

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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In the world - not of it: Balancing our Priorities

An *imaginary* story is told of the day when Jesus met with His disciples. Seeing a pile of twelve stones, He instructed each of them to pick one up and then carry it up the nearby mountain. Peter, true to character, came forward first, and seeing one stone that was smaller than the rest, he picked it up and marched off up the mountain. Andrew, his brother was last to choose and was left with the biggest stone. As it was a hot day, by the time he got to the top of the mountain, he was red and tired. But Jesus then instructed the disciples to sit down, and promptly turned the stones into a picnic. Andrew got the biggest meal, whilst Peter was left with only a small snack. Seeing another pile of stones, Jesus told the disciples to pick one up and carry them back down the mountain. This time Peter grabbed the largest and hurried off, whilst Andrew was left with just a small stone. At the bottom Jesus told His disciples to throw the stones into the lake. Poor Peter got a drenching, while Andrew sent his stone into the deep distance. Jesus then turned to His disciples and said to them "When you do what I ask, who are you doing it for?"

As we continue our series looking at how our faith is to be expressed in the real world, it is very much this question that we need to keep asking ourselves. Perhaps, like me, you struggle with this subject, feeling that there is too much to do and not enough time to do it in. Not only have I struggled with the subject in practice, but as I began to look at what the Scriptures say about this subject, then there was a real challenge as to how far what I was doing matched up to what was required of me. This morning we will look at four short passages that will give us a good start in finding the scriptural answer to balancing our priorities.

Early on in Israel's history, Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 10:12, 13 and 19: "And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I command you today for your good? ... Therefore love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

One of the earliest prophets, Micah, records in Micah 6:8: "He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Then we read, in one of the earliest of the New Testament books, in James 1:27: "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world."

Lastly, it is to the words of the Lord Himself that we shall turn our thoughts: "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." Matthew 6:33.

Life would be so much easier if we had a full rule book that gave us clear instruction as to what we should do in every circumstance. Yet if such a list existed, it would represent tremendous danger for us. We would then try to obey it in our own strength, and soon find ourselves failing miserably. Instead, in His wisdom, God has given us a far better system to regulate our lives. By the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, we are to daily rely upon His leading. If only I was to do only all that He led me to do each day, then my life would be stress free and there would be no competing calls upon my time, no conflicts of interest. If we are brutally honest these conflict points arise because, for one reason or another, I have failed to allow myself to be guided by Him. So first of all we need to develop a real and dependent relationship with God. This is not the sort of thing that is expressed in public on a Sunday, or in a spiritual sounding prayer, but rather in the quiet of my own mind and heart. There needs to be a daily time of reading His word, and talking to Him in prayer together with quiet meditation. For some, this may be done first thing in the morning or last thing at night. Others may find this impractical, so a lunch break devotional time, or time of prayer during the commute to and from work may work best. The real key is not so much when, so long as it is done. Time must be set aside for personal study, if ever I am going to be useful in helping others. There needs to be in my life that time when God and I meet, unknown to all around me, when He is able to work out His kingdom in me. Everything else is discretionary. In his Letters to an American Lady, CS Lewis wrote "Don't be too easily convinced that God really wants you to do all sorts of work you needn't do. Each must do his duty "in that state of life to which God has called him." Remember that a belief in the virtues of doing for doing's sake is characteristically feminine, characteristically American, and characteristically modern: so that three veils may divide you from the correct view! There can be intemperance in work just as in drink. What feels like zeal may only be fidgets or even flattering of one's self importance ... By doing what "one's station and its duties" does not demand, one can make oneself less fit for the duties it does demand and so

commit some injustice. Just you give Mary a little chance as well as Martha.” Now I don’t for one minute want to discourage anyone from being busy doing what the Lord has called him or her to do, if indeed He has called. But Jesus’ words were to seek first His kingdom. Until His authority has a place in my personal life, I cannot expect others to respond to a call to follow Him. Closely associated with this is the need to spend time as a family, as a couple and as an individual, in prayer and reading His word. It is vitally important, yet very difficult, to ensure time is set aside, when all the members of a family can have a spiritual time together. Again, one size does not fit all. For some this will be reading His word together. For others it may be praying in turns, or singing a hymn or chorus together. According to Jesus’ words, it is as I allow His authority to rule within my life, and then in my family life, that all the other things associated with life will be added as well.

