

# Priorities

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     that we have such technology that enables us in a time like this to be able to gather together virtually and pray and worship. Although I have to say, as amazing as this technology is, I never thought that we would be using it. So this is an entirely new experience for me and for many of us. We've joked that this pandemic is dragging Church of the Advent, kicking and screaming into the 21st century. And so here we are. This has been a time, I think, where lots of things are happening that we didn't expect. Everybody is having to adjust. And we all, I think, feel off, not just in our country, but in the world. Everything feels off. A lot of things are being put on hold. I know that there are lots of opinions out there. Some of you may think that all of this is overblown and crazy overreaction. I know others of you are feeling quite anxious and quite fearful. And so there's a whole range of feelings about this. I want to encourage you to do what Laura and I have been trying to do. And that is to allow God, rather than the 24-hour news cycle, to shape how we think and feel and act in response to this crisis. I'm not saying don't watch the news.

I'm not saying don't stay tuned. But we do have a choice in what influences we allow ourselves to come under in how we think and feel and act in response to the things that are happening.

And so we've really been trying to seek the Lord. And we've been trying to ask God what He may be trying to teach us through these trials. Because God is always present and He's always active and He's always calling us to Himself in one way or another. And so I've been feeling that this is a really good time for us together as a community to take stock of our lives, to ask ourselves what really matters, to reevaluate where we're investing, and to really figure out are we focusing on the things that we need to be focusing on. And so because of that, I've been reading passages like the ones that we've read today together out of Leviticus and Luke chapter 16, both difficult passages to understand. Luke 16, 1 through 13, in particular, I think is probably the most difficult parable in all of Luke.

And yet it's worth the effort because it is a treasure trove of teaching and wisdom about what life is, what matters, and what our priorities should be. So it's been a very rich study for me. And so I'm excited to share some of that with you. I just want you to listen to what Jesus says at the end of the passage in verse 13. He says, No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

Now this is a fascinating statement that Jesus makes. In other words, everybody has a master. Everybody has something that takes top priority in their lives. Now we may not know it. But this is true for Christians and non-Christians alike, regardless of whether you consider yourself to be religious or completely irreligious. Everyone has a master. And that master is either God, or it is someone or something that God has created. It's either God or the stuff of the created world.

[ 3 : 2 8 ]     That's essentially what mammon means. It means the stuff of the world, our wealth, our possessions, the things that clutter our lives. And here's the rub. We may think that we serve one master.

But when you look at our priorities and our daily lives, those are the things that reveal our true master. So what I want to do is to spend just a few minutes looking at this parable. I want to explain it and unpack it a little bit because there's some things that are hard to understand. And then we're going to consider briefly three questions that I would commend to you that are for self-reflection, to help you discern where your priorities are and what master you're serving. So if you have a Bible, open it to Luke chapter 16 verses 1 through 13. Follow along at home. And let's dive in.

First, I want to give a little context to this parable. Jesus is having dinner with his disciples along with some tax collectors. And there are some Pharisees listening in as well. And the Pharisees, we know from reading earlier in Luke's gospel, are grumbling that Jesus would associate so closely with people like these tax collectors. And so Jesus begins to share a parable that would have been particularly relevant to the tax collectors who are really good at manipulating money and people.

And it also would have been very relevant to the Pharisees as we will see. But this parable that Jesus shares is all about a steward. He's a money manager. And his job is that he's been entrusted with another man's property to manage. But as we know, he has been wasteful. Maybe he's been a little too liberal with his expense account. The rich man catches him, calls him in and says, I want you to get your books and accounts in order and bring them here. You're fired. Now, being fired is no fun. Some of you know that. And this man has no prospects. He looks around and he realizes he can't bring himself to leave the cush white collar lifestyle and do manual labor. He is too proud to beg on a street corner.

And so he needs a plan. So he calls up everyone who owes his master any kind of debt. And most of these debts are actually pretty large debts. And he brings these people in one at a time.

[ 5 : 40 ] And he starts reducing all of their debts. And if we had time to get into the amounts, these are massive debts, eight to 10 years salary worth of debts. He starts reducing these debts down.

