

Priorities: Deciding and Doing What Is Most Important ***Luke 9:51-62***

When Charles M. Schwab was the president of Bethlehem Steel he offered a challenge to a management consultant named Ivy Lee:

Schwab: “Show me a way to get more things done. If it works, I’ll pay anything within reason.

Lee: “Write down the things you have to do tomorrow. Now number these items in the order of their real importance. The first thing tomorrow morning, start working on number one and stay with it until it is completed. Next take number two and don’t go any further until it is completed. Then proceed to number three, and so on. If you can’t complete everything on schedule, don’t worry. At least you will have taken care of the important things before getting distracted by items of lesser consequence.”

“The secret is to do this daily. Evaluate the relative importance of the things you have to get done . . . establish priorities . . . record your plan of action . . . and stick to it. Do this every working day. After you have convinced yourself of the value of this system, have your (associates) try it. Test it as long as you like. Then send me a check for whatever you think the idea is worth.”

A few weeks later Charles Schwab sent to Ivy Lee a check for \$25,000. Schwab claimed it was the most profitable lesson he had learned in his entire business career.

That is because the success of life is tied to making and keeping priorities. Those who figure out what is most important and then do it are those who make the most of their lives.

No one was better at priorities than Jesus. Not only did he figure out what was most important—he did it! And not only did he do it himself but he taught us to do it as well.

Jesus’ number one priority was (and is) to reconnect people to God. In Luke 19:10 we learn that

“the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”

Have you ever made a very important telephone call from a pay phone and run out of time? You were disconnected. The operator came on the line and said, “Please deposit one dollar for three more minutes.” But you don’t have a dollar in change. You immediately look around for someone nearby—anyone—who would pay the dollar to get you reconnected. Otherwise, the conversation is over. The connection is lost.

Jesus came to reconnect people who lost their connection to God. He *“came to seek and to save what was lost.”* The cost was higher than four quarters. The cost to reconnect was Jesus’ life. Jesus came to die on the cross in Jerusalem in order to

connect us to God forever. This was Jesus’ number one priority.

In order to fulfill his priority, Jesus had to leave where he was up north in Galilee and head down south to the

city of Jerusalem. In Jerusalem he intended to be crucified, buried, arise from the dead and later ascend back to heaven.

The shortest route from Galilee to Jerusalem was through an area called Samaria. Here’s what happened according to Luke 9:51-56:

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village.

The problem was that the Samaritans and the Jews were different denominations. We may laugh at that except denominations are not some modern

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American invention. They are part of every religion from the Sunni Muslims to the Shiite Muslims, from the Orthodox, Reformed and Conservative Jews to the Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Baptists and Episcopalians.

In those days the big denominational difference was between Jews and Samaritans. It was actually ethnic as well as religious since the Jews claimed that they were pure descendants of Abraham while the Samaritans were “half-breeds” resulting from the intermarriage of Jews with the people of neighboring nations.

There were numerous disagreements and differences between the Jews and the Samaritans but the really big difference was over the right place to worship God. The Jews insisted that they worship God at the Temple in Jerusalem. The Samaritans insisted that worship take place on Mount Gerizim in Samaria.

Because of the deep differences, most Jews who lived up north in Galilee went around Samaria when they traveled south to Jerusalem. It added a couple of days to the usual three-day journey but they figured it was safer and better. They knew they weren’t welcome in Samaria. In fact, history tells us that that was probably a smart move because in AD 52 a group of Jewish pilgrims decided to take the short cut through Samaria and were massacred by the Samaritans.

So it was somewhat surprising that Jesus decided to travel through Samaria. But Jesus came to save all people from sin. He wanted to reconnect everyone to God, including the Samaritans. When the Samaritans found out where Jesus was headed, *“the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem.”* (Luke 9:53)

It is sad but not uncommon that some people get so caught up in their denominational distinctiveness that they do not even welcome a visit from Jesus Christ himself. Sometimes people are quicker to identify themselves by their denominational label than they are to tell that they are followers of Jesus Christ and are Christians.

