

Spiritual Priorities
John 21:15-22

- You may have heard the letter that has made the rounds...

Dear mother and father,

Since I left for college I've been remiss in writing and I'm sorry for my thoughtlessness and not having written before. I will bring you up to date now, but before you read on please sit down. You are not to read any further unless you're sitting down.

Well, then, I'm getting on pretty well now, the skull fracture and the concussion I got when I jumped out of the window of my dormitory when it caught fire shortly after my arrival here is pretty well-healed down.

I only spent two weeks in the hospital and I can now see almost normally and only get those sick headaches once a day.

Fortunately, the fire in my dormitory and my jump was witnessed by the tenant at the gas station near the dorm and he was the one who called the fire department and the ambulance. He also visited me in hospital and since I had nowhere to live because of the burnt-out dormitory, he was kind enough to invite me to share his apartment with him. It's really more like a basement but it's kind of cute.

He's a very fine boy and we've fallen deeply in love and are planning on getting married. His divorce is final now, and he shares custody of his 3 children. We haven't got the exact date yet but it will be before my pregnancy begins to show.

Yes, mum and dad, I am pregnant. I know how much you're looking forward to being grandparents and I know you will welcome the baby and give it the same love and devotion and tender care you gave me when I was a child.

Now that I've brought you up to date I want to tell you that there was no dormitory fire, I did not have a concussion or a skull fracture, I was not in hospital, I'm not pregnant, I'm not engaged, and there is no boyfriend, however I am getting a D in history and an F in chemistry and I just want you to see those grades with the right priorities.

Your loving daughter, Sharon.

- The point is, that there are more important things than bad grades. And her need to write the letter in such a way reveals a problem we all share: our tendency to elevate the less important with what is most important.
- And as we approach a new year, a new season we all face the great temptation of elevate what is less important and diminishing what is most important.
 - And the consequences are not small. Spiritually speaking, distraction from the most important thing, can cost you everything
 - It is of the utmost importance that we get our priorities right.

Priorities are decisions you make before opportunities

- What we chose and why is what your spiritual life is all about.
- How should I choose? And how can I keep from being distracted? What are the priorities of spiritual life?

- When John writes this early biography of Jesus, he makes the case that he is the son of God, saviour of the world and at the end, lays out a path for those who believe in him.
- It's a beautiful and powerful scene: Jesus has died a horrible death on a cross but rose three days later. Word spreads like wildfire, it's news that would change the world... and this group were going to be the first to tell it. And how they are prepared for it reveals priorities of spiritual life, what matters most. And through a conversation with Peter there are several lessons in priorities that are revealed, and I would ask you to take to heart

1. Jesus is the Center of Spiritual Life

- a. This may seem like the most obvious point to anyone who has a basic understanding of Christianity. And yet it must be stated for several reasons.
 - i. Most people in culture today will tell you to focus on yourself
 - ii. But God created us to focus on Him and reflect Him!
 - iii. We were designed to feed upon Him for our souls and yet we are feeding off of ourselves
 1. It is like a spiritual anorexia!
 - iv. And even for the church, this must be stated because we must be constantly reminded. And I want you to notice the way in which Jesus does this with one of his most well-known disciples
 - v. "Simon, Son of John" Jesus says to Peter in verse 15
 - vi. Why does Jesus address him in such a formal matter? Perhaps it is not unlike the habit of a parent when addressing their children, they prefer to use their full name.
 - vii. In any case, there is a weight to the question he is about to ask
- b. And then he asks a question that almost seems inappropriate, he asks in verse 15 "Do you love me more than these others love?"
 - i. How could a person possibly know?

- c. But what you must understand is that this connects to earlier words:

John 13:37 "But why can't I come now, Lord?" he asked. "I'm ready to die for you."

Matt. 26:33 Peter declared, "Even if everyone else deserts you, I will never desert you."

- i. After such claims, Jesus perhaps Jesus is asking if he is still so sure of himself, centred on himself!
- ii. To our relief, Peter does puff himself up by saying I do love you more than the rest!" Instead, he says "YOU KNOW"
- iii. Look at what has happened to Peter, for this happens to everyone who has been changed by Jesus.
 1. We no longer appeal to our own self-confidence as proof that we are going in the right direction!