It is important to realise that, as believers, we are real people too. It would be lovely to spend all day every day just quietly reading His word, or listening to great ministry. But it would be quite wrong! God made me with a need to eat, and a need to sleep, a need to laugh and an ability to appreciate good things, for example. When God made us in His image, He made our whole being not just what we think of as a spiritual being. It is that whole being that needs to be developed and used in His service. There may come times when He calls us to a very particular time of service. Epaphroditus is an excellent example of this, He was so busy in the Lord’s work that he made himself ill. You can read about him for yourself in Philippians 2. Paul speaks of a married couple abstaining from normal relations for a while, for a particular reason. But these are exceptions to the normal, where God desires a balanced life. The three verses we read at the beginning today, can be summarised in two thoughts: personal purity and compassionate care for others. If you like, we can view these two things as God’s priorities for our lives. There are a multitude of ways that these may be expressed at different times and in different cultures. But His desire for me to be righteous in all that I do, and to show compassion towards those who need it, remains constant. This is what God wants from each one of us. Sometimes we make life too complicated. We need to take a careful look at all that we are involved in and measure it against these two goals. Does it promote personal purity? Does it help those who need to be cared for?

It would be quite easy to sort out our priorities if the choice was between watching the TV for six hours a day and spending time helping my wife around the house. Yet so often the choices to be made are not between one good and one bad thing, but rather two equally good things. For example, how do I decide between giving money to support the Lord’s work directly, and buying my children something that, whilst they may not need it as an essential, they would certainly appreciate it. It is in cases like this that we need to come back to His leading again and again. The answer that is right today, may not be so tomorrow! But neither is necessarily better than the other. Provision for one’s family is one of the most fundamental requirements of any believer. To ignore this is to invalidate any other service. Sadly, so often we work under a ladder scale of values where we have put God at the top, then family, then church, then work, then others. This is not always helpful. For starters, God covers every aspect of my life. Each one of us is in full time service for the Lord. God may call me to be a missionary. God may equally call me to be a bin man. In both jobs I am to express personal purity and a care for others. We rather need to see all these areas of our lives as important and under the authority of God. There needs to be a balance between them all. It is as I overemphasise one to the detriment of another that I find that my priorities have gone astray. If I pursue my career to the detriment of my ability to contribute to the life of my local church, then I am not working for Him. But it is equally as poor if I am so busy in church so that I don’t have time to do my school homework, or am late to work because I have been at the early morning prayer meeting. There is nothing spiritual in being out at church each night so that my family never sees me. But then if I am always at home, who will teach my children about sacrificial service. You see, in every sphere of life there needs to be a balance, with appropriate resources given to each. At different times, each sphere of my life may require more time and effort, than at another. But over each I need to ask myself the question, “Who am I doing this for?”

Sometimes, we get ourselves into difficulties because we strive for perfection. Now it is right that we try our best in all things, but having done so we need to let go and move on. In an imperfect world, we must learn to accept our own faults, and those of others. GK Chesterton once said: “If a job is worth doing, it is worth doing poorly!” What he was saying was not to extol shoddiness, but rather to remind us that if we can do a job to perfection, in a fallen world, then it probably wasn’t much of a job in the first place. Difficult, challenging tasks, inevitably will be full of faults. As a parent, it is ok to fail sometimes. I don’t have to remember to say everything in a sermon, or be superman at work. It is all too easy in our desire for perfection, to want to be better than everyone else is, so that I will be recognised and listened to. People will seek my opinion and value my ideas. And all the time it’s me, me, me. In every sphere of life I need to remember that I am God’s co-worker. Together we are raising a family. Together we are active in my local church. Together we work in the hospital laboratory. Together we are showing what a difference there is in knowing Christ as Lord. But it is His work, and He will complete it in just the way He wants to. No one sphere is more important per se than another. Each one needs to be kept in balance with the rest. What is important is how we behave in each sphere of our lives. Who are we doing what we do for?

