

Home Campaign: Priorities

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning to all of you. As I said at the beginning, especially those who are new, joining us for the first time, really delighted that you're here. My name is Tommy. I'm a pastor here, and we've been for the last few weeks in the midst of the Home Campaign, which we're very excited about.

This is something that has been prayed about and planned and thought about and talked about for years. And it's related to the reason that we started the church, which was about 14 years ago, we were meeting in a living room in Columbia Heights, and our sense of calling was very clear, and that's that we wanted to start a church in D.C. that would be committed to loving and serving the city long term.

And by that, we mean for many, many generations. And so, a part of that commitment means that we are now seeking a permanent home. We've had seven locations since we started the church, and we're seeking a place where we can put down roots and really live out this commitment to love the city long term.

And this is something that we're going to be talking about. Nobody's going to be asked to make a commitment this morning. In a couple of weeks, we're going to have an opportunity for people who want to be a part of this to commit. But many of us are already committed to it.

My wife and I, we've committed to this already. Our clergy, our staff, our parish council, all committed to this. And so, this morning, we're going to be doing in this sermon, we're going to be considering, as we have the last couple of weeks, what a commitment like this entails, what it requires, and most importantly, how to do this in a way that will ultimately lead to the growth of our faith, a greater ability to trust in the Lord, a healthy view of money and resources.

[1 : 47] And as we'll see a little bit this morning, a clear sense of priorities and the kinds of priorities we should have. So, we've been in a series sort of thinking about stewardship and faith and finances.

And a couple of weeks ago, we talked about what does it look like to trust God. So, we talked about trust. And then last week, we talked a little bit about what it means to have God at the center of our lives.

And then this week, we are talking about priorities. And I think this is really timely because many of you know that in the wake of the COVID pandemic, there's been a whole lot out there on priorities. People saying this is an opportunity for us to reevaluate our priorities, to figure out what really matters in life, which begs the question, how do we determine which priorities we should have? Because there's a lot of advice out there, and a lot of it is contradictory. So, we're going to be looking at Luke chapter 16, verses 1 to 13 for guidance and how we should think about priorities in our lives.

[2 : 54] And I do have to admit, I think this is probably the most difficult parable in Luke's gospel to understand. You know, Jeff and I were talking before the service started just about, you read this and you think, are you sure you wrote that down correctly?

You know, are you sure you remembered this? And are you sure it was supposed to go here? It's one of those, it's really hard to understand at first glance. But I think that once we dig in, we begin to realize it's a treasure trove about priorities and helping us determine what our priorities are and should be.

You know, the funny thing about our priorities is that we can think that we know what our priorities are, but in reality, they may actually be something quite different. So, there could be a kind of disconnect.

And so, what we need is a way of figuring out what are our priorities actually, and then what should they be? How do we realign them? Look at what Jesus says here in verse 13 at the end of our passage.

He says, So, what he's saying is, at the end of the day, all of your priorities boil down to this.

[4 : 04] Ultimately, every human being is serving one of two masters. You're either serving God or you're serving something that God has made, right?

This broad category of stuff that the Bible calls mammon. And he says, don't kid yourself, you can't serve both. At the end of the day, you have a highest priority. And it's either God or it's something that God has made.

So, how do we know? Well, that's why we're looking at this passage. So, I want to spend a few minutes unpacking this parable and trying to understand what it means. And then we're going to draw out three, you might say, diagnostic questions to help us get at what our priorities really are. So, let's pray, and then we'll open God's Word. Lord, we thank You for Your Word. And we thank You that it can be like a surgical instrument, that we can come with a sense of what we want or need or hope for this morning.

And yet, You're here to do a kind of spiritual surgery in us. And I pray that each one of us here, that there would be something here for us, that we would hear Your voice. But that it wouldn't be the voice of a cold surgeon, that it would be the voice of a loving Father who knows us better than we know ourselves, who loves us more than we can possibly imagine, who is working in us now through Your Word to make us whole.

[5 : 16] We pray that for our good, but ultimately that we would be people who glorify You in all that we do, Lord. We pray this in Your Son's holy name. Amen. Amen. So, let's just unpack this parable.

Jesus is having dinner, and He's with His disciples along with some tax collectors, and there are some Pharisees who are listening in on the conversation.

And so, this parable that He tells is about a money manager, a steward who has been entrusted with a rich man's property to manage.

So, there's the master, and the master has entrusted his stuff to this manager, this steward. But the steward has been wasteful. He's been irresponsible. He's not doing a good job.

And so, the rich man catches him doing this, mismanaging his money, and he calls him in and says, all right, I want you to get your books. I want you to get all of your accounts in order. Bring it all here.

[6 : 15] You're fired. Today's your last day. So, the steward hears this, and I don't have to tell many of you, being fired is no fun.

