

Make It A Priority – John 11:55-12:8

John 11:55. I've titled the sermon *Make It A Priority* because priorities govern our lives. You probably don't think about it that way, but it's true. You're sitting here this morning because you made it a priority. Others of you aren't because of safety concerns. *That* took priority. And that's wise.

But some people come based on a completely *different* set of priorities. Like how they feel. Who's preaching. Who's going. How much sleep they got. It's not as though they *lack* priorities, they just have different ones.

The point being, our entire lives are governed by a set of priorities. They may not be written, or consistent, or biblical, or thought out, but they're priorities, nonetheless. Some good, some not.

And while this passage doesn't address *all* the good ones, it does highlight four. And if we're going to live like Jesus, if we're going to follow him, we need to make it a priority to make *these* things our priorities.

Intro

John 11:55 – *Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand* [one of the major feasts and commemorations commanded in the Old Testament], *and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves*. [To make sure their hearts were right.] [56] *They were looking for Jesus and saying to one another as they stood in the temple, "What do you think? That he will not come to the feast at all?"* (ESV)

And just in case we missed the reason for such a question in the *previous* verses, John tells us why. [57] *Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should let them know, so that they might arrest him*. Arrest and kill him, we saw back in v53.

[1] *Six days before the Passover* [John gets very specific; for good reason we'll see], *Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead*. Let's stop there. Because John uses another one of those words that should make us think. "Therefore." *Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany*. (1)

What does John mean by that? Did he go to Bethany to avoid Jerusalem and arrest? Or foil their plan to kill him? Is that what the *therefore* is there for?

I don't think so. Because Bethany was only 2 miles from Jerusalem. A short walk over the Mount of Olives. And as we'll see in the *next* paragraph (9-10), the chief priests were well *aware* of his presence in Bethany.

So I don't think he went to Bethany to avoid Jerusalem, I think he went because the Passover was at hand and he was destined to fulfill it. I think that's why John is so explicit about it, and Jesus was so intentional about it. He was destined to complete and fulfill the symbolism of the Passover.

Remember that? In Exodus 12? When the Israelites were in Egypt, a perfect lamb was sacrificed, and its blood was applied to the doorposts of their homes? So that when the angel of death came by, he would *pass over* them and spare their lives? Save them?

It was such an important event, full of so much meaning and future implications, that they were instructed to remember and commemorate it throughout their generations. And do so, by sacrificing another lamb. Every year.

And lo and behold, we know from the rest of John's Gospel, as well as the Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – that Jesus would die at the very time the Passover *lamb* was slain. Just 6 days later. Expanding and changing the *meaning* of Passover for all time and all people. Especially those who put their *faith* in the Lamb. Capital L.

In other words, Jesus fulfilled the symbolism of the first Passover, by sacrificing himself for the ultimate Passover. For *all* God's people, from *all* nations. God's prophetic plan all along. The first Passover foreshadowed the final Passover.

So *Jesus therefore came to Bethany*, to make sure he was in the right place at the right time. He made it a priority to follow the plan.

And we should too. Always, always make it a priority to . . .

Live according to God's plan, not yours (John 11:55-12:1)

You may not *know* all of God's plan for your life. In fact, you don't. None of us do. But we sure do know some of it. And what we do know, we should follow. What we do know should inform our decisions and compel us to act. Just like Jesus.

For instance, we do know that God desires all to be saved; saved from the judgment of hell. 1 Timothy 2:4. And for those who are, we know his plan is our sanctification; conforming ourselves to the likeness of Christ. (1 Thessalonians 4:3) And loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. (Matthew 22:37-39) We know that much for sure.

And we also know that just like Jesus lived according to God's plan for the future Passover, we're to live according to God's plan for eternity. That day when we will dwell in his glorious presence face to face, in a glorified body, worshipping forever and ever.

That means basing our decisions on the *eternal* impact they will have, not just the temporal. Like whether something prepares you for heaven, not just tomorrow. Whether it glorifies God and advances his kingdom a hundred years from now. Whether it builds up the *next* generation. And the next, next.

If so, you're living according to God's plan. If not, make a change. Get your priorities right. Give your life to Christ and live for him. Now and later. Today and tomorrow. And all the tomorrows. That's the first priority we find here.