Now, it's possible we're not sure exactly what he's reducing. It's very possible that he's cutting out the interest that is owed on the debts and only requiring these people to pay the principal. But what we do know is that he is very likely cutting out his own commission in the process.

So here's a guy who's about to be out on the street, who is cutting his own commission out of these debts that are owed to his master. And so it begs the question, why in the world would he be doing this? And there are two things going on here. Number one, even though this man is sacrificing his commission now, in a little while when he's out on the street, he's going to have a whole town full of people who owe him favors. And that is worth its weight in gold, way more than whatever commission he might have made. He'll have plenty of people who want to hire him because they owe him a favor. Number two, everyone is going to assume that he's acting on the wishes of the rich man, of his boss. And so that puts his boss in a very interesting predicament. Either his boss says, yes, this was my idea, and lets word spread that he's a gracious and merciful man who's willing to forgive debt and interest. Or he has to be the guy who says, no, no, no, no, this was my steward's idea. I'm actually going to need that money. In which case, people aren't going to like him very much.

So for this reason, we look at what this steward has done, and in one fell swoop, he has secured for himself a future full of people who like him and owe him favors. And he has allowed his master to look so kind and generous in the eyes of the public that there's no way he will possibly recall these debts.

So it's a pretty brilliant maneuver. Now here's where it gets interesting, because you can imagine at this point, all of the tax collectors sitting there would be laughing, looking at one another and saying, that's a pretty good move. I'm going to write that down and remember that in case I need to use it. And all the Pharisees probably would have been grumbling and saying, I can't believe Jesus is telling this story about this dishonest worldly man. All right, so here's where it gets really interesting. Jesus then says in verse 8, the master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. That means his street smarts. For the sons of this world, Jesus says, are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. Now that's fascinating, because it sounds like Jesus is saying, I wish my followers would be more like this dishonest steward, which would have been very bizarre to hear in any generation, especially Jesus' generation. But notice what he's commending here. He's not commending the dishonesty. He's commending the shrewdness. He's saying, this guy is way more street smart than my followers. And this is an example of Jesus teaching by contrast.

[ 8 : 33 ] He's essentially saying this, even though this manager is, what he says, a son of this world, meaning he is someone who is only concerned about self-preservation, he's corrupt, he cares nothing about the ways of God, he's entirely self-focused, even though he's a son of this world. He has his priorities in order. He knows what matters, and he's pursuing it. So Jesus is saying, if a guy like that can have his priorities in order, how much more should you, the people of the light, my followers, people who belong to me, how much more should you have your priorities in order? It's teaching by contrast. And there are three questions that rise up out of this passage as we think about our own lives and whether or not we do, in fact, have our priorities in order. So I want to walk through those questions very briefly. So question number one, do you live like an owner or like a steward?

Do you live like an owner or like a steward? See, an owner mentality looks at all of the things in one's life and says, this is all mine, because I've earned it. And therefore, I have a right to do whatever I want with it, whether it's my money, or my time, or even my body. It's mine. And so only I get a say in how it is used, right? That's an owner mentality. And an owner mentality gives rise to feelings of entitlement. I deserve this. This says something about me as a person. It gives me worth.

And yet Jesus shows us that just as the manager in this parable has been entrusted with the rich man's possessions for a while, so each one of us has been entrusted with things for a while. But all of those things ultimately belong to God. Our time, our money, all of our possessions, even our bodies, they all actually belong to God. And they've been entrusted to us for a brief while, a very brief while, when compared with eternity. And what Jesus is saying through this parable first is that we are not owners as much as we would like to think that we are. We're stewards. One of the best ways of understanding the meaning of the word sin is that it is living in this world like it's ours, living in it while ignoring the God who made it and the God to whom it belongs. But Jesus is saying, we are not owners, we're stewards. And what you will see is the more you begin to think of yourself like a steward and the more that you begin to look at the things in your life as things that have been given to you, entrusted to you by God, it will lead to the sense of entitlement in your life evaporating.