Comes out of nowhere. This guy has no prospects. He's thinking about life after this job. He can't bear the thought of leaving his white-collar life and doing manual labor. He says, I'm not strong enough.

I'm not cut out for that. He can't bear the thought of begging on a street corner. And so, he says, you know, I need a plan. What am I going to do? So, here's what he does.

He calls up everyone who owes his master any kind of money, and he begins to meet with them one by one. How much do you owe?

How much do you owe? And in each case, he reduces their debts. Now, we're not quite sure what the math is here. It's very possible that he is cutting out the interest that is owed on the debts and only making them pay the principal.

[7 : 14] But what we do know, almost for certain, is that whatever else he's cutting out, he's cutting out his own commission. He's cutting out his own commission. Now, think about this.

First, he's fired. He has no prospects. He's going to have no source of income. The last income that he has any hope of getting that's going to kind of help him meet his needs is going to come from these commissions.

And yet, he calls these people in and says, that's okay. Cut that out. Just pay the principal, right?

Now, why in the world would he do this when he knows he's going to need money? It doesn't seem to make any sense.

And the answer is, he's playing the long game. He's not just thinking about the next few weeks or months or years. He's playing the long game.

Here's what's happening. Two things. Very important to understand. Number one, even though he is sacrificing his commission now, once he's on the street, what's going to happen?

[8 : 15] There's going to be a whole lot of people who owe him a favor. A lot of people who are very appreciative of what he's done for them. That's number one. Number two, everyone is going to assume that he is acting on his master's wishes.

Right? They would never dream that he's doing this on his own, right? They're going to assume that he's doing this at his master's request. So, they're going to say, wow, that master, that rich man is so generous.

He's so generous. Isn't that amazing? So, this is going to put the rich man in a tough spot, right? The rich man is going to hear that all of these debts got reduced. And he's only going to have two options.

Either he just eats that loss and pretends like it was his idea all along, or he forces these people to pay back everything that was originally owed, but then everybody's going to hate his guts.

Because once you're told that you don't owe as much money, and then they come back to you and say, actually, you do owe that much money, that's not going to go over very well. So, more than likely, the rich man is just going to pretend like it was his idea all along.

[9 : 21] You're right. I am a very generous individual, right? So, in one fell swoop, this steward does two things. He ingratiates himself to all of these people who are going to owe him favors down the road, and he makes his master look so good that he's never going to recall the debt, right?

And now, what we are supposed to hear in this parable is, you know, what we're supposed to think is, wow, that guy's brilliant. He's brilliant. What an amazing business move.

But here's where it really gets interesting. Jesus then says, verse 8, the master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. Okay, the master was proud of the manager.

For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. Now, that's where this seems to go off the tracks, because what it seems to be saying, what we seem to read here is Jesus saying, I wish my disciples were more like this dishonest money manager.

Take some notes, right? Right? And I think it's easy at first pass to read this and to think, this shouldn't be here, right?

[10 : 33] This shouldn't be in the Bible. But notice what is being commended here. He's not commending the dishonesty. He's not commending the wastefulness that led to this whole debacle.

He's commending the shrewdness. He's commending the street smarts. He's commending the fact that he's playing the long game. And that's what we need to have in view here. This is an example of what we would think of as teaching by contrast.

Teaching by contrast. The manager is described as a son of this world. That means he's self-focused. He cares nothing for God. He's functionally atheistic, lives as though there is no God. He's corrupt. He's only focused on self-preservation. He's a son of this world. But, Jesus says, even a guy like this has his priorities in order. He has his priorities in order.

And so, Jesus is saying, like, if a guy like that, if a son of the world can have his priorities in order, how much more should you, the sons and daughters of light, have your priorities in order?

[11 : 39] So, that's the point of the parable. If he can do it, you who know so much more about life and eternity and what really matters, you should absolutely be able to do it.

So, what this does is it sort of begs the question of us as the reader, well, do I have my priorities in order? Am I playing the long game?

Am I thinking about things accurately? And so, then what this parable does in the subsequent comments made by Jesus is it gives us three questions about our lives that can help us to clarify our own sense of priorities.

They sort of help us illuminate what our priorities really are and then what they should be. And so, we're going to walk through these three questions and to try to do a little self-diagnosis here.

The first question that we have to ask comes from verse 1, the parable itself. Do we as individuals, as families, have priorities of an owner or do we have the priorities of a steward?

[12 : 53] Are we owner-minded in our prioritization or are we steward-minded? See, owner-minded people look at the stuff in their life and they say, this stuff is mine because I earned it.

Belongs to me. I worked hard for it. But the Bible says actually that we are stewards of our stuff.

Just as the manager in the parable has been entrusted with the rich man's possessions for a while, each one of us has been entrusted with God's possessions for a while.

