

Who's on First?

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A lesson on biblical priorities

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INTRODUCTION

Merriam-Webster defines worship in this way;

1. *Reverence offered a divine being or supernatural power also: an act of expressing such reverence.*
2. *A form of religious practice with its creed and ritual.*
3. *Extravagant respect or admiration for or devotion to an object of esteem (Example: worship of the dollar).*

I want to pay particular attention to the 3rd definition, because it acknowledges that worship is not always religious, nor does it require a divine being on which it is focused. Worship can be any object to which we devote our lives. I would dare add that it can also be an activity. It can be...

- The dollar
- Our home
- Our car
- Sports
- Travel
- A hobby
- Alcohol
- A cigarette
- A drug
 - The list goes on

Everyone worships something; most likely more than one thing. Every individual tends to unwittingly create a worship pyramid. I would suggest that we can identify what we worship by what we prioritize in our life. When it comes to life, ‘worship’ and ‘priority’ are almost synonymous with one another. Our first priority is the thing or things that controls our thoughts, our dreams, and our goals. It consumes our time, our finances, and our energy. Our priorities, or the object(s) of our worship guide us through life. They are the first consideration in every decision we make.

What many people forget when they establish their priorities is that much of what we love here in this world is simply borrowed or rented. We pay for the things we love throughout our life with our time, finances, and energy. When we die their value expires. We don't own them. We don't have possession of them. Like the old saying goes: “We can't take them with us”

Solomon, the greatest and wisest king, and the wealthiest man alive in his time, said this: *“Those who love money will never have enough. How meaningless to think that wealth brings true happiness! 11 The more you have, the more people come to help you spend it. So what good is wealth—except perhaps to watch it slip through your fingers!”* (**Ecclesiastes 5:10-11, NLT**). *“So what do people get in this life for all their hard work and anxiety? 23 Their days of labor are filled with pain and grief; even at night their minds cannot rest. It is all meaningless.”* (**Ecclesiastes 2:22-23, NLT**)

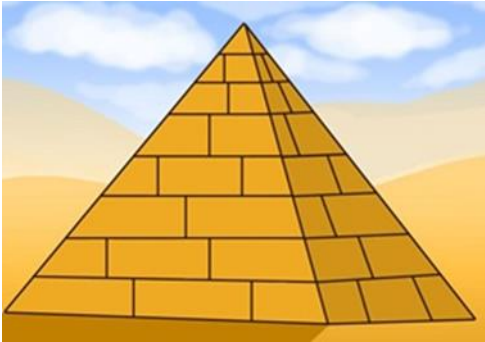
Near the end of his musings, Solomon gave us this prudent reminder: *“Don’t let the excitement of youth cause you to forget your Creator. Honor him in your youth before you grow old and say, ‘Life is not pleasant anymore.’”* (**Ecclesiastes 12:1, NLT**).

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon was recording his thought process as he evaluated his life and what was important to him. He had lived much of his life horizontally. In other words, he lived to achieve great wealth, build great buildings, and to gain the respect of mankind. In the end, however, he realized that all of that had no real value. *“Everything is meaningless,” says the Teacher, “completely meaningless.”* (**Ecclesiastes 12:8, NLT**). So, Solomon refocused on things that are eternal. He ended his life living vertically, living for God.

If a man like Solomon, whose life was filled with wealth, women, and wisdom, came to the conclusion that real purpose and value was found in our relationship with God; why do we live as if we are trying to prove him wrong?

These are some of the things that are often building blocks that build our pyramid of priorities. Self (our physical, emotional, and psychological well-being), position, material possessions, preparation for retirement, friends, family, and for the Christian – church and God. Every one of these are both important and necessary to our lives. None are meaningless in and of themselves, but they definitely lose value and can become meaningless in the light of eternity when not in

their proper place in our pyramid of priorities. Each block of a pyramid is designed and cut to fit perfectly into one place. Look carefully at the diagram below. When, out of order, the whole pyramid becomes unstable, but when each stone is in its' proper place it is an amazing structure that lasts thousands of years. Similarly, each important thing in our life holds its greatest value when it is in its proper place. When our priorities are out of order, we lose purpose, we do not fulfil the goal God has for our life in its entirety, and our spiritual lives become unstable.



We will look at each of the things we commonly prioritize briefly. First, let's consider some biblical absolutes. The balance of items may need to be determined individually based on God's specific purpose and will for your life.

GOD

For every other part of our lives to have meaning, we must put God first. Solomon didn't do that for a time; and he valued everything as meaningless. Once eternal value is removed from any part of our life, it becomes temporal. Instead of owning it, we are renting it. We take none of its value with us when we die.