It is inevitable in life that we will feel competing demands being put upon us. This can cause us to become stressed and irritable. It is important to realise that these competing demands are not in themselves a bad thing. Only a dead person feels no stress. We should view them as a healthy sign that we are busy in His work. However, we do need to

learn when to say “yes” to a new activity, and when to say “no”. We can only learn this by experience and by daily time spent with God. As parents, we do not expect our children to do everything. Nor should we do everything for them, for then they would be spoiled. As part of the process of growing up we expect them to take increasing responsibility for their own actions. As an infinitely wise Father, God is able to guide us through life, enabling us to know what He wants us to do. Sadly, sometimes we become so busy we just don’t have time to listen. At other times, we plainly don’t want to listen. Perhaps, we need to list all the things that we do and prayerfully bring them before God to see if they are the things that He wants us to do. Is my career that which He has chosen for me? Is my family functioning according to His blueprint? Am I serving in my local church in a way that is pleasing to Him? Am I acting as salt and light in the society that He has chosen to put me in? It is vital that we learn to recognise His voice. If we do not, then we will say “yes” to calls upon us, and end up doing things that we ought not to, or say “no” and not do that which we should. It was Mary who was given the great commendation “she has done what she could”. She had not done what she shouldn’t, nor had she not done what she could have done. In beautiful love for her Lord, she had anointed Him, against the day of His burial. It would be a marvellous thing if this commendation could be given to each one of us also. It is also true that probably all of us could be doing a bit more for Him, and a little bit less for ourselves. We really must ask ourselves the question, “Who am I doing this for?”

Before we finish this morning, we do need to remind ourselves of the fact that the Christian life is often utterly different to the general way that this world exists. We ought not to be surprised then, when we seem to be quite different from those around about us. Indeed, if we are not, then it is likely that there is something wrong with our Christianity. There is a great danger that the values that this world uses will become our own. So for example, parents push their children to be the best, to get the highest grades possible, so that they can get the best job, with the highest salary. Now it is quite right that we teach our children to work hard. That is Christ honouring. But the reason for doing so ought not to be the fattest pay cheque, or the nicest house. These things have no eternal value, and it is so important that we teach our children only to pursue those things that will last forever, whilst they are still young. It is not a coincidence that many of the greatest men and women of God have held quite ordinary jobs. This has allowed them more time to develop a relationship with God that has been to the eternal blessing of many others.

For those of us in work, or having retired, peer pressure is to advance as high as possible, to get the biggest house possible, and to have as large a pension pot as possible. Daytime TV is full of lifestyle programmes that pursue the theme that more is good. So imbalances arise as more and more of our energy goes into acquiring wealth and pursuing prosperity. How many of us have learnt to live on an income equal to that which we started out on? Godliness with contentment is great gain. We need to rediscover the simplicity of life that so marked the early believers, as they met together daily, sharing what they had with those in need. There can be little doubt that the awesome power of materialism has profoundly damaged the Christian testimony in the western world. As we order our priorities, we need to seek God’s strength to free us from the power that materialism exerts over this world, so that whatever He gives us is held in stewardship for Him.

In summary then, we need to constantly ask ourselves the question; “Who am I doing this for?” It is quite possible to do a good thing for very selfish reasons. And whilst it is possible to fool ourselves, it is utterly impossible to fool God, as we try to answer that question. Just recently, my wife answered a question I had only just thought of, and hadn’t yet got round to asking! It was quite scary. She obviously knew what was going on inside my mind. And yet that is also true of a far higher authority. The Lord Jesus knows why we do all that we do. He knows the reason for all our behaviour, and it is to Him that we are answerable. The only wise, the only Christ honouring course in life is to make time each day to really find out what He wants me to do. Once I have an answer, then simply do it, until He tells me to stop. This was the lesson that the disciples learnt as they went fishing. Under their own steam, they could fish all night and catch nothing. Under His direction, they caught a great net full of fish. As they obeyed Him to the letter, so they prospered. When they acted beyond His commands, they struggled.

As we review our lives, let us truly seek to do just what He has given us to do. Nothing more, nothing less. And in doing this, let us do it to the very best of our ability, joyfully thankful that we are a part of His wonderful plan. Just as He has given us eternal life to enjoy, let us seek those things that have eternal value, so that we too may receive the commendation, “Well done! Good and faithful servant!”

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