The second comes from v2-3.

Jesus came to Bethany – [2] *So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table*. [3] *Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard*, [Nard was an aromatic balm made from the root of a plant found mainly in the Himalayas at the time. A world away and pretty rare.] *and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume*. They took advantage of the opportunity. In the *best* sense of the phrase.

Jesus came to town, so [v2] *they gave a dinner for him*. An opportunity presented itself, so they seized it. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. They invited people into their home for a meal.

Same for Mary. She too seized the opportunity. Once again indicated by the word, *therefore*. V3. They gave a dinner, Jesus was present, and Mary *therefore* spared no expense. Financially *and* personally.

She brought out the very best ointment and then humbled herself by applying it to his feet, the dirtiest part of his body. Setting him apart, or anointing him, as someone special. And then humbled herself even further by using her *hair* to wipe his feet. The opportunity presented itself and she made the most of it.

And the result? The entire *house* was filled with the aroma of Christ. Literally *and* figuratively. Because the fragrance of the perfume became *his* fragrance. His aroma.

It's an example for us to do the same. To . . .

Take advantage of opportunities to show hospitality and honor Jesus (v2-3)

That's the second priority. Opportunities to fill *your* house with the fragrance of Christ. Fill *your* home with friends and family.

You say, "Oh pastor. I don't have time to do such things." You do. It's just a matter of priorities. A matter of what you *make* time for.

I'm not saying every week. Or that you have to break out the china. But what about once a quarter? Twice a year. With paper plates and pizza if you want. Or a couple of soup options.

It's something Becky and I finally started acting on a few years ago, and it's been awesome. We call them "Hospitality Nights." About every 2 months, we invite 3 other couples, or a combination of *singles* and couples, for dinner and dessert in our home.

We serve the food buffet style, and when we sit down we ask 3 main questions in order to be intentional. Going around the table so each person can answer.

The first is, "What do you like to talk about?" If you find yourself in a situation where the small talk is draining, what's the topic that would light you up?

Second, "What has God been teaching you recently? Or showing you? Reminding you?" It could be something in the Word, it could be a situation, it could be a thought, whatever. And Becky and I answer as well.

And third, we ask, "What questions do you have for us?" Sky's the limit.

And then, when all that's done, I pray for each person according to what they shared. And I'm here to tell you, the aroma is thick. Along with the fellowship and love.

It lasts about 2 ½ hours, takes us about 30 minutes to clean up, and fills our heart for weeks.

Don't miss out on that. And don't wait as long as we did. Make it a priority and honor the

Lord.

Third, the third priority, by way of negative example, comes from v4-6.

Mary used an expensive ointment on Jesus – [4] *But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, [5] "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?"* Whether he was exaggerating or not, a denarius was equivalent to a full day's wage. So 300 denarii was equal to a whole year's wage.

[6] *He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it.* He said it because he wanted more for himself. He said it because he was deceitful.

And John pulled no punches. Calling him *a thief*. Somebody with the audacity to actually steal from *Jesus*, while acting like he was all good. Somebody who said what he said just to deceive everybody. "*Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?*" (5) As if.

It's a stark reminder to . . .

Live with integrity and speak the truth (v4-6)

A stark reminder to make *that* a priority. A priority to do everything Judas *didn't*. Like live openly instead of deceptively. Speak truthfully instead of falsely. Be a man of integrity instead of deceit. A woman of honesty instead of pretense.

In other words, don't be a hypocrite. Stop acting like you're all good when you're not. Like you're toeing the line when you're not even close. Like you're prince charming when you're Darth Vader. Make it a priority to live with integrity.

And before you cast the first stone at Judas, consider how *you* might be living a lie. How *you* might be deceiving people. Or *trying* to.

Do you feign spirituality on Sunday only to forget it on Monday? Do you confess Jesus as Lord but live however you want? Do you say you follow him but only do so when it's convenient? Do you give sparingly while acting like it's generous?

How about at work? Do you worship on Sunday and curse on Monday? Do you fudge the numbers to pay less taxes? Do you laugh at the jokes and hope for more? Do you put on a face to keep up appearances?

