

Joke: One year Esther and Morris went to the fair, and Morris sees a sign that says helicopter rides \$50.00. Morris says to his wife, “Esther, I’m 85 years old, if I don’t ride that helicopter I might never get another chance.”

Esther replied, “Morris that helicopter ride is 50 dollars and 50 dollars is 50 dollars.”

Morris begins to walk away a bit disappointed but all of a sudden the helicopter pilot who over heard their conversation says, “Folks I’ll make you a deal. I’ll take both of you for a ride and if you can stay quite for the entire ride and not say a word I won’t charge you anything, but if you say one word, it’s 50 dollars.”

Morris and Esther agreed and up they went. The pilot did all kinds of fancy maneuvers to try and get some reaction from the couple, but not a word was heard. He did daredevil tricks over and over again, but still not a word. When they finally landed, the pilot turned to Morris and said, “By golly, I did everything I could to get you to yell out something, but you didn’t say a word. I’m impressed.

Morris replied, “Well, to tell you the truth, I almost said something when Esther fell out, but you know, 50 dollars is 50 dollars.”

Week 1: Better Priorities

When we put the things of God first in our lives, the other things just seem to fall into proper order. However, on the hand, often times

when we prioritize things above God, we find ourselves anxious and full of worry.

As you know, tomorrow will begin a brand-new year. With that, today is the perfect time to look back on this past year and ask what can be learned. It is also the perfect time to look ahead and ask ourselves if we are living the kind of life that God wants for us, or if we could do better.

Today we begin a new series called Better. Over the next several weeks we will evaluate our priorities, our relationships, our choices, and our witness. So, let's open our hearts and minds as we dive into our priorities as we enter the new year.

Illustration: Our lives are all made up of priorities. Like these golfballs, some priorities are larger, like God (hopefully), family, your job, relationships, and health. Other parts of our lives are made up of various other small priorities for some it might be working out, a hobby of some sort, reading, or watching sports. Show the small stones. Then there's all the other stuff. Show sand. The question is whether we have our priorities in proper order.

Put stones in with golfballs then sand. Reverse cycle with sand, stones, and then golfballs.

Talk about having no room for the big priorities if we concentrate on the smaller first.

I've mentioned before that we will always find time for the things that are important to us. How did you do in 2023? Do you need to . . . want to do better in 2024?

The Bible speaks to this need to have order in our lives as well. God knows that without keeping the main thing, the main thing, we can get lost in lesser things. So, as we begin this new year, we need to take an honest look at our lives and consider what priorities we have put first, what things seem to matter most.

Jesus' most famous sermon in the Gospels is called the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew chapter 6, Jesus turns to preaching and teaching about how we have the tendency to worry about our lives.

Maybe some of you can relate to this right now. We are worried about paying the bills. We are worried about our children. We are worried about our marriage. We are worried about what this new year might hold. Jesus states that trusting in Father God is the only way to keep us from being paralyzed by anxiety.

In verse 33, Jesus gives us the answer to our worry.

Matthew 6:33 (NIV): But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

That is point one. . . love God first.

We must seek God first. Do you hear priority in Matthews gospel? Jesus tells us that when we seek after a life that pleases God, all the things that we have the tendency to worry about will fall into

proper order. I didn't say the troubles would disappear, I said they would fall into proper order. How might this practically work out day in and day out;

- When it comes to our marriages we might be worried about, when we put Jesus first, we might just mature into a more gracious, loving, and kind spouse, which in turn could impact that relationship and others for that matter.
- When it comes to our finances, when we are focusing on God first it may reveal to us how we spend too much on things that don't really matter.
- With our children, we may find that putting God first may make us more patient and understanding with our kids.

So, as we think about these priorities the question is, "are you seeking after God first? Is God at the center of it all?" Or are you seeking after the smaller stones that don't matter as much? Again I'm not saying these smaller stones don't matter, they just don't matter as much.

Let me pose another question. . .is your attention and energy divided?

Someone once asked legendary coach, Tom Landry, why he had been so successful as a football coach. He said, "In 1958, I did something everyone who has been successful must do, I determined my priorities for my life — God, family, and then football."

Tom Landry got it right. He knew that in order to succeed in our families and our careers, we must seek God first. But how do we seek God? We seek Him like we seek anything else. We must spend time and energy in pursuit of Him.

If the only time you read His book is on that screen on Sunday that's not seeking Him first. If the only time you pray is when life has hit you hard that's not seeking God first.

And listen I know life is full of distractions, but what is important to you, you will always find time for.

Luke 10:38–42 (NIV): As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. 39 She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. 40 But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" 41 "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, 42 but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Did you catch that? Look at verse 40. . .But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.

Had to be made scripture tells us. . .they were the smaller stones. But Mary understood seeking God, spending time with Jesus had to be first on the list.