But that has a time limit on it. Our money, our time, even our own bodies, they all ultimately belong to God. So, when it comes to having the right priorities, instead of using what we've been given to advance our own interests, which is the owner-minded way to do it, a good steward does what? A good steward says, my job is to actually use what's been entrusted to me to advance the interests of the owner. I want to make decisions, financial decisions and investments.

I want to seize opportunities that are going to align with my master's priorities. That's what a good steward does. Right? So, and as we think about our lives, we think as stewards because we know that one day, just like the manager in this parable, one day God is going to say to each one of us, okay, it's time for you to get all of your accounts in order because your time is up.

[14 : 32] Right? And that we are then going to stand before the owner, the master, and we are going to be called to give an account of all of the ways that we used what has been entrusted to us.

The hard truth is, whether or not you ever get COVID, right, at some point we are all going to die a premature death.

We're all going to face a premature death. And at that time, we're going to have to give an account for how we have used what we've been given. Do we use it in ways that further our own agendas or in ways that further the agenda of the true owner, God Himself?

So, that's the first thing. Do we prioritize like an owner or like a steward? Second question as we think about our priorities. Do we tend to prioritize the temporal or the eternal?

This comes from verse 9. Prioritizing the temporal means living like this is the only life there is. And make no mistake, if this is the only life that we have, if at the end of this, like many people believe, when we die, we just blink out of existence into nothingness.

[15 : 47] If that is the case, and this is the only life we have, I will tell you now, we should try to get as much out of this life as we possibly can. Whatever floats your boat, money or status or pleasure, whatever it is that gets you up in the morning, you should try to get as much of that as you can while you can, while the getting's good.

Because one day, you're going to blink out into nothingness. 100 years, 200 years, 500 years, nobody's going to even know you were here. So, get the most out of life while you can.

But the point of this parable is that this life is simply a preview of the real life that will begin and continue on into eternity.

This is, as some people call it, pre-existence. And one day, we will begin our actual life with Christ. Right? So, if that's the case, Jesus says in verse 9, I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

[17 : 03] This is Jesus' way of saying, the resources and opportunities you have now in your pre-existence are not going to last. The economy that we are basing everything on now is going to be completely obviated.

All of the value that we place in these things is going to evaporate. So, use these things while they have value to invest in the things that will continue into that actual life.

Things that are going to last for eternity. And what you will find is, as you begin to think about eternity and to begin to invest in eternity and to begin to think about this life as a preview of eternity, if you begin to think like that, it's actually going to begin to set you free from that need to get as much as you can, to accumulate as much as you can, because your priorities begin to shift.

There's a great story about two great writers, Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller, both great writers, and they were together at a party at the home of a billionaire.

And they're sitting there, and they're looking around at the home of just this fabulously wealthy man, and they're looking at all of the original art and all of that, and Vonnegut leans over to Heller and says, Isn't it amazing to think that this guy makes in one day what you're going to make from all of your book sales over the course of your entire life?

[18 : 35] Right? He makes in one day as much as you're ever going to make, and more. And Heller thinks about it for a moment. He says, Yeah, but you know, I've got something that he'll never have. And Vonnegut kind of laughs, and he says, What could that possibly be?

And Heller says, Enough. The knowledge that I have enough. Right? If you prioritize the eternal, it begins to set you free to ask that question.

How do I know when I have enough? You know, when I make enough. When I've climbed the ladder of success enough. When I have a big enough house.

You know, when I have a deep enough sense of connection to the place I live. When my things are nice enough.

You know, my clothes are nice enough. My car is nice enough. How are you going to know? Where's that line? If you begin to think about eternity, it begins to shift the calculus around. And you can think about that.

[19 : 45] When is enough enough? So, that's the second question. Are we prioritizing the temporal? Are we prioritizing the eternal? Third diagnostic question. Are our priorities merely idealistic?

Or do we convert them into daily habits? This comes from verse 10. You know, when Laura and I were first married, we lived in a tiny little apartment in Capitol Hill.

I don't know how many square feet it was. But we were always bumping into each other. And our space was just filled with clutter. And we would always say, you know, the problem is the space. If we could just have a bigger space, then we would have somewhere to put all of our stuff. And then it wouldn't be cluttered. Then the house would be clean. And so, you know, eventually down the road, we were able to move out of that apartment.

We got quite a bit more space. And guess what happened? The house was absolutely spotless from that point forward. Has anybody been over to our house recently?

[20 : 44] No, the clutter followed us. Right? Now, what was the problem? Well, it was a misdiagnosis of the problem. See, we had this ideal of a decluttered home.

And we misdiagnosed that as being related to a space limitation. If we have more space, then we have more closets, we have more shelves, we have more places to put things. Then their house would be clean. We just need more space. About, you know, 500,000 more square feet ought to do. That's all we need. You know, it's never like I need 20 more thousand square feet. It's like I need, you know, about 500 more square feet. That would be just right. And then what happens is the stuff expands.

