

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, AZ 86001
www.fcfonline.org

THE PRIORITIES OF GOD'S PEOPLE

1 Peter 2:4-10

by

Steven J. Cole

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1 Peter Lesson 9

THE PRIORITIES OF GOD'S PEOPLE 1 Peter 2:4-10

Life can be hectic. I thought you might enjoy this story:

"It all began when the dental hygienist, who was scraping tartar off my teeth, asked, "Do you spend about four minutes each time you brush your teeth?" With a gurgling tube hanging from my lip, I responded, "A liddle lessth than that."

"You really should," she said, "or you will lose your teeth." I vowed to myself that I would floss, pick, brush and rinse as instructed.

"At my annual physical examination the doctor asked,"How often do you exercise?" "Do you limit your salt intake?" and "Does your diet contain much cholesterol?" I thus began an intensive fitness program, which I checked off on the daily "Personal Maintenance Schedule" on the refrigerator door.

"I then made an appointment for a beauty makeover. "When is the last time you had a facial?" the cosmetologist asked.

"Never" didn't seem like the right answer so I hedged with, "It's been a while."

"You should have a facial more often. You've already got some wrinkles around your eyes," she warned. Mentally I added "Get facial!" to my personal maintenance schedule.

"I soon learned personal maintenance was not all that I had to worry about. At the appliance-repair shop, the clerk examining my coffee maker asked, "Do you run white vinegar through it each month?" This began my "Home Maintenance Schedule," which took its place next to my personal maintenance schedule.

"Several other appliances, too, began demanding my attention. When I discovered that the tape deck in my car, the VCR and the disk

drives in my computer also required cleaning, I wondered how long I could keep up this rigorous program. I was sleeping four hours a night, had lost touch with my husband and children, and had no social life, not to mention no room left on the refrigerator door.

“It all came crashing down one night when I was reading an article entitled: “Are You Endangering the Lives of Your Loved Ones by Failing to Dust Your Smoke Alarms Regularly?”

“I ran to the refrigerator and tore the schedules to shreds. In their place I have established a policy in which I respond to all questions about my behavior by taking the Fifth Amendment.” (Lynne F. McGee, *Reader's Digest* [2/89], p. 198.)

In the rush of modern life, it's easy to lose sight of our priorities. Under pressure, we tend to focus on the urgent, but not always on the important. So it's good to be reminded occasionally of our priorities as God's people.

The believers to whom Peter wrote were under pressure--probably not from being busy--but pressure from persecution. Scattered as aliens in a pagan world (1:1), it would have been easy for them to lose sight of their priorities as God's people. The pressure easily could have driven a wedge between the Jewish and Gentile members of the church, leading to church splits. Peter wanted them to see their priorities clearly so that they could fulfill the glorious purpose to which God had called them. Thus he closes this first major section of his letter by showing that our salvation must be lived out by being built upon Christ, in Christian community, with witness to the world:

God's people must keep God central, be built together as His people, and proclaim His excellencies to others.

You will hear me emphasize these three priorities often. They sum up the Great Commandment (to love God and neighbor) and the Great Commission (to win and disciple the lost). They help keep us in focus when pressures build.

1. God's people must keep God central.

Our relationship to God must be at the center of all we do, both individually and corporately. If God is not central, we are off track. If our devotion for Him is lacking, we're just playing church. You will recall how the Lord rebuked the church at Ephesus (Rev. 2:1-7). They worked hard for the Lord. They had persevered through trials and had not grown weary. They had stood for the truth against some false teachers in their midst. They were doctrinally sound. And yet the Lord said, "But I have this against you, that you have left your first love." Love for Christ must be central! Peter mentions two ways to do this:

- A. We keep God central by continually coming to Christ and building upon Him.

"And coming to Him" (2:4). Of course we come to Him in salvation when we first put our trust in Him. But that is not what Peter has in mind here. The present tense participle means coming to Christ repeatedly. It does not refer to our conversion, but to our daily communion with Him. We must come to Christ repeatedly and build our lives on Him.

Peter calls Him a "living stone." That is an oxymoron, a seeming contradiction in terms (like "efficient bureaucracy"). But the dissonance of the term should grab our attention. That Christ is a stone means that He is a solid foundation on which to build our lives. As Peter goes on to state, He is the cornerstone of the church. Just as when you build a house or building, you want to make sure the foundation is solid, since everything else rests on it, so with our lives. Jesus Christ is the only solid foundation for time and eternity. Thus you can put your trust in Him and know that you will not be disappointed or "put to shame" (1:6).

But Christ is not just the stone on which you can build everything in life. He is a living stone. He is living in that He died for our sins, but was raised from the dead, triumphant over sin, death, and hell. He is the author and giver of life, able to impart spiritual life to all who believe in Him. That He is living means that Christianity is not a religion of going through dead rituals. It is a relationship with the living Lord of the universe! We come to Him and commune with Him daily, building everything in our lives on who He is and on what He has provided for us in His death and resurrection.

