

It doesn't matter?

It doesn't matter - what kind of clothes you wear...

It doesn't matter - the way you do your hair.

So began a humorous and memorable television commercial, some years ago, for a well-known brand of Australian beer. Of course, these things – clothes and hair – do matter to some limited extent. But the message from the brewer implied that it is more important that you buy his brand of beer!

On this same topic of what is and is not truly important: I once worked with a man by the name of Bill, a soft spoken engineering colleague who, when discussions during company meetings sometimes became unpleasant, surprised all of the attendees and brought proper decorum back to the proceedings with these words: "But you must remember – it doesn't matter anyway!" I'm sure the visiting managers and engineers thought Bill was being impertinent but, looking back, I think Bill may have possessed a small gleam of true wisdom.

What matters to *you*? What is important to you? What are your priorities? Clothes? Hair? Beer? Do your priorities match those handed down to you from God? Or is your job perhaps your main priority? Does it take up all of your mental and physical resources, leaving nothing remaining for God? Is a luxurious lifestyle your main priority? Or even just keeping up with the Jones'? Do you just *have* to own the latest and greatest in fashion, housing, furniture, automobiles, electronics and vacations – again leaving nothing remaining for God?

The setting of one's priorities and the deciding what is truly important can be somewhat relative in nature. If you say that something is important, another may ask, "Important compared with *what*?" For example, we twenty-first century Christians might be of the opinion that our time now is less important than the future time when God's people will be taken to a place of safety (Revelation 12:6 & 14). Or that the place of safety period is less important than the Millennium. Or that the Millennium is less important than the Great White Throne Judgement period.

The late Herbert W. Armstrong, when speaking on the subject of priorities, frequently advised the members of God's church to "hold on to the trunk of the tree." Evangelist Gerald Waterhouse humorously expanded on Mr. Armstrong's tree analogy by recommending that brethren "stay away from the twigs and the leaves – because that's where the bugs are!" The trunk of the tree pictures the major central core of true doctrine. The twigs and leaves represent areas of church teaching that may rightly be changed as the church grows in true knowledge. They picture the relatively minor doctrinal topics that may not be one hundred percent clear to the leaders and members of this modern era of God's church and may be open to a certain degree of interpretation and opinion. Recent events in God's church have clearly shown that these twigs and leaves are not the anchors we should be holding onto when a major storm blows in.

In this article, I would like to review what God says our priorities should be, what is important to Him and thus what should be important to you and me. There are others, of course, but here are three priorities that appear to matter most to God:

The Kingdom

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. (Matthew 6:33)

Jesus Christ clearly stated that our number one priority should be the Kingdom of God. In the hubbub of our busy, day-to-day lives, it is sometimes difficult to put God's Kingdom first in our thoughts. We do not – and should not – bring our thoughts into line by displaying pictures or statues representing Jesus Christ (Exodus 20:4), but there are little things we *can* do to help ourselves. On a bookshelf in my study, I keep photographs of my wife and our four daughters. I also keep a photo of David John, our son who died in 1985 when he was only two and a half days old. In addition to all of the regularly quoted reasons we would want to make it into the Kingdom, my wife and I are determined to be there when God wakes our young son from his long sleep. David John's photo helps me in the artificial turmoil of the average working week to remember that my work problems are relatively unimportant in the greater scheme of things. We yearn for the Kingdom of God, for the time when we can join Him in the next phase of His truly important work. We long for the first and second resurrections and to be with our little son again. We have no doubt whatsoever that these things are truly important!

Love

For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity. (I Corinthians 13:9-13)

A lot of information has been packed into these five short verses. God, through Paul, mentions two of His priorities here. Through this epistle, God was telling His first century church in Corinth (and, by extension, He is telling His church today) two of the things that are important to Him and that should be important to us: first, His Kingdom – the time "when that which is perfect is come" and the second priority, love.

Love – translated here in the King James version as "charity" – is important. Paul says that, in order of God's priorities, it is even more important than faith and hope. He also states that, from God's point of view, perfect things are mature and important whereas imperfect things are relatively childish and unimportant. It would be good for us to keep this in mind as we go through our daily lives. How often has each of us looked back on a disagreement or argument on some petty issue and thought how childish we had been?

