

PRIORITIES: PUTTING FIRST THINGS FIRST

Matthew 6:19-34

A wealthy father, the CEO of a major corporation, planned an extravagant rehearsal dinner for his son's upcoming wedding. No expense was spared. An elegant dining room at the city's most elite hotel was engaged. Fresh lobster was flown in from Maine and thick, juicy steaks were purchased. The finest linens were laid out with appropriate china and silver. An orchestra was hired and a valet service was chartered. Then invitations were sent to all the elite of the community. "You are invited to a rehearsal dinner. RSVP."

To the surprise and dismay of the father, excuses came pouring in. Some of them were ludicrous. One man was a real estate speculator and had bought some property and needed to inspect it. Really? He bought without seeing it? And at night, no less! Another couldn't leave his store. Others told of similar conflicts. Excuses, excuses, excuses. Not a single invitation was accepted. The father was angry. "Those ingrates will never get another invitation from me," he grumbled. Then sending some of his employees down into one of the poorest sections of the city he said to them, "I'm going to have a banquet for my son. Take whomever will come. Rich people, poor people, respectable people, winos. I don't care. I just want that dining hall filled for my banquet. So ... his employees did just as they were told and that night a festive occasion was had by all those who came to the rehearsal dinner.

Now! I'm sure you recognize this story as an abbreviated and updated version of Jesus' parable in the twenty-second chapter of Matthew.

The clear theological meaning of the parable is that the so-called "righteous" people of his day rejected Christ. So the Father opened the invitation to His banquet to all who would come - righteous and unrighteous alike. Those who rejected the invitation didn't get a second chance, but to any who would come, the door is open. That is the obvious theological message of the parable. But I don't think it's the only message. I think the passage also deals with excuses all of us offer God at some time or another - especially that most common excuse of all, "I can't do that; I don't have time."

IF I WERE TO ASK MANY OF YOU FOR YOUR MOST COMMON COMPLAINT ABOUT LIFE, IT WOULD BE, THERE ISN'T ENOUGH TIME. We are desperate to squeeze just a few more minutes into every day like the young wife who called a newspaper office and asked for the food editor. "Would you please help me?" she asked. "I'm cooking a special dinner tonight for my husband's boss and his wife. I've never cooked a big dinner before, and I want everything to be perfect. I bought a nine-pound turkey. Could you tell me how long to cook it in my new microwave?" "Just a minute," the food editor said, as he turned to check his reference book. "Oh, thank you," she said. "You've been a big help. Goodbye."

There just isn't enough time. Some of us are caught up in a hectic life-style and it's depressing. The poet, T. S. Eliot has said that the years between 50 and 70 are the hardest. You are asked to do things, and you are not yet decrepit enough to turn them down.

EXPERTS ON TIME MANAGEMENT SAY THERE IS ONLY ONE WAY TO DEAL WITH SUCH PRESSURE, AND THAT IS TO ESTABLISH SOME PRIORITIES. Otherwise, the most important things in life are crowded out by the most immediate. It was said of Brother Lawrence, author of the medieval classic *THE PRACTICE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD*, that although he never hurried and never worked quickly, he did twice as much work as anyone else because he always did exactly what needed to be done.

Victor Frankl, another spiritual giant, has written: "Unless a person wishes to drown, one has to become selective. That is to say, one has to become able to select when to turn on the TV set, when to turn it off, what books, newspapers and journals to read and what to throw in the wastebasket. Selectiveness means that we have to be responsible for what is important and what is not, what is essential and what is not, what is valuable and what is not, what is meaningful and what is not. We have to be capable or become capable of such decision making.

The point is that somewhere in life we have to set priorities. We have to decide what really matters and make certain that the really important things are done. Time with our family, service to our community, attention to our work, relaxation, self-improvement – we could develop a list of important things that would go on and on. Somewhere we have to draw a line. The choice is seldom between the good and the bad. It is usually a choice between the good and the best. See! That's where the establishment of priorities comes in.

Now let me say it, and here is the most important point of the sermon: **OUR FIRST PRIORITY MUST BE GOD!** If we are too busy to heed God's voice, then we are too busy! If we are too busy to perform some service in His kingdom, then we are too busy! And we must not forget that there will come a time when our relationship with Christ will be the only priority that makes any difference at all. I've never heard of someone on his deathbed who said, "I sure wish I had spent more time at the office."

In the famous French fantasy story, *THE LITTLE PRINCE*, the best friend the Prince finds on the fictitious planet to which he has been banished is a fox. When the fox must leave the little prince forever, he offers to tell him the most wonderful secret in the world if the prince meets certain conditions. When the little prince has met all the conditions, he asks to be told the greatest secret. The fox replies, "Only that which is invisible is essential."

Think about that for a moment. It is true. “Only that which is invisible is essential.” As a matter of fact, that comes really close to what Paul said to the Corinthians, “So let us fix our eyes not on what is seen but what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” (2 Corinthians 4:18 NIV).

In his thin volume, *A JOURNEY WITH THE SAINTS*, Thomas Kepler writes: “The secret of the revolution in the lives of the saints lies in the fact that their lives are centered in God. They never seem hurried, they have a “large leisure”. They refer the smallest things to God. They live in God.” That is the great secret to successful living – the realization that when one reserves time to come to God’s banquet, all of the rest of life will fall into place. Or as Jesus put it, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all those other things will be yours as well.” (Matthew 6:33)

I have read that a mental hospital developed an unusual test to determine when their patients were ready to go back into the world. They would bring the patient being considered for release into a room with a sink. When the patient entered the room a faucet over the sink was already on, the sink was overflowing, and water was pouring onto the floor. The patient was handed a mop and asked to clean up the mess. If the patient had enough sense to turn off the faucet before starting to mop up the water, the doctors concluded that he was ready to go back into society. But if he started mopping with the water still running, more treatment was needed.

You and I need to stop mopping long enough to look up and see if the faucet is still running. We need to go to the root of our restless, confused lives. If we have crowded God out, we discover that without God, life is simply a whirlwind of meaningless activity. We need to center our lives in God and God’s purpose. Then we discover that life truly is a feast. God offers an invitation to the party. Do you have time to accept God’s invitation? Do you dare refuse it?

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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