Verse 6 (a quote from Isa. 28:16) shows that we build on Christ by believing in Him. To believe in Christ, I must let go of my own works as the means of my salvation. I must not trust in myself or what I do as the way to approach God. Rather, I rest completely on who Christ is and on what He did for me when He died on the cross in my place.

Once you've trusted Christ as Savior, the entire Christian life is a process of discovering all that He is to you. As Peter puts it (2 Pet. 1:3), God "has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness." Christ is our sufficiency. As we commune continually with Him by faith, we learn that our primary need in life is to "know Him" (Phil. 3:10).

Because I love you I'm going to tell it to you straight: If you are not consistently taking time to come to Christ in personal devotion to build your life on Him as revealed in His Word, then your priorities are wrong. You're building your life on the sand. If we as a church do not keep God central by continually coming to Christ in all we do, then our priorities are wrong. We're building a work on the sand. Christ is choice and precious in God's sight. He must be choice and precious in our sight as well.

B. We keep God central by offering spiritual sacrifices to Him through Christ.

As we come to Christ, we also, "as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (2:5). This is the central text on the great doctrine of the priesthood of every believer. There is no such thing as a Christian priesthood of just a few who are ordained to ministry. In the Old Testament, only the priests could draw near to God by offering sacrifices and incense on His altar. Only the High Priest, and that only once a year, could enter the Holy of Holies to make atonement for the people.

But now, Christ our High Priest has offered Himself once for all as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. As believer priests, we all have direct access into God's presence through Christ, our mediator (1 Tim. 2:5). We need not go through any human priest. We need not bring a

bloody sacrifice, since Christ's offering of Himself once for all is sufficient. But we offer up to God other spiritual sacrifices as priests.

What are these sacrifices? Romans 12:1 tells us to offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God. This means that everything we do can be done to God's glory (1 Cor. 10:31). In Romans 15:16, Paul says that he was "ministering as a priest the gospel of God, that [his] offering of the Gentiles might become acceptable." Thus sharing the good news of Christ is a sacrifice we can offer to God. The Philippian church took up a collection and sent it to Paul to meet his needs. He calls their service "an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God" (Phil. 4:18; also Phil. 2:17). Hebrews 13:15-16 instructs us, through Christ, to "continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. And do not neglect doing good and sharing; for with such sacrifices God is pleased."

This relates to all you do in your Christian life. Everything you do should be a thank offering to Christ. Do you work with our young people? Help with socials? Help at a church work day? Usher? Call on or take a meal to the sick? Give money? Sing? Pray? Lead a Bible study? Counsel? Whatever you do should be done as a sacrifice to Christ. It ought to be done by asking yourself the question, "Lord, does this please You?" Your motive is not human recognition, but gratitude to the Lord.

Our first priority is to keep God central by continually coming to Christ and by offering spiritual sacrifices to God through Him.

2. We must be built together as His people.

When I do weddings, I usually explain that marriage is like a triangle, with God at the apex and the partners at the other two points. As the partners each grow closer to God, they grow closer to one another. What is true in marriage is also true in the local church. As the members grow closer to God, they grow closer to one another. Our text has a distinctively corporate flavor. Peter wants his readers to see that Christianity is not an individualistic thing, where we each have a relationship with God, but not with each other. We are being built together into a spiritual house or temple in the Lord.

This truth is especially important in our increasingly fragmented, mobile, impersonal society. If you're like me, you've got relatives that you haven't seen in years. I probably wouldn't know some of my cousins if I saw them on the street. It's not uncommon for grown children to move thousands of miles from parents. With the high divorce rate, some children rarely see their own fathers or mothers. Since God made us to be connected with other people, there's a high felt need for community. God designed the church to meet that need. Much could be said, but I must limit myself to two observations:

- A. We are built together to the extent that every believer exercises his priesthood under the headship of Christ.

The church isn't a building; the church is God's people. The church may meet in a church building or in homes or outdoors. But Peter pictures God's people, the church, as a building (or temple) in which each member is a living stone, being fitted and built together upon and by the living corner stone, Jesus Christ. How do you think this church building would look if the builder had left out a few stones here and there? I wouldn't want to stand under the roof! And God's church, which is His people, will only be complete and strong as every member fits in and functions in the way that the Builder designs. There ought to be no such thing as a believer just "attending church." We don't go to church; we are the church! We must minister one to another in the church.

It's a mistake to think of ministry in exclusively formal terms: teaching Sunday School or serving on a church committee, etc. These are ministries. But ministry is the overflow of a life that is full of Jesus Christ. If He is central in your life (Priority One), then you will be ministering to people when you have contact with them. Ministry takes place through relationships. Thus we should gather as believer priests, looking to build up one another because Christ is filling our hearts to the brim. Ministry is Christ slopping over from you to me and from me to you.

- B. We are built together to the extent that we live in line with our identity as a distinct people.