Paul says that love for God and for our fellow human beings is more important than our imperfect knowledge of doctrine and prophecy. It is relatively unimportant to God if one of His children does not understand every intricacy of the unfolding of prophecy. Have you, like me, ever questioned your level of understanding (or even your level of conversion) when you have heard someone say that certain prophetic details have been clearly revealed to God's church today – but you don't really get it? Have you, like me, ever been in a gathering of church members and someone has casually mentioned his view of the outcome of Daniel's 1290 day/1335 day prophecy as though everyone present clearly understood, and were able to immediately call to mind, every detail of its fulfillment? We all know of many very converted brethren who went to their graves without having understood all the finer points of doctrine or prophecy. Some may have understood more in their younger years. God did not call others until their senior years. It is wonderful, to be sure, that some members are blessed with true understanding of all these fine points, but it should not be taken for granted that every other member does. The prophetic and spiritual knowledge of the most learned and inspired among us is still very imperfect. When all is fulfilled, and we are given perfect knowledge and understanding, we will all ask ourselves, on one point or another, "Why didn't I see that?"

Where did Paul get these opinions and priorities? Were they his own ideas? No. He received his teaching from the same Jesus Christ who had said:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matthew 22:37-40)

A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another. (John 13:34-35)

This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you... These things I command you, that ye love one another. (John 15:12, 17)

And I have declared unto them thy name, and will declare it: that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them. (John 17:26)

God the Father loves us. Jesus Christ loves us. They expect us to make a high priority of loving them and one another.

Humble obedience

In recent years, many of God's people have been deceived into believing that "all you need is love," that Christian faith and love somehow do away with the requirement to obey God's commandments. Over and over again throughout the scriptures, Old Testament and New, God tells us that He expects us to obey those commandments. Jesus stressed that simple, humble obedience is very high on His list of priorities:

And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments. He saith unto him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Honour thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. (Matthew 19:16-19).

Humble obedience to God is more important than even the greatest physical pursuits, even those directed towards God, such as the building of and reverence for His Temple:

Thus saith the LORD, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? And where is the place of my rest? For all those things hath mine hand made, and all those things have been, saith the LORD: but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word. (Isaiah 66:1-2)

Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. Trust ye not in lying words, saying, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, are these. For if ye thoroughly amend your ways and your doings; if ye thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbour; if ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your hurt: then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, for ever and ever. Behold, ye trust in lying words, that cannot profit. Will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal, and walk after other gods whom ye know not; and come and stand before me in this house, which is called by

my name, and say, We are delivered to do all these abominations? Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, even I have seen it, saith the LORD. (Jeremiah 7:3-11)

It does not make sense that God's people can tremble at His Word and, at the same time, feel free to disobey it. Even within the general heading of obedience, various levels of priority exist. For example, the spirit of the law is more important than the letter of the law. Jesus revealed this in His parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:9-14) and in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:17-48) where He taught the magnification of His law. However, God still expects physical obedience from His children. To know, to think about, and to agree with the requirements of God's law are not enough. We must obey them:

For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified. (Romans 2:13)

But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: for he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed. (James 1:22-25)

The doing of the law – obedience to it – is more important than just the hearing, knowing, understanding and repetition of it.

First Love

Despite all of their good points, God found it necessary to give a strong warning to His church in Ephesus because their priorities had become perverted. They had left their first love (Revelation 2:1-5). God commanded them to remember what their proper priorities had been in an earlier time, to repent, and to get back to doing these "first works."

Have we, like the Ephesus church, left our first love behind? What was our first love in the early days? Did we not love the very thought of the coming of God's Kingdom? Did we not love to have a part in working towards it? Did we not love God and His children? Did we not love His commandments?

One final word on this: If we take our thinking on this subject of priorities to an even deeper level, and if we really pause to ponder life's biggest questions, we find that the most important is, "Does God exist?" All of the other true priorities, including those listed above, hang on the fact that He does exist, that He is a loving, wise and benevolent God, that He created mankind, and that He loves and cares for His creation – including you and me. Now, that is important – and very encouraging too!

With all due respect to the Australian brewers mentioned at the beginning of this article, it really does not matter one iota what kind of beer we drink, or even if we drink beer at all! But let God's children never be heard to say, "It doesn't matter" about His priorities. Rather, let us be saying:

The Kingdom of God – it does matter!

Love - for God and for others – it does matter!

Humble obedience to God – it does matter!

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