2. NOR does Peter get down on himself or even passive-aggressive: "No, Jesus, OBVIOUSLY I don't..."
- iv. Peter rests simply in the fact that Jesus knows his heart, just as Jesus knows our heart. And in order to direct our hearts, our spiritual life, Jesus asks this all-important question. And not just once, or twice but three times. (verse 16-17)
- v. The simple fact that Jesus asks Peter, who is about to become one of the prominent leaders in the early church, three direct times about Peter's love for him teaches us this all-important lesson! The first question for us all is "Do you love Jesus?"
- vi. And it is followed by a practical response: feed my sheep
- vii. The responsibilities around you, must be connected to and flow from love for Jesus.
- d. Friends, please note this: Where there is love for Jesus, there will be fruit and health in all other areas of life.
- e. Do you want to grow in your marriage and friendships? It begins with loving Jesus.
 - i. He is the source of relationship, provides meaning of marriage.
 - ii. Do you want to grow in... friendship? In work? In finances?
- f. In fact, when he speaks directly to Peter about what he will face in his future, Jesus is teaching us all a much bigger lesson: our lives are to reflect Jesus!
 - i. Just as Jesus faced a cross, so Peter will face a cross, v18-19
- g. And what he says to Peter, he says to us all at the end of v20 Follow!
 - i. Do not be surprised by suffering in this life, for I have suffered. I went this route myself! But I am also alive again, and so you to will experience new life now, and forever!
- h. He is the centre... and so, as a result:

2. Devotion is a Necessity of Spiritual Life

- a. A university professor used to begin his first class each year by saying "I am about to teach you the most important thing you will learn"
- b. If Jesus is the centre of spiritual life, then cultivating this love is the utmost priority. This comes first.
- c. The word devotion means a loving and committed response!
- d. This is how we are made, we are creatures of affection, and whatever fills our minds and our diaries will stir up our affections. Take advertising and events, for example
 - i. Sports analogy, West End Shows, Instagram
 - ii. And so, it is with what matters most!

- e. The goal is not just “fill your diary with churchy things” But fill your life with things that stir your affection for Jesus!
 - i. That is why we are here! Why we plan!
 - ii. We try to emphasize this in our service!
 - 1. And in our church calendar!
 - iii. The songs we sing...
 - iv. But for you personally, you need to fill your time with things that stir up affection for Jesus!
 - v. **Study** (devotion of time and attention to get knowledge)
 - 1. Study of and immersion in, Scripture

Psalms 1:1-3 “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither.”

- 2. Meditating on Scripture, Chewing, thinking deeply!!
 - 3. If you have a small amount of time, read a portion of scripture for half, then meditate for the other
 - 4. “man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God”
 - a. What is your diet? What words do you FEED on?
 - vi. **Prayer**- communion with God
 - 1. We live in a culture in which we know ABOUT many things but perhaps have experienced very little
 - a. Adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication
 - 2. Prayer as a practice
 - a. Intentional, planned (prayer walks)
 - 3. Talk to God about what comes to mind from the Word of God, and you will never again say the same old things.
 - vii. **Solitude** (often the best context for study and prayer!)
 - 1. Not negative isolation! But times of solitude for the sake of communing with God, and being prepared by Him
 - 2. Solitude allows you to fine-tune your hearing
 - 3. Solitude lets you that you are not playing a game
 - viii. **Service**
 - 1. Specifically, the service that goes unseen
 - 2. Putting into action that which you have learned
- f. Some of you are shrivelling spiritually because you are filling your life with things that stir up your affections for lesser things!
- g. Many of us are way to flippant! Church on Sunday, for example, can be viewed as “so long as I don't have something else on”.

- i. Think even of why we arrive... to sing together! Yes, it is to connect with each other, we will talk about that next week!
But more than that! To stir up affection for Jesus!
- h. It is because it is so easy for our love to wane, we need to constantly come back to Jesus' question, and ask him to grow our love and make it stronger and stronger. This question, honestly asked and answered reveals the centre of our lives.
- i. Peter's response is almost like saying "I can't appeal to my own convictions or abilities, I don't trust myself, but instead I appeal to your knowledge of me and others!"
- j. Love for Jesus is not to be practiced as incidental emotional bursts, but sustained, commitment to God's people and all the responsibilities he gives to us.
 - i. This year, may your love be a candle, not a match!
- k. That's the most important thing, but often the most neglected thing.
 - 1. Setting goals... what about God? Maturity?
 - ii. You will not accidentally drift into maturity...
 - iii. Follow me. But, it is not a coincidence that the next conversation is added immediately after this, for I think it is a lesson in what can distract us from our priority!

