

68 – Priorities

John 12:1-13

It's the most natural thing in the world: People turn to God because they need something and want Him to use His power to help them. That's actually the motivating factor behind most of the world's religions, and has been throughout human history. People do something, or sacrifice something, or chant something until their god or impersonal spiritual force treats them favorably. And history has shown that humans will do just about anything, no matter how horrible or costly, to persuade whatever they call "god" to help them.

Selfishness is obviously a main motivation behind this sort of religious behavior, but selfishness isn't the only reason people relate to the spiritual realm this way. Sometimes people pursue God/god/good vibrations on someone else's behalf. Fear or anger can also drive people to seek for spiritual help, but regardless of why people come, the underlying nature of the relationship between humans and the spiritual world remains the same: pleasing God, or a god-like energy until He, She, or It gives us what we want or need. It's very much like a business transaction. We pay something to get something.

The problems with approaching the God of the Bible this way isn't so much that we ask Him for help, after all, He's the Source of all things. The problem is we only ask Him for help. We don't seem to want to be with Him as a person. We're content to go on with our daily lives until there is a problem. We get religious until the crisis passes, and then slide back into our routine. But the God of the Bible created us for relationship. He made us in His own image (Ge 1:27) in the hope that we would freely choose to become His children. Here's how John stated it in the opening to his gospel:

"He (Jesus) was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, [even] to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." (Jn 1:10-13)

This God, the God of the Bible, the real God, wants to love us, and He wants us to love Him, more than we love anything or anyone else. And for that to happen we must desire to be with Him more than we desire anything else. We must hate the things that separate us from Him and long for a way to draw close to Him.

Judas Iscariot is traditionally portrayed as the embodiment of evil, almost sub-human, as if a normal human being could never do what he did. Indeed, he became Satanically possessed in the process of betraying Jesus (Lk 22:3; Jn 13:2, 27). Jesus warned him that he was becoming "a devil" on one occasion (Jn 6:70), and referred to him as "the son of perdition" (spiritual ruin) after he left the upper room to report their location to Caiaphas (Jn 17:12). But what apparently motivated Judas to follow Jesus in the first place was not different than what motivated the cheering crowds that lined the road to Bethany, or even some of the other disciples (Mt 20:17-28; Mk 10:35-45). The problem arose in Judas' heart when Jesus explained His priorities and Judas refused to change his. At that point he became deeply disappointed in Jesus, and that disappointment gradually turned into anger, while in the other disciples it merely turned into sadness (Lk 24:17). Today, let's examine our own priorities.

Trying to control Jesus (Jn 12:6-13)
DBS (Sun, Mon, Thurs, Sat)

A clash of priorities

I believe Judas planned to use Jesus' power to achieve his own desire: money. The miracles Jesus performed surely convinced him that Jesus had the necessary power to become the nation's Messiah. But Jesus kept insisting that He was going to die and that deeply frustrated Judas, and the rest of the disciples (Mt 16:21-23). The other disciples were confused by Jesus' insistence that He must die, but as the years passed they resolved to follow Him anyway because they loved Him and He promised them heaven (Jn 6:66-71). But Judas grew bitter, until that moment came when he finally realized that there would be no changing Jesus' mind; He was determined to die. That happened when Mary poured out the perfume and Jesus said, "She's preparing Me for My burial" (paraphrase). The hope within Judas that Jesus was going to fulfill his priorities died in that instant. He must have decided that Jesus was a "fool" who was going to waste the opportunity to become the Messiah. Obviously, he felt no need for forgiveness. All that talk about Jesus being the Passover Lamb (Jn 6:53-56) and the Bread of Heaven (Jn 6:32) meant nothing to him. He didn't consider himself to be a desperate sinner and his greatest desire wasn't to be with God forever. His greatest desire was to have a pleasant life here.



LIFE LESSONS

WITH DR. STEVE SCHELL

Teaching the Bible
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The people in the crowd that lined the road to Bethany that day were just like Judas. They too were convinced by the miracles, especially Lazarus (Jn 12:17-18), that Jesus had the power to be the Messiah. They too wanted Him to use His power to give them what they desired: a free and prosperous nation.

Even some of the disciples tried to make Jesus fulfill their priorities. Salome, the mother of James and John, and the sister of Mary, Jesus' mother, with the full support of her sons (Mt 20:20; Mk 10:35-45), came to Jesus, just days before He arrived in Bethany, and said this:

"Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit one on Your right and one on Your left." (Mt 20:21)

She said that, immediately after Jesus had said this:

"Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and will hand Him over to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify [Him], and on the third day He will be raised up." (Mt 20:18-19)

Just as surely as those disciples did not believe He would rise again on the third day, they did not believe He had to die.