Because why? Because we never cultivated a habit of decluttering. You know, decluttering is a daily habit that you have to invest in if you want a clean house. And if you don't declutter, you're going to have clutter.

It's just the way it works. And this is essentially what we experienced in that moment is the truth of what Jesus is saying here. He says in verse 10, you know, one who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much.

[21 : 43] And one who's dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. In other words, what is the best predictor of future behavior and outcomes? Past behavior and performance.

Right? That's the best predictor. What are you going to be like in 10 years? What are your daily habits right now? You become your habits. Your habits determine who you become.

Right? So people say things like, I don't have time for friendship now. You know, I have a couple of people I stay in touch with, but I don't really have time for that. You know, I don't really have time to, you know, come to church every week or get involved or serve or do ministry.

I don't have time for those kinds of things because, you know, things are really busy right now with the kids and my job and all of that. Things are really crazy. But at some point, I'm going to have more margin. And then I'm going to get all of that margin to investing in relationships and ministry. Then I'll give it all to that. Or people say, you know, money's really tight right now. I don't have a whole lot to give. We're just barely making ends meet. But, you know, when we make more money down the road, we're going to be making more money and we plan to give all that away.

[22 : 52] The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior and present behavior. These are ideals like a clutter-free home. But Jesus is essentially saying the best way to know how you're going to use more free time is to look at how you use the time that you have now.

The best way to know how generous you would be with more money is to look at how generous you are now. And this is a shift that I think we all have to make. You know, priorities, faithfulness, is not about high ideals.

It's not about grand gestures that you envision yourself doing at some point in the future. It's about daily habits. That's how faithfulness is lived out. Daily habits.

So our priorities need to be converted into habits. It's all well and good for me to say I prioritize prayer. I prioritize spending time with the Lord. But that needs to be built into my day.

It needs to be built into my week. Otherwise, it's an ideal. It's not really a priority. So what I'd like for us to do is just take some time over the next few days, weeks, as individuals, as families, as a church, and to think about what are our priorities really, and then what should our priorities be as people who follow Jesus.

[24 : 18] So we need to ask ourselves, do we have the priorities of an owner or a steward? Do we prioritize the temporal or the eternal? Are our priorities merely idealistic, or do we convert them into daily habits?

And of course, the best example we have of someone who has their priorities in order is Jesus Christ.

Do you know that all through Jesus' earthly ministry, He was surrounded by people who were continually trying to get Him to change His priorities? Even His closest friends.

People around Jesus tried to convince Him to lead a military revolt, to overthrow the Roman occupiers. People around Jesus tried to convince Him to spend all of His time feeding and healing the people who were in desperate need right around Him where He was.

They tried to convince Him to become a great rabbi and accumulate thousands upon thousands of disciples. They tried to convince Him to avoid danger and prioritize self-preservation by staying well clear of Jerusalem.

[25 : 32] All of these are great priorities. Who could argue with any of these priorities? They're all very justifiable. They would all do lots of good in the world.

But Jesus was playing the long game. Jesus knew that His life was not His own. That He was here to do the will of His Father.

He was thinking like a steward, not like a master. Even though He was a master. Jesus was focused not on this life only, the temporal, but He was focused on all of eternity.

And guess what? Not just His eternity, our eternity. And finally, these priorities were not just ideals.

They were woven into His daily life when again and again and again He did the unexpected thing.

He left the people who were around Him who were begging for His attention and His healing. He left the people who were trying to put a crown on His head.

[26 : 39] He moved on. He, instead of avoiding Jerusalem, He made a beeline for Jerusalem.

Why? Because He knew. He knew what His priorities were. They were woven into His daily life.

He lived them out faithfully. And we see His priorities in John chapter 6, starting in verse 38. He says this, Jesus knew why He had been sent in the world.

to give His life for sin. To overcome death. To raise His people to new life. To renew and restore the world. And to take the throne as the King of the heavens and the earth.

That's why He came. He was playing the long game. And it's because Jesus was clear in His priorities. And therefore accomplished all of that.

That we can be secure in our priorities. That we can prioritize our lives in ways that look foolish, maybe even irresponsible to people around us. But as sons and daughters of light, we have Jesus who shows us that in these priorities, trusting God, our future, our eternal future is secure.

[28 : 15] Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You for Your Son. We thank You for His single-minded commitment to accomplishing salvation on our behalf.

Lord, I pray that this would give us the kind of peace and security to dramatically rethink how we live.

Lord, knowing that we can trust. We can trust. That if we give our priorities to You, You will provide for us.

You will go before us. Lord, that we can rest in You. And what You've done on our behalf. Lord, we pray this in Your Son's holy name. Amen.