And that will be replaced by a deep sense of gratitude. You'll give thanks that God has given you and entrusted you the things that you have. And as we think about what it means to be a steward, a good steward has two primary characteristics. Number one, a good steward is somebody who never uses the things that have been entrusted to them to advance their own interests. They use those things to advance the interests of the owner. So in this case, that would be God. So that's the first thing to think about. And then the second characteristic of a good steward is that a good steward knows that one day, just like this manager, one day God is going to say to us, get your accounts and your books in order and come to me, your time is done. And that's a sobering thought. But the hard truth is, coronavirus or not, one day all of us will die a premature death. And as hard as that is to contemplate and as upsetting as that might be for some of us, we're also told that that will not be the end.

And that we will come before the Lord and we will be asked to give an account of all of the ways that we've used his possessions while we were stewards over them. So that's the first question. Do we live like owners or like stewards? Number two, the second question, are you investing only in temporal things or are you investing in eternal things? Do you invest in the temporal or also the eternal? Jesus says in verse nine, and 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. Unrighteous wealth simply means worldly wealth, but the economy that we live in now that one day will be no more and will become irrelevant. This is a way of saying all of the resources and the opportunities that you have right now, none of that is going to last. So use them to invest in things that will last for eternity.

[ 13 : 22 ] Use things that won't last to invest in things that will last, which means people. It means relationships. It means loving and serving those people we will spend eternity with. That's what Jesus is talking about. And, uh, you know, this coronavirus scare is very big and very prominent. It's on everybody's mind right now, but you know, this is going to pass and life is going to go on and there will be other things that crowd in for our attention and other things that demand a response. But while this scare is here, we actually have an opportunity to reach out and care for our neighbors. Never have we had a better excuse to get to know the people who live right around us and to check in on them and to make sure they're okay. Um, it's in particular an opportunity to check in, uh, and to care for the elderly. Um, if you have people who are elderly, who you know might be living alone, um, in your apartment building or down the street, this is a great opportunity for you just to check in and see if they have everything that they need. There are people all throughout the city who are lonely, who because of the social distancing measures that are now in place, they are more isolated than ever before. There are children that have a result of the public schools not meeting may not get the food that they need. And so there are lots of opportunities for us to focus on and invest in the things that will last for eternity. So we should be asking ourselves during this time, where am I investing my time and my energy and my talents and my treasures, as they say, am I investing in things that are going to fade away? Or am I investing in things that are going to last for eternity? Uh, I know just yesterday, some people from the Advent community joined together and you helped to pack 550 bags of canned food and other non-perishables to give to the elderly who may be at risk because of this crisis. And I want to say that's the kind of investment that lasts. That's the kind of investment that matters because you're investing in the lives of people. So that's the second question. Am I only investing in temporal things or am I also investing in things that are eternal? Uh, the third and final question that, that I would like to encourage you to think about as we think about priorities, do you follow Jesus? For those of you who follow Jesus, do you follow

Jesus in a compartmentalized or in an integrated way? Are you compartmentalized in your faith or are you integrated? Now let me explain what I mean by that. A compartmentalized faith means that there is a disconnect. You may have learned how to talk or act in Christian ways when you're around Christian people. Maybe when you're at church or you're at a small group, if you're a part of something like a small group, you've learned how to talk the talk. You've learned how to say and do the right things.

And yet your faith has no bearing on the way you approach or think about your job or on the way you relate to other people, maybe friends from college. Your faith has no bearing in how you think about what you do on the weekends or how you spend your money or where you're spending your time.

And so your faith is sort of compartmentalized. When Jesus says this very curious thing in verse 10, he says, one who's faithful in a very little is also faithful in much. And one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. In other words, true character is what runs all the way through you. True character is what runs all the way through you. I love the illustration that comes from Tom Wright, who compares character to Brighton Rock Candy. Brighton Rock Candy is a kind of long stick of hard candy. And it famously has the word Brighton written on it. And wherever you break into that piece of candy, wherever you cut into it, you will see the word Brighton because it runs all the way through the piece of candy. And he says character is a lot like that. He says your true character is a pattern of thinking and acting that runs all the way through you. So no matter what time of day, no matter what situation or context you're in, whether there are people around or you're all by yourself, your character is that thing that is always at the center of your thinking and your acting.