And hear this church I have often found myself like Martha making preparations that had to be made, doing things that had to be done. I have been distracted by the lesser things more times than I want to admit. And I sometimes need to reevaluate what I'm doing so that I can sit at the feet of Jesus and not miss out on what is better.

Seeking God takes time. It is a marathon and not a sprint. Another way we seek God is by knowing what it is that we are looking for.

When I seek God, I am looking to do things in my life that shape me into someone who looks more and more like Jesus Christ. I want less of me and more of Him in my life. It's called purpose.

The only way that we make the effort to seek God first is by deciding to love Him more than anything else. Jesus speaks to this as well. In fact, there is a time in the Gospels when the Pharisees and the Sadducees try to trap Jesus by asking Him a question about priorities. As Jesus travels along, he is cornered by a lawyer who asks him a tough question.

Matthew 22:34–40 (NLT): But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees with his reply, they met together to question him again. 35 One of them, an expert in religious law, tried to trap him with this question: 36 “Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?” 37 Jesus replied, “ ‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.”

Did you catch the question the man asks Jesus? He says, “What is the greatest commandment?” He could have easily asked it this way. “Jesus, what should I have as my greatest priority?” Jesus quotes a command from the Old Testament when he tells him to love God with all his heart, soul, and mind. In other words Jesus is telling him to love God with everything.

Which brings me to my second point which is this. . .love God with all you have

When a couple falls in love, it is almost sickening how much they talk about each other. When someone really loves their sports team, they bring it up all the time. The same thing should be true of us if God is truly our priority. When we love Him with all we have, we can't stop talking about Him. He is regularly a topic of conversation. We look for reasons and ways to bring Him up.

So, how do you love God with all you have. I have used my truck to move things for people that do not attend this church. I have opened my home to some homeless folks that happened to walk in during our service. Gave them a bed, a meal, and let them take a shower. I have given my finances to help people who were in need.

Loving God with all of our heart, soul, and mind helps us realize that every part of our life is incredibly meaningful. How we do our life reflects how we love God.

This means how we handle our career is meaningful because it says something about our relationship with Jesus. It means how

we parent our children is reflective of our relationship to our heavenly Father. Our love for God should be the motivation and inspiration every day over this next year. We want to look back 365 days from now and recognize all the ways we loved God with all that we have.

And church this is what I have found: God actually meets our needs in our lives most fully when we prioritize His needs in our hearts – that is a result of love.

Notice how Jesus ends this conversation. He tells the man that the first and greatest commandment is to love God, but the second is just like it, we are to love our neighbor. It seems that unless we get loving God right first, we have little hope of loving our neighbor well.

There is a prioritization that God lays out for us in this passage. He even says in verse 40, all of the laws and the prophets depend on getting these first two right. They are the golf balls, and the rest are the small stones. We cannot get them out of order.

Point three: Focus on the eternal rather than the temporary

One way to know where to put our energies is by asking a simple question. Is this thing eternal or temporary?

The apostle Paul understood this important distinction as he wrote to the church in Corinth.

2 Corinthians 4:18 (NIV): So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Paul says that we should not spend all our time focused on what is seen, rather, we should focus on what is unseen. The things that we can see will one day pass away, while the things that are unseen will go on forever.

But let's be honest, which is easier to spend our energies on? It's been my experience, that the things that are seen are because they are often more obvious to us. That means it takes a more intentional effort to give ourselves to the things of God.

I heard someone say that over the triple doorways of the cathedral of Milan in Italy there are three inscriptions spanning the splendid arches. Over one is carved a beautiful wreath of roses, and underneath it reads, "All that which pleases is but for a moment." Over the other is sculpted a cross, and there are the words, "All that which troubles us is but for a moment." But underneath the great central entrance to the main aisle is the inscription, "That only is important which is eternal."

And as we go through this series and enter into a new year I want to encourage you to think about these things, and bring them before God in prayer. . .

What in your life could be reordered? What could be reprioritized?

Make sure that the things that receive your time, attention, energy, and affection are things that will last and matter. Take a moment to pray and ask God to show you the golf balls in your life. Make sure to place those on the schedule first. The little stones, the other things that are important but maybe not as urgent, need to come next, everything else that sand if you will can fill in the empty spaces.

And if our priorities are centered around God, everything else has a way of working out.

Before we close and pray let me share with you a poem by Deborah Ann Belka called Yearly Check up.

Today God gave me my yearly check-up
Told me my life was just a breath
He said that any day. . .
I could face my earthly death.

He said my days were numbered,
Along with all my hair
And the fleeting of my time
Was the ground work to prepare.

All throughout the exam
As the evaluation was going on
I wondered if my heartbeat. . .
Reflected the one of His Son.

When the assessment was over,
I knew my habits had to change
And the priorities in my life
I would need to rearrange.

Today God gave me a check-up,
I found out life was just a vapor
So until my dying breath. . .
I'm living it for my Savior!

Prayer

Show New Years Eve Video from the skit guys.