What should be done when Jesus is not welcome? The Zebedee brothers had an idea! James and John wanted to call fire down from heaven and burn them all to a crisp.

One part of me is disgusted by their suggestion

while another part of me sympathizes. It is always tempting to want to fry those who disagree with us. It can be hard to hold different beliefs without becoming hostile toward the other people.

What James and John suggested, others have actually done. Whether during the Crusades, the Roman Catholic Inquisition, the Protestant Reformation or current conflicts in the Middle East, burning people with different religious beliefs is not all that unusual.

Jesus said *no*. He turned and rebuked his two disciples for even suggesting such an action. Jesus came to win the hearts and souls of men and women, not to destroy them. In the words of John 3:17, *“God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”* Does this mean that both Jews and Samaritans were equally right? Is it saying that Jesus doesn’t really care about doctrine or what a person believes? Of course not! But, Jesus taught tolerance toward others of different beliefs, even if they are wrong.

In the midst of this hot controversy, Jesus was teaching his followers a lesson about discipleship and priorities. He was teaching them that following him meant going anywhere he leads. Even to hostile places. Even to unwelcoming people. Even into rejection. But, that was just the beginning of his lessons on the priorities of being a Christian.

“As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’” My guess is that a few others might have said, “Jesus, next time you go through Samaria, count me out. I’ll meet you in Jerusalem, but I’m never going there with you again.” But seeking to be both courageous and faithful this one man said, *“I will follow you wherever you go.”* Cool! Wonderful! Great! I’ve heard lots of Christians say that. I’ve said it myself.

But Jesus didn’t say thanks. Instead he raised the stakes significantly by painting the worst-case scenario of what it might mean to follow Jesus anywhere. It meant a serious cost, so Jesus said in Luke 9:58: *“Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”* In other words, following Jesus anywhere could cost a lot.

My first serious camping experience was on the coast of Maine when I was a teenager. A friend and I went camping with a friend of my father whom we had just recently met. A storm was coming in. It

was cold. He told us to be careful not to touch the tent because it would leak. That night the wind howled, the rain poured and I couldn't sleep very well. Lying on my back in a borrowed sleeping bag I thought about touching the tent and decided that his instructions were stupid. I put my hand firmly against the canvass over my face and . . . sure enough, it leaked on my head for the rest of the night.

As a college student I spent a summer camping across Europe. It was fun, but not as much fun as staying in a nice hotel with color television and a private bathroom. I don't think I was wired to camp.

But Jesus was making a greater point here than that foxes have holes and birds have nests and he didn't have a home and had to camp out on the ground. He wasn't calling all present and future Christians to be campers or homeless. He was calling us to follow him at any cost. He was serious . . . *any cost!*

For millions of Christians in this century the cost of making Jesus number one has been very high. To follow him has meant persecution, lost jobs, rape, slavery, imprisonment, losing children, beatings, disease and death. Hundreds of thousands of people in Africa and Asia today are hungry primarily because they insist on following Jesus and refuse to forsake their faith.

This is a pointed message to us comfortable Americans. Many of us won't take time to read the Bible, we pray only when in trouble, we give little or nothing and have never financially sacrificed a dollar for Jesus' sake. We have so much but are prone to hold onto all we do have.

Let it be clearly proclaimed that Jesus called his disciples to follow him at any cost. This is a commitment to give up anything for Jesus' sake. To be a Christian is to say that Jesus is more important than my family, my marriage, my home, my job, my money, my health, my safety or my comfort.

Once Jesus made it clear that the cost of Christianity can be very high he said to another man, *"Follow me!"* The man knew what Jesus meant. He insisted that for him the issue was not where Jesus wanted him to go or how much it would cost—but the timing wasn't right!