3. Comparison is an enemy of spiritual life

- a. Peter knows that Jesus knows... But Peter ALSO knows that he does NOT know how much the other disciples love Jesus and so he must not compare himself as he did earlier!
- b. But, old habits die hard!
- c. Peter had been told what his responsibilities to Jesus would be: He would serve and love Jesus by loving and serving His sheep
- d. BUT... instead of expressing gratitude for the gracious way in which he had been restored or asking how his duties would be fulfilled *he immediately inquires about someone else*
 - i. He asks Jesus about John
 - 1. Perhaps Peter wanted to compare callings?
 - 2. Perhaps Peter wanted Him to point out faults in John?
 - 3. Perhaps Peter was simply drawing attention away from his responsibilities by looking at John
- e. In any case, Jesus saw it necessary to correct Peter
 - i. He rebukes Peter by drawing his attention away from John and back to Himself
 - ii. "So, what if I wanted John to live forever?"

- iii. He is basically saying “My plans for him aren’t your business” or “What I am doing with them shouldn’t concern you”
- iv. Peter’s response, I believe, reveals something about the tendency that we all have:
- f. Our focus is often on others (we are experts on other people)
 - i. *As a Comparison...* Pointing out faults
 - 1. We often substitute our relationship with Jesus for a job of judging other people’s relationships with Jesus!
 - 2. This can happen with church! We expect brilliance from a service and accept mediocrity for ourselves
 - 3. Sometimes, we like to blame others because it’s easier than acknowledging our own faults
 - 4. Look, if you want to disintegrate spiritually without knowing it, just keep pointing out other people’s faults!
 - ii. *Or, simply as a distraction*
 - 1. We should be concerned for other people of course!
 - 2. Jesus said to Peter “feed my sheep!”
 - iii. But our concern should not be a replacement for or distraction from our responsibility to follow Jesus
 - iv. The fruit of wrong focus?
 - 1. Bitterness, jealousy, strife, frustration, death?
 - v. Jesus’ rebuke calls our attention where it should be: on him
 - vi. And on a positive note, Jesus is also stating that each individual calling is vitally important!
 - vii. The command for Peter to follow Jesus indicates:
 - 1. It’s not automatic. Listen... you will never accidentally drift into maturity.
 - 2. It’s not something that can be done for you by another
- g. We are to continually follow Him. And those two words are not only a call to courage, they are an enabling promise! To be healed of this toxic comparison and unhealthy distraction, you need to know that:

4. Grace is the foundation of spiritual life

- a. This is the message you won’t hear in New Year’s resolutions.
- b. The invitation to follow me to Peter shows us grace, that Jesus chooses problematic sin-stained people like Peter and us to have a relationship with him.
- c. It is also no coincidence that the three questions of Jesus echo Peter’s three denials over the weekend.
- d. Was Peter grieved when he heard the question asked three times? Yes. It is not as though Jesus intended to cause Peter pain, but the

reality is when we are confronted by our shortcomings it will be painful! Though Peter denied the Lord in the presence of enemies, Jesus affirm him in the presence of friends

e. His purpose was not condemnation but restoration!

Luke 22:31-32 "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. ³² But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."

- f. We are called to make commitments. But they are based on Christ's commitment to us.
- g. Here we find the hope, that Jesus has stood in our place and on our behalf. How can He look upon Peter, and me and you, with mercy in the moment of failure? Because He went under the sword of judgment and into the shadow of darkness when He went to the cross. There, Jesus went through the trial and judgment that our sins deserve so that we might get the verdict His innocence deserves.
- h. It is in looking to him, knowing that he stood in our place, he paid for our sin, knowing he has prayed for us, that restores us and keeps us from failing.
- i. This year you will face all kinds of opportunities... and obstacles... the question now is, what are your priorities? What are the decisions you must make now before the opportunities of 2019??
- j. Jesus asks... and Jesus calls...
 - i. Those who need to be restored...
 - ii. Those who need to be refreshed...