We are God's first love and first priority. Calvary proved it. *"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."* (**John 3:16, NASB**) A relationship with us is His first priority. The Father put us ahead of His own Son. He asks us to do nothing more and nothing less than what He required of Himself. A Pharisee, hoping to trick Jesus into saying something that contradicted their understanding of Scripture, asked: *"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"* ³⁷ *Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."* ³⁸ *This is the first and greatest commandment."* (**Matthew 22:36-38, NIV**)

God represents everything eternal. When we make our relationship with Him our first priority, our lives on earth are impacted to a lesser degree by the

natural, sinful world in which we live. It is more impacted by the supernatural. Jesus said: *"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."* (**Matthew 6:33, NASB**). The New Living Translation says, *"and He will give you everything you need."*

Not only that, we care for and utilize everything else that we prioritize in our life in a way that has eternal value. It is the natural fallout of establishing God as our number one priority. The Apostle Paul's prescribed way of living becomes our normal: *"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."* (1

Corinthians 10:31, NIV)

God 'commands' us to make our relationship with Him our first priority. From our perspective, we should see Him as being worthy of such a place. After all, He is both our Creator and our Redeemer. Without Him we wouldn't be, and without Him we would have no hope. From His perspective, it gives Him opportunity to bless us more abundantly, and to do so is His greatest pleasure.

God is also the source of all wisdom, grace, mercy, kindness, goodness, justice, holiness, and love. If we want those characteristics to flow from our lives and impact the lives of our family and friends, then it makes sense that we have to prioritize our relationship with God first. These characteristics flow naturally out of the Spirit He puts inside us.

Literally, every other person and thing that we prioritize in our life is impacted positively by God's wisdom and character when we make Him #1. If we

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truly make God our first priority we will live according to His wisdom and His purpose for our life.

FAMILY

It has been said that family is our first ministry. After God comes family. That is true to both full time ministers and lay people working in the church. Family first.

This begins with your spouse. *“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. 22 Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.” (Ephesians 5:21-22, NIV).* *“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” (Ephesians 5:25, NIV).* The relationship between husband and wife is second only to our relationship with God. This is because our marriage is intended to be an earthly portrayal of the relationship between Christ and His bride – the church. Our marriage is a testimony to our children, friends, workmates, and others of the unconditional love of God and an appropriate response to that love. To accomplish this we must prioritize our marriage in a way that makes it second only to the relationship between God and us.

Most married couples have children. Just like we can be better husbands and wives if we put God first, we can be better fathers and mothers if we put our spouse first. It creates a godly atmosphere in which the children

are raised. Then we follow Solomon's advice to *"Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it."* (**Proverbs 22:6, NIV**)

As much as every adult leaves the parental nest at some point, and most begin a family of their own, it does not negate the fifth commandment: *"Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the LORD your God is giving you."* (**Deuteronomy 5:16, NIV**)

After our own household comes our extended family. Our relationship with our entire family is important in the eyes of God. *"Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."* (**1 Timothy 5:8, NIV**)

The relationship between husband and wife are of prime importance within the family dynamic; even when our children are at an age when they are totally dependent on Mom and Dad. This is a difficult time in life to keep our priorities in order.

Family comes before involvement in church leadership or activities. After all, if we can't represent Christ well at home, how can we represent Him well outside the home without being hypocritical in the eyes of those most important to us? *"If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?"* (**1 Timothy 3:5, NIV**)

CHURCH

I hear the phrase all too often that “I can be a Christian without going to church.” Who am I to argue? We are Christians by faith, not by church attendance. Our relationship with God determines our spiritual status, not our church attendance.

Still, to minimize the importance of church is to minimize something very important to God. Church was His idea, not man's. It seems natural that any Christian would want to be part of something that Jesus is building on earth. *“And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”* (**Matthew 6:18, NIV**).

The writer to Hebrews makes it very clear that being an active part of the church is important to every believer. If we run from the church because it is imperfect, we give up the opportunity to make it what it should be. We lose out on the opportunity to minister to others, be God's servant, and store up for ourselves riches in heaven. *“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”* (**Hebrews 10:24-25, NIV**).

The church is Christ's bride. He loves His bride very much. Our choice is to either tell Him that His bride is ugly and we want nothing to do with her, or do all we can to make her beautiful and fruitful. *"Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready."* (**Revelation 19:7, NIV**).

