic they may be; no matter***

how out of whack their priorities may be. He died and rose again for even the lowliest chief of sinners. He died and rose again for you, for me, and for all.

I pray that this *Christocentric, cruciform mercy and grace* is your number-one priority, now and to the end of the age. I can't make it so, but by God's grace and the working of the Holy Spirit, I pray that it is so. I pray that the fruits you daily bear confirm, and do not contradict your confession. May you ever live in the peace and joy of your justification in Christ alone and because of Christ alone, and may you depart in the peace and joy of your justification in Christ and because of Christ.

In His name and to Him alone be all glory, all praise, and all honor...

AMEN.