What about home? Do you watch what you shouldn't and act like you don't? Do you speak one way here and another way there? Do you treat other women better than your wife? Are you passive in your *leadership* but tough with your façade?

If so, repent. Ask God to forgive you and make it a priority to live with integrity. To be the same here, there, and everywhere. No matter who's looking. Or who's not.

And make it a priority to speak the truth. Whether it's the Gospel truth or difficult truth. Make it a priority to be anything *but* a hypocrite. That's the third priority.

And then last, is the one found in v7-8. Where Jesus actually alludes to priorities.

In response to Judas – [7] *Jesus said, “Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. [Evidently, she hadn’t used all the ointment.] [8] For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.”* In other words, get your priorities right.

“It’s *okay* to withhold the value of this ointment from the poor, in order to use it on me,” Jesus said. “In order to bless me. Prioritize me. Because I’m not going to be around much longer. They will.” That’s the idea. And that much is clear. It’s a matter of priorities.

What’s not so clear, is how it applies to *us*. And we have to be careful. Because this isn’t *our* situation, and we could easily get it wrong. Thinking we can turn a blind *eye* to the poor if we do something for Jesus.

But our situation is different because we *always* have Jesus. He’s always with us. Via his Spirit in our heart. *Never* to leave us.

Plus, he always wants us to *help* the poor. Saying in Matthew 25 that those who are part of his kingdom: feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the destitute, attend the sick, and visit the imprisoned. (34-40) It’s what the people of God *do*, he says.

And we try. Between our Soul Care Ministry, Congregational Care, and Compassion Fund, we try to help. Not just with money, but time and effort and counsel. And we *expect* to do so until Jesus returns. Because the poor will always be with us, he said. (8)

Our situation is different. Which makes this account *descriptive*, not *prescriptive*. It tells us what *happened*, not what we should do.

What we should do, is . . .

Worship first, then help (v7-8)

That’s the best way to apply this, I think. Make it a priority in your life to worship the *Lord* first, then help the poor. Focus on *him*, then your neighbor. Fill up, *then* overflow. Because if you don’t get that right, you won’t help right. Or help at all.

You’ll lack compassion, you’ll lack discernment, and you’ll lack impulse. You won’t even *want* to help. And if you do, you’ll probably do more harm than good. Because apart from worship, our perspective is flawed. Apart from worship, our thinking is off.

You’ll end up giving money instead of time. Providing stuff instead of dignity. *Enabling* their situation instead avoiding it. Doing something *for* them, instead of getting *them* to do it; or giving them the *opportunity* to do it.

Better to worship *then* help. Better to fix your eyes on Jesus, *then* the poor. Starting every morning, every week, and every moment in between. Otherwise, you risk *hurting* the poor more than helping them.

Let me give you four ways where the rubber meets the road on this. Help, help the poor . .

- **But not at the expense of gathering.** *Gathering* for worship. Praising God from whom all blessings flow, together. So that you *have* something from God to offer. You *have* something to help. Prioritize this.

Second, help, but . . .

- **Not at the expense of the Gospel.** Provide a helping hand *and* a helpful message. Provide *and* preach. Give them cold water *and* living water. Clothes *and* robes. (Isaiah 61:10)

Third, help the poor, but . . .

- **Not at the expense of serving.** Serving the saints. Serving the church. *Let us do good to everyone* [the Bible says], *and especially to those who are of the household of faith.* (Gal 6:10) The household of God. Our church. From which the poor are helped even more. Prioritize serving.

And last, help, but . . .

- **Not at the expense of tithing.** Giving to the poor is not giving to the church. It’s not storehouse tithing. Malachi 3:10. Give to the work of ministry first. And see if God doesn’t provide even *more* to give to the poor.

Four ways to worship first, then help. Fill up, then overflow. Otherwise the poor will remain poor – poor in spirit and poor in faith – no matter how much you try.

Summary

Live according to God’s plan, take advantage of opportunities, live with integrity, and worship first. Make it a priority.

Prayer – Father, help us. Help us we pray. “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it.” Prone to set my own agenda. Prone to do my own thing. Forgive us, Lord. And show those priorities that need to change. Help us to give up our plan and get on yours. Spur us on to fill our homes and our lives with the sweet aroma of your Son. For your glory and our good.

You Are Loved