The church is the body of Christ. A body is the most complex and organized structure within God's creation. By not being part of it, are we any better than the body part that is present but functioning improperly? Both **Romans 12** and **I Corinthians 12** talk clearly about the body of Christ. Here is a sample: *"For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, 5 so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."* (**Romans 12:4-5, NIV**) *"...there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. 26 If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. 27 Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."* (1 Corinthians 12:24-27, NIV).

Both of those chapters also provide us with a list of gifts, available to every Christian, given specifically to help the church function as it should. For a person to not use the gifts as God intended must be an offense to Him. Again, it also prevents us from having the opportunity to minister to others, be God's servant in His body, and store up riches in heaven. To not make active involvement in church a priority in our life means

that we can't serve Christ as God intended (as a body part), people aren't ministered to that need it, and you miss out on an opportunity to store up riches in heaven.

The church is the building, the body, and the bride of Christ – all biblical allegories. This being true, being an active part clearly must be high on the priority list of every Christian.

SUMMARY OF BIBLICAL ABSOLUTES

The order of these three priorities are clear in the Scripture. God first, family second, church third. The rest of the list of things and activities that are important to any Christian family seem to get intertwined. They are like the cables behind your television, cable box, and Blu-ray player. Every cable is important, but they are hard to separate.

There are 'others' in your life that attend church, and there are 'others' that don't. There is the 'self' at home, the 'self' at work, and the 'self' at church. There are jobs to do and leadership opportunities at work, church, and in your club. There are material things that you need or want, and the same is true at church or any other charity that you may be involved in.

It is our jumbled-up lives that often leads to confusion and mixed up priorities. People today are so busy. I hope the balance of this study will help you untangle and properly organize your priorities.

OTHERS

After saying that the first and greatest commandment is to love God, Jesus said: *“And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.”* (**Matthew 22:39, NIV**). The initial response to that may be that we are to love self-first, and once we have achieved that we are to love our neighbour with equal measure; but the Apostle Paul took it one step further: *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. 5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; 7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant.”* (**Philippians 2:3-7, NIV**). So, our first choice is to love others as much as we do self. Our second choice, when making decisions that affect them and us, is to put them ahead of self. That's what Jesus did. That's why He left heaven and came to earth as a man. That's why He died. That's mind boggling, isn't it?

Jesus adds to the challenge of prioritizing others ahead of self. He taught: *“But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. 29 If someone*

slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them.” (Luke 6:27-29, NIV). We often think that when Jesus forgave the soldiers who carried out the orders to crucify Him, that he was able to do so simply because He was the personification of God’s nature, His amazing grace. We think this kind of love is beyond the normal human being. However, when one of the first deacons was being stoned to death for no good reason, Stephen showed the same kind of grace. *“While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.” (Acts 7:59-60, NIV).* Because Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit he was able to offer the same kind of grace to his murderers as Jesus did. Can you love your enemies in such fashion? Doing so is a biblical priority. Others come before self.

SELF

I'll remind you that Jesus said that the second greatest commandment includes loving our self. *“And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.”* (**Matthew 22:39, NIV**). Some people think that loving self leads to pride and ungodliness. That's not true if we do it right. We can love others better when we have a good relationship with our self.

We must not only accept but love the person we are. To achieve this, we may have to do some self-improvement. Loving self doesn't mean to accept our imperfections. Such love leads to working on perfecting or weaknesses. It does, however, mean accepting who we are in regard to...

- Physical strengths and weaknesses
- Physical characteristics
- Spiritual gifts
- Talents
- Intellectual ability

Not loving who we are leads us to wishing God gave us different spiritual gifts, because we idolize the person who has a different ministry. It leads us to striving for the gifts and talents that others have and we don't. We become jealous of the beauty or academic achievements

of others. We become jealous of the earning power of others. On and on it goes. It is important that we love ourselves without condition. It is important that we love ourselves enough to strive to become the best self that we can be. It is important that we learn what our strengths and weaknesses are and not lust after the strengths of others. Be in love with who God made you to be, then strive to become that person consistently. Once we love our self in this way we can love others better.

The big question is how 'love of self' looks in practical terms. These are the things that will make us feel love-worthy. Rather than making this long and laborious, let's just summarize...