Note the terms that Peter piles up to paint a corporate identity for his readers as the people of God. All these terms come from the Old Testament: A chosen race (Isa. 43:20); a royal priesthood (Exod. 19:6); a holy nation (Exod. 19:6); a people for God's possession (Exod. 19:5). In verse 10 Peter draws from Hosea 1:10 & 2:23 to remind his scattered readers that formerly they were not God's people, but now they are. Formerly they had not received mercy, but now they had.

Peter wrote this because his readers were scattered fledgling churches under persecution. To keep from falling apart, they needed to see their identity as God's people. Since they had come to the Living Stone who, though choice and precious in God's sight, was rejected by men (2:4), they could expect that they, too, though chosen and precious in God's sight, would be rejected by men. But in the long run, they would not be put to shame, but rather would share the honor with Christ (1:6b-7a). Thus the way to endure rejection by men is to see our new identity as the chosen people of God.

God never intended that we live as Lone Ranger Christians. (Even he had Tonto!) I was in a gathering of Christians from different churches. We were going around the room telling what church we were from. One woman described herself as "a Christian at large." I thought, "What a violation of biblical truth!" There's no such thing! We all must be connected with a local church where we are being built together with other believers.

Thus, we must keep God central and be built together as His people. Finally,

3. We must proclaim the excellencies of God to others.

God has called us out of the world as His people so that we can go back into the world and proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light (2:9). Gathered as the church, we worship our great God by proclaiming His excellencies to one another and we build up one another. Scattered into the world, we proclaim God's mercy and light to those who are still in the darkness.

It would be great to think that everyone who doesn't know God would be responsive--just waiting to hear and believe. Some are; but the

Bible is clear that we can expect some to reject not only the message, but also us. The temptation is to tone down the message so that people will not reject it (or us). In fact, evangelicals are going out of their way to present an unoffensive Christ to the world. Often Jesus is marketed as a nice, non-judgmental man who wouldn't upset anyone, who will meet a person's every need and desire. He makes them feel good about themselves. He helps them to be successful in whatever they choose.

I'm not suggesting that we be rude and insensitive in presenting Christ to people. We shouldn't blast people with God's judgment. Our Savior was kind to sinners and yet He spoke plainly about sin and judgment. We should always be gracious (Col. 4:6).

But having said that, we must remember that the biblical Christ is going to offend many people, for at least two reasons: First, the cross of Christ is offensive (1 Cor. 1:23). The cross humbles human pride. It tells people that their own good works will not get them into heaven. It tells them that they are sinners who have offended a holy God. People don't like that. Second, Christ's lordship offends people. Everyone likes the idea of an Aladdin's genie-Jesus, who will fulfill their desires. But a Christ who is Lord, who confronts sin and demands obedience--that's another story! If you proclaim Christ crucified and Christ as Lord, some will believe and be saved. But others will reject Him and you. Be prepared!

Note that the dividing line is belief versus unbelief (2:7). Believing or not believing in Jesus Christ separates people into two distinct camps. Believers are joined to God and His people and one day will be exalted with Christ in heaven. Unbelievers who do not repent are in the darkness, headed for God's judgment. Jesus Christ is the central issue in belief or unbelief. Either He is the corner stone on whom a person puts his faith and builds his life; or, He is a stone of stumbling and rock of offense over which a person falls.

What does Peter mean when he says that unbelievers "stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this they were also appointed" (2:8)? Are some appointed to perish? Peter's purpose here is to encourage believers under persecution. Thus his point is that the raging of the wicked is under God's sovereign control, so that believers need not fear (Ps. 2:1-6). Those who disobey God will not somehow

thwart His eternal purpose. He will someday be glorified in His saving His elect and in justly condemning the reprobate. We are assured that the wicked will be punished.

And yet, those who are disobedient are responsible for their sin, even if it is in line with God's predestined plan (Acts 2:23)! But, they need not remain in disobedience and rebellion. God offers them mercy and forgiveness if they will turn to Christ. He has "shut all up in disobedience that He might show mercy to all" (Rom. 11:32). No one has piled up more sin than God's mercy can cover. Christ's death is sufficient for the chief of sinners. All may come and receive mercy at the cross.

Conclusion

I would ask each of you to examine your priorities. First and foremost, have you truly believed in Christ as Savior and Lord? Is He and His death on the cross precious to you? If so, is He central in your life? Are you coming continually to Him and building your life on Him? Are you offering your life as a spiritual sacrifice to Him? Second, are you seeking to be built together with His people or do you just attend church? You may need to commit yourself to this local church. Third, are you seeking to proclaim His excellencies to those in darkness, that they, too, may come to know the Savior? Those are our priorities as God's people who have received His mercy.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What has helped you most to make God central in your daily life?
2. How can a Christian know where he/she is supposed to serve in the church?
3. Why are we more comfortable with "formal" rather than "relational" ministries? How can we change this?
4. Is it wrong to "sell" Jesus to lost people? How confrontational must we be to remain true to the gospel?

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