And so the point is, a person who is unfaithful in the small everyday details of life will probably be unfaithful in the big defining moments as well. I know that I can very easily think that this little thing over here, that little expense over there, that doesn't really matter. But if push comes to shove, if I really need to take a stand for my faith, surely I'll step up. And Jesus is saying, don't be too quick to assume that. In fact, it is those small, seemingly insignificant daily patterns that determine the likelihood of how we will think and act in those big defining moments of life.

[18:07] And that's what Jesus is wanting us to know. So the question that I want us to consider is, does my faith and does my desire to follow Jesus run through my entire being? Or is it compartmentalized?

Do I have a Christian mode that I can switch on and off depending on who I'm around? How do we know? How do we know whether this is something that runs all the way through us? Well, look at your small everyday moments. Ask yourself, am I faithful in the small everyday moments of my life? The brief exchange that I have with my kids, the way that I respond to them when I'm angry, the brief exchanges that we have with people at work, the little ways that we spend money that doesn't seem like a whole lot, but can really add up. This is going to tell you a lot about what really defines you. You may have heard it said that if you want to know somebody's priorities, if you want to know what really matters to them, look at their day planner and look at their bank statement.

Those are going to tell you what that person's priorities really are. So I want to bring all of this together. Essentially, I want to say this, this is a tough moment for a lot of people. A lot of us are shut up at home and not quite sure what the future holds over these next few weeks. But I want to commend you to seize this moment and to recognize the opportunities that exist within it.

Not only is this a great opportunity for us as Christians to pray for our neighborhoods and our city, and our world, which we should be doing every day, not only is a great opportunity for us to join together in prayer, especially for all of those who suffer or are vulnerable, but we really have an opportunity right now because everything is on hold to take stock of our lives and to reevaluate and to ask ourselves what really matters? What am I really here to do? And so we need to ask ourselves these questions. Am I living like an owner or like a steward? Am I investing only in temporal things or am I also investing in things that are going to last for eternity? Am I following Jesus in a compartmentalized way or is my relationship with Jesus something that runs all the way through my heart and soul from the smallest, most insignificant interactions to the biggest, most defining moments of my life?

Do I have my priorities in order? This is a question that I want us to think about this week. You know, even for us as a church right now, many of you know, we are in the middle of the home campaign. This is a big push and this is in the middle of the public phase of that push. And the hope is that every single person who's a part of the Advent family and extended family, that we would all commit to financially supporting our goal to secure a permanent long-term home in the heart of the city.

[ 20 : 51 ] For, for, for, for, to, to serve for generations. And so you don't have to be an expert to know that right in the middle of a public phase of a campaign like this, it's generally not a good idea to stop having public meetings. Generally, you want the opposite to happen, but what's going on? Well, the entire reason that we want a home is because of our commitment to love the city long-term.

And it turns out that right now, loving the city means not having public gatherings. And so this has been a great opportunity for us as a church to make sure that our priorities are in order.

Our ultimate, ultimate priority is to love the city in the name of Jesus Christ. And if loving the city means not meeting, then that's what we need to do. And at the end of the day, if we lose sight of that priority, then why in the world will we need to build it? And so for now we are here, but, but I want to encourage you to continue praying for this campaign and to continue praying for this vision that we all share to commit ourselves to loving the city long-term, not just for the next year or two, but for generations to come. And of course, our greatest hope is this, that even though many of us, myself included, most of the time find that our priorities are all out of work. Our greatest hope is that Jesus Christ never wavered. His entire ministry, he was exclusively focused on doing the will of his father, even though that led straight to the cross. But when we look at the cross, and when we contemplate the meaning of Jesus's death and the hope of his resurrection, what we realize is that even when we reject him, even when we deny him, we are always Jesus's top priority. And when you realize that, and when you realize that that was true, even on the cross, it shows you that when it comes to our time, when it comes to our, the things that we're investing in, there's only one who is worthy to be our top priority, and that's Jesus Christ. Because even when we didn't love him, even when we rejected him, he never stopped loving us, because he loves relentlessly. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. And as we continue in prayer, I just,

I pray specifically for everyone who is at home right now, especially for those who might be alone. I pray that they would be encouraged. I pray that they would know and feel the love of Jesus Christ with them right now where they are. I pray that Jesus, you would make your presence known, Lord, through the power of the Holy Spirit. And I ask this in your son's name. Amen.

So now we're going to respond to... Amen.