- Prioritize your relationship with God. When you understand how much He loves you it is easier to love yourself
- Be the person God created you to be. Find your spiritual gifts and use them in a way that is productive in God's kingdom
- Seek to find and do the will of God for your life. You will find your purpose there and know it
- Take care of yourself physically. This is a huge subject, and one that I am personally not good at. I need to grow in this area in order to love myself more
- Take care of yourself emotionally. Find a quiet place. Be still in God's presence and let Him restore your soul (Psalm 46:10; Psalm 23)

- Be a learner. This involves both spiritual knowledge through the reading of God's Word and an understanding of the world around us. Learn from history. Learn from the creative minds of others. Learn from those with knowledge greater than our own. Learn from science. Science is not the enemy of God. Science helps us understand God's greatness and the wonders of the world He placed us in
- Rest. Play. Have hobbies and find leisurely things to do that you enjoy. Sometimes people feel guilty about doing these things. They feel like the godly thing to do is to use every minute to work, to achieve, to accomplish something. God rested on the seventh day. What is good for God must be good for us. You will be better in every way if you allow your spirit, body and soul to be refreshed.

When we become the best person we can be, and live the best life we can live within the will of God, we become loveable to our self. When we are in that place, it is so much easier to love others – even our enemies.

POSITION

The only position that matters is where God wants us. So many people lust after a position of influence, authority, power, and responsibility. This can happen at work, the club, or at church. Some people love to have a role that draws attention to themselves. To others, a position of authority allows them to do things their way. They make achieving these things a strong priority in their life that often gets in the way of their relationship with God, family and others. This is a serious mistake made by many people.

Is there something wrong with having influence, authority, power and responsibility? Absolutely not, if our gifts have equipped us for them and if they are God's plan for our life.

Our priority should be finding the best place to use the gift, or gifts that God has given us; not to seek after a position that feeds our pride, fills our wallet, or gives us opportunity to control others. *"We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; 7 if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; 8 if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do*

it cheerfully." (Romans 12:6-8, NIV).

To be used of God in whatever role He chooses to use us should be our priority. To strive for anything different is rooted in pride and selfishness. Jesus, prior to His incarnation, had all of the riches of heaven at His disposal. Angels bowed in His presence. He sat in the throne room of God. But having that position was not His priority. Fulfilling the Father's purpose was His priority. *"In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; 7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!"* (Philippians 2:5-8, NIV). In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus makes it clear that fulfilling the position that the Father desired for Him was His priority over His own desires for His life. *"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."* (Luke 22:42, NIV) The position Jesus ultimately desired landed Him on the cross of crucifixion for our sake. There, He completed the greatest act ever committed through the giving of His life.

Make serving God in whatever capacity he desires for you the position you seek after. Make God's will a strong priority in your life.

MATERIAL POSSESSIONS

We all need things. We need a roof over our head. We need transportation. We need furniture and we need stuff. The truth is that our culture has dictated to us that we need more than we truly do, but that's another subject.

As much as this topic doesn't require a lot of words, it is at the bottom of the list for a reason, and yet it is one of our greatest challenges to keeping our priorities in order. Literally every other thing we have talked about is more important than material possessions, and yet to a large degree they are what we work for and what we live for. So many people live only for things to enjoy now, and preparation to enjoy their retirement without much thought of the eternal.

I want to clarify that there is nothing wrong with having money or things if you can afford them. There is nothing wrong with preparing well for your retirement. God loves blessing His children, so enjoy His blessings. Enjoy what God has and will give you.

The problem is that way too many people prioritize their 'stuff' over just about everything else. Years ago, I worked with a lady. She and her husband had bought their dream home, and spent years renovating and decorating it exactly the way they wanted

it. I was never in it, but apparently it was gorgeous. However, once they had all they wanted, their marriage fell apart and ended in divorce. They lived for their dream home, and once it was complete, they had nothing else to bind them together. It is because they prioritized the material things over their relationship.

The love of possessions can have the exact same impact on our relationship with God, our spouse, our children, others, and even our self. It is so easy for the things in our life to become what we worship, what we live for. It is so easy for them to become idols.

Jesus said this: *“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”* (**Matthew 6:24, NIV**) Similarly, the Apostle Paul wrote: *“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”* (**1 Timothy 6:10, NIV**).

Jesus also taught: *“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”* (**Matthew 6:33, NIV**). In the same sermon, He said: *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* (**Matthew 6:19-21, NIV**).

Clearly this has been a human challenge throughout the millennium. We must guard ourselves against it.

CONCLUSION

As Christians, we say that we worship God. We do worship God. The problem is that many prioritize other relationships and other things over their relationship with Him. What they do with their time and resources prove it. He is not their first love. One of the Ten Commands says explicitly that *“You shall have no other gods before me.”* (**Exodus 20:3, NIV**).

We all have a pyramid of priorities. Solomon looked at his, and decided that the way he was living was meaningless. He needed to rearrange his priorities and put God where He belongs. It's never a bad idea to re-evaluate our priority pyramid. It should look like this.