The man seemed to have a good excuse: *"Lord, first let me go and bury my father."* Old Testament law made this one of the highest responsibilities of every son. It was a very important obligation. Burial of one's father was a way of obeying the commandment to *"honor your father and your mother."* It was unthinkable to do something else.

There are two different possible explanations of what this man was asking. One is that his father was not dead yet. It could be that he wanted to wait one, ten or thirty years until his father died and then he would get around to following Jesus. Or it may be that Jesus was making his point with an extreme

example. Jesus insisted that if it comes down to a choice between giving your life for those who are physically dead or spiritually dead Jesus wants us to focus on

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those still physically alive but spiritually dead. *"Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."* Either way, Jesus insisted that he must be more important than anyone or anything else.

"Still another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family.'" It seemed like a reasonable request but it was counted as yet another excuse for putting Jesus somewhere other than at the top of life's list.

There is an important psychological principle at work with this spiritual teaching. When it comes to turning an important decision into action the greatest likelihood for doing it is when we first decide. So, if a person decides to accept Jesus Christ as Savior, to be baptized, to serve others, to give money, to sacrifice for the poor, to take a stand for what is right but then delays, it will be easier to say "no" the next time. If we can come up with an excuse every time, we will eventually feel as if we did the right thing even though we didn't. The feelings of the decision will become a substitute for action.

Take any example you want. Pick something that you once decided to do as a step of Christian faith but never actually did. Remember what the excuse was at the time (if you can). The more excuses and the longer the delay, the less likely it will ever get done.

Jesus knew this. That's why he insists that a true disciple doesn't wait for a good time to follow Jesus. There probably never is a good time. Now is the time. Any time Jesus says he wants us to do something for him is the time it needs to be done. When Jesus is the top priority in our lives we agree to follow him anywhere, at any cost, any way and any time.

The way Jesus calls his disciples to follow him is forward. Jesus is the Lord of hope and the future. He said, "*No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.*"

Plowing is hard work. It takes a long time and can be exhausting and backbreaking. And looking back is a bad thing to do. The only way to keep the furrows straight is to keep your eye on where you're going, not where you've been. And Jesus says that's true with life as well.

I find that encouraging because it reminds me that Jesus is willing to forgive and forget the sins and mistakes of the past. He keeps pointing us to the future. There is something wrong with living in yesterday when we are Christians. God promises that the best is yet to come. He has more for us to do. Christians are to walk by faith, not by sight, and faith is about tomorrow, not yesterday.

I wonder if there is some connection between the opening and closing lines of this story. It started out that the time was approaching for Jesus to be "*taken up to heaven.*" Apparently there was a specific time when Jesus was to go to heaven. Have you ever wondered if God has a specific time picked out for each of us? For some it is younger and for some it is older but for each of us the time is approaching for us to be taken up to heaven.

Jesus knew that the path to heaven was by way of the cross. It's sort of that way for us, too. The gateway to heaven is through death. And if there is a time for going to heaven there must be a time to die.

According to Luke 9:51, "*Jesus resolutely set out*" knowing the path on which he was headed. He didn't look back. He went straight to the cross and up to heaven. That is what he wants us to do as well. He wants us to live our lives fully for Jesus, not looking back, headed to heaven. Jesus said, "*No*

one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." In other words, know where you're going in your life and go there, following Jesus forward every step of the way.

All of this begs the question: Are you willing to follow Jesus? At any cost? Any time? Any where? Is Jesus Christ the highest priority in your life? Is he more important than anyone or anything else? Is this reflected in your schedule, your finances, your lifestyle, your relationships? Let's be honest — what number is Jesus? Is he number one? Number two? Number three? Number ten? What number would you like Jesus to be? Where would you like him to be in the priorities of life? Do you want him to be number one? Understand that number one means following Jesus Christ anywhere, at any cost, at any time, any way he says.

I invite you to pick a number. I invite you to tell God right now what number Jesus gets in your life's priorities. I invite you to tell God that you want Jesus to be number one.

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