

Simplify: Prioritize by Holly C. W. Aastuen
Mark 1:14-20 January 22, 2012

What is a higher priority for you—reading a book or washing dishes? Vacuuming the living room floor or watching the Vikings? Doing your homework or going on Facebook?

The problem with many of our life's decisions, both trivial and significant, is that too many good things compete for our time. We want to keep our priorities straight, but we often find ourselves choosing that which is most convenient, and not always that which is best for us.

Prioritizing our lives makes good sense all around—it makes good business sense, good home life sense, good friendship sense—but because we are human, we are constantly in need of reminding what our true priorities are, where our true priorities lie.

And when we choose our priorities, we want those concerns to be reflected in our lives, in how we spend our time, in where we put our money.

For most of us, following Christ is a high priority in our lives, but the problem is in making that priority a reality. How do we, practically, make Christ a priority? Do we have to sell all we have, give it all to the poor and spend our days in prayer and fasting?

Of course, we don't need to go to extremes to make Christ a priority in our lives, but we do need to be intentional about how we spend our attention, time and money. We need to choose to whom and with what we ally ourselves.

When I was younger I used to resent the servant language, the slave language in the Bible. There are many places in the Bible where slave language is used: "Choose today whom you will serve—God or wealth," it says in Matthew 6. Or "whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all," in Mark chapter 10. In Romans 6 we are encouraged to change from being slaves of sin to slaves of righteousness. But in all of these passages I contended that they didn't apply to me because I wasn't going to be a slave to anyone. I wasn't going to submit in all meekness, (which I equated with wimpyness), to anyone or anything.

Now I have discovered that regardless of any good intentions I have to keep myself from becoming a slave to anyone or anything, I have found myself enslaved. If I didn't set a priority of finishing a worthy task like writing my sermon or paying the bills, I would often find myself a slave to some computer game, often for hours on end. If I didn't set a priority of getting home in time to greet the kids after school, I would find myself a slave to trying to get my email inbox below 1000 emails. We are wired naturally to want to ally ourselves with something and if we don't take care to do that intentionally, our desires and inattentions will get us allied with something we didn't plan.

The truth is that we are all a slave to something. Whether by design or lack of intention, we give our allegiance to someone or something.

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The players in today's Bible reading have their priorities straight. They are working for a living, fishing and cleaning nets, but when Jesus calls them to a life of serving with him, they drop their nets and follow. I find it amazing that they are so willing to follow, that they move to walk with Jesus with seeming ease and lack of hesitation.

A lot has been made of what went on in that exchange. Many have been amazed at how the disciples seemed to immediately drop what they were doing and follow Jesus. How could they follow and leave their livelihood behind them on the beach like that? How could they do so 'immediately' as Mark's gospel implies? Weren't they experiencing any hesitation? Didn't they need to go tell anyone what they were up to?

One theory on how these rough and ready fisherfolk were so willing to accept and follow Jesus was that their hearts were ready. They were willing to drop everything because they already had in their hearts a longing for something more than fishing. Some of them may have already been followers of John the Baptizer and because of that experience, they were ready willing and able to follow Jesus when he came along.

Even if they weren't followers of John the Baptizer, the theory goes, they were ready to drop their nets to find something they knew would fulfill them in a way that fishing never could. They were ready not only for something different, but something to fill their deepest longings.

Another school of thought is that this work of recruitment, this change of heart to follow Jesus and fish for people, wasn't a heroic or particularly daring act on the part of the fisherfolk, but was evidence of a miracle. According to Mark, these fishermen weren't particularly religious people nor did they seem particularly introspective or inclined to be seeking fulfillment. No, they were fishermen and they were fishing, an all consuming task that took all their focus and energy.

And so this story of call and response is a story of supernatural powers. The story as it is told and the actions of those in the story don't indicate that there was any thought going on, on the part of the disciples. They just dropped their nets and followed. Instead of thinking of these people as such heroes that were doing such noble works of faith, things that we could never do, we should think of them as a miracle story, like a healing. Something just happened to them, something inexplicable, and they followed.

I like to think that the reality of this situation is somewhere in between the two, somewhere between the first theory that the hearts of the disciples were seeking fulfillment and the second theory which points to the supernatural power of God in Jesus, giving rise to a miracle over which the fishermen had little if any control. I think Andrew and Simon and James and John were at some level ready and willing to follow a call from Jesus and yet their remarkable speed of hearing and responding to that call was in itself a miracle.

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Even today as we are also called to follow Christ, we need to prepare our hearts and minds for him, to recognize the yearning in our own hearts for something deeper, something more significant than the activities with which many of us fill our days. And at the same time we need to allow for miracles, to see that there are times in our lives when God works with us and through us in inexplicable ways.

We are all called to make following Christ a priority in our lives. It isn't an activity that is restricted to just a few vocations. All of us are called by Christ. Our following Christ needs to be at the forefront of all we do, so that wherever we find ourselves living and moving we are living and moving in ways that affirm our Christian values.

Our callings can be as different as we are—as students, as teachers, as retirees, as business people, we are called to reflect God's light in whatever circumstances we find ourselves.

But as we prepare our hearts and minds to follow Jesus, we need to remember that all the follow stories in the Bible, all the instances where someone follows Christ when he calls, all of them have a common thread. Everyone who answers the call of Christ leaves something behind. Andrew and Simon leave their nets. James and John leave their father. We can follow Jesus but we need to leave behind that which is keeping us from him.

Choose today whom you will serve, it says in Joshua chapter 24, "but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." (vs. 15)

In an ideal life, we would have our priorities straight all the time. As Christians we would see our ideal as a life with Christ, a life of grace directed towards Christ, as his life is already directed 100 percent towards us.

Jesus wouldn't have it any other way. Jesus yearns for a relationship with us.

As we read throughout the Bible about Jesus Christ, his impact on others, his miraculous power, and his deep wisdom, it is often easy to forget that Jesus did not come down to earth in order to be a solo act. He did not come and seek to dazzle people with his power. He was a very different kind of man. He came to seek out others, to invite them to follow and invite them to join him in ministry. Unlike any other rabbi of his time, Jesus did not wait for disciples to come to him, he went out and recruited. He went out and sought out those he could who would drop everything and follow him.

By his very act of recruiting followers, and by his nature of seeking others, he was a different kind of leader, a rabbi that wanted disciples, a Son of God who wanted children of God to follow.

Our priority in life, our focus for living, whether we are reading a book or washing dishes, vacuuming the living room or watching the Vikings, is following Jesus, with all

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that we are and all that we have, so that those times when we feel that Jesus is encouraging us to do something difficult, to reach out to someone the rest of the world shuns, or to give up something that is ours for the sake of someone in need, we will be ready to follow.