Something strange is at work here. Why were so many people so confused? Why didn't they believe Him? There is only one possible answer. It's not that Jesus' words don't make sense. It's that people didn't like what they were hearing. We're watching a clash between priorities. They wanted Jesus to use His power to meet their desires here and now. But Jesus was determined to pursue His priority, which was to pay for human sin so that we could become the "children of God."

Our priorities

Consciously or unconsciously, each of us chooses our own priorities. They're the goals we put at the top of the list. They reflect what we value the most: the prize we believe is worth living for. These are the things we hope will fulfill our deepest desires. Jesus called them our "treasures," and challenged us to question them. Listen,

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in and steal; for where our treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Mt 6:19-21)

In other words, He's asking us, "What's your treasure?" or actually, "Where's your treasure? Are you going to pursue money, pleasure and safety here in this life, or are you going to use your days and resources to prepare for heaven? Do you want to be rich or take people with you into eternity?" It's a matter of priorities.

Four choices

Below are four choices every one of us must make. They are unavoidable. Each choice is revealed by the way we answer a simple question. And as we review these choices, it soon becomes obvious that Jesus answered them one way, and Judas, the crowd, and even some of the disciples before the resurrection, answered them another way. The question before us today is: How do you and I answer them?

Choice #1: Here or heaven? Which is more important? Does this world seem more real than the next? Some people have spiritual eyes that can see the future. They really believe in life after death, so they use the opportunities and resources they have here to prepare for that future. They understand that their biological life, and even the planet itself in its present condition, will pass away, but the next level of existence lasts forever. Abraham and Sarah were such people, which is why, though wealthy, they lived like "strangers and exiles on the earth" (He 11:13).

Choice #2: Help or forgiveness? Which do you or I need more? Do we think of ourselves as a good person who may have made a few mistakes, or as a selfish or rebellious or independent person who's done some really bad things? When Jesus tried to tell people He came to die for their sin, most stopped listening (Jn 6:67-68). He said it's the sick who need a physician (Mt 9:12), and by "sick" He meant people who knew they were sinners, who understood they would be judged by God, so they longed for His mercy. Those who don't consider themselves to be sinners are confused by all the talk about Jesus dying on the cross. Inside they're saying, "But why? I'm not that bad!"



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Choice #3: Things or people? Which am I spending my life pursuing? Which do I value the most? It takes energy and time to acquire things, just as it takes energy and time to reach people for God. Everyone has to work to provide the basic necessities of life, but after that our priorities determine how we invest what's left over. Depending on our choice we'll end up with more things or people.

Choice #4: God's hand or face? Do we want God to do things for us, or do we want God? Do we use Him or love Him? Is our deepest longing to someday be with Him and see Him face to face? Because if it's not, sooner or later we too will become disappointed with God. A few "unanswered" prayers or unexpected crises can turn us bitter as well.

Asaph, the psalmist, described his own struggle with this choice in Psalm 73. He said he watched unbelievers prosper while he was facing hardship, and he grew bitter toward God. But then he said he went into the sanctuary of God and worshipped, and, strengthened by the Holy Spirit, he changed his priorities. He realized there is nothing greater than knowing God. He said, "Whom have I in heaven [but You]? And besides You I desire nothing on earth" (Ps 73:25). He called God his "portion forever," and said, "...the nearness of God is my good." In worship Asaph changed his answer to this question. He chose God's "face" rather than His "hand."

Response

It's a matter of priorities. It isn't that God doesn't want to bless us here in this life, or work miracles to help us, or generously provide physical resources. He does. But those are not His highest priorities, and they can't be ours either. The example of Judas is a warning to us that until Jesus' priorities become ours, we're walking on a path that will leave us disappointed, and may make us bitter. But when we surrender to the heart of God, and value the things He values, and see this world from His perspective, our disappointments cease and our hearts swell with thankfulness.

Questions

1) Pick one of the "Four choices" listed above, and tell us the choice you made. Was the choice easy to make or difficult? Tell us why. 2) Have you known someone who grew disappointed or bitter at God? What was their reason? Are they still that way, or have they changed? 3) Do you need to change any of your priorities? Would you be willing to share that with us and why it's a struggle?