

Ministry Priorities

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[0 : 00] When we look at the early days of the ministry of Christ as we're looking at these days in Mark, we see how powerful his ministry was.

! The reason it was powerful is because he knew what his priorities of ministry were. He was clear on that. And to have effective ministries in our lives, which if you're a Christian, we have a responsibility for that.

And to have effective ministries at Pickens First Baptist Church, we need to know what our priorities should be. There's no better way to realize that than by watching and seeing what's important to Christ.

It's found in Mark chapter 1, beginning in verse 35, and it says, And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place.

And there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, Everyone is looking for you.

[1 : 09] And he said to them, Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that's why I came out.

And he went throughout all of Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons. And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling, said to him, If you will, you can make me clean. Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said, I will be clean. And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.

And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once and said to him, See that you say nothing to anyone, but go show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what proof commanded, what Moses commanded, for a proof to them.

But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places.

[2 : 17] And people were coming to him from every quarter. I believe that the ministry priorities of Christ ought to be our priorities as well, if we have Christian ministry.

Notice first how he prioritized prayer. He started the day with prayer. He pulled away from the demands of people, the demands of ministry, and he prayed.

He knew that his ministry was only as effective as his reliance upon the Father. That's not to say that people understood his ministry.

They would rather him do other things. They wanted him to tend to them. They wanted him to feed them. They wanted him to heal them.

They wanted him to stay with them. His value with them, his ministry with them, His prayer life. His prayer life. His prayer life.

[3 : 22] His prayer life. His prayer life. And it's common for people to underestimate time alone with the Father. However, it is crucial. It was crucial to Christ.

He leaned on the Father. Now, granted, it's hard for us to understand the Son of God coming in the flesh, stripped of the glories of heaven, and here on earth in the flesh.

Philippians chapter 2, verse 6 and 7. Help us some with this. When it says, Though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

So Christ on earth was still divine, and he was still God. But he voluntarily stripped himself of those divine qualities that identify the independent abilities of God.

For instance, we know that when he was Christ in the flesh on earth, he was not omnipresent. He was in one place at a time. There's little we know about how much power he had from being God, and how much power he had from having a sinless relationship with the Father who empowered

him, as well as his knowledge.

[4 : 48] It's obvious that he leaned on the Father for his abilities while on earth. And those abilities were still supernatural because, you understand, he had a sinless dependence upon God.

Nothing hindered his prayer life. I mean, for one, he was born of a virgin, and the significance of that is that he was not born into sin.

He was not born with a sin nature. In addition to that, he never sinned. Nothing ever came between he and the Father as he prayed.

So he proves that he is dependent upon prayer because he continues to go back to it. If he needed it, surely we need it, and he did it first thing.

And it's a good pattern to do. It's better to bathe the day in prayer before you begin it than at the end of it. A fresh touch of time with the Lord before the rest of the day is worth, hear me, it's worth the sacrifice of the time that it takes to get up and do it.

[6 : 05] It's worth it. Allow prayer to be a lifestyle. Not just a prayer over a meal. Not just a prayer over the beginning of a crisis.

But at the sunrise of a new day, when you don't know what that day holds, but you know who holds that day. And so you submit that day to him before the calamities come.

And trust him with it. And I want you to notice something that stuck out to me. Is that he was interrupted. And when he was interrupted, he didn't lose it.

He didn't get rude with them. It says that they were looking for him. And the Greek verb there speaks of frantically looking for him.

I remember when my children were young. And we'd be in an apartment store somewhere. And in the clothes, you know, in the clothes racks, sit about this high. And kids sit about this high. And you turn around and your young'un's not there.

[7 : 10] And you know immediately they've been snatched and taken to Bolivia. You know. It's over. You know. And then you look around the corner. And sure enough, they're right there. They're four feet from you instead of two.

But that frantic. The scripture says that they were frantically looking for him. I believe Peter thought something may have happened to him.

People are already getting mad at him. Maybe they've done something to him. And they were frantically looking for him.

And there's nothing worse than being interrupted in prayer by a frantic. That's a frantic fanatic. But he let it happen.

And he wasn't afraid to be interrupted. And he didn't get rude with them. Listen. If prayer is a habit for you. You make it a practice in your life.

[8 : 09] It will be interrupted from time to time. It will be. For years, I kept a prayer journal. It's now digital prayer journal that I started this year.

And as I read God's word, I begin with prayer asking God to show me a verse that he would have me to just etch within my heart. Just highlight it off the page and let it speak to my heart and life. When I find that verse, as I do each day, I pray through that verse. I write some of that prayer down. And then I pray for the things that I think about the most.

I pray for my family. I pray for the needs of you as I know what they are. I pray for God to move in the life of this church and to guide us in the things that we're doing along the way.

Burdens that I have and directional matters. I lay that out before the Lord. And then I ask him to lead as the day. And I kind of go through the day as I know it.

[9 : 16] I go through that day and lay that out before the Lord. I put that down. And there are days in that journal. And I used to keep journals. We have some available.

But I kept journals and would keep those prayer journals. And there's times when the page is very short because I got interrupted by somebody in my family.

That came to talk. And I am thankful now for that interruption. There was a time when my children knew not to mess with me when I was in the quote what they called the Jesus chair.

We had this chair in our bedroom. I had bought at a charity auction. And a fellow had told me that if I bought the chair that he would cover it for me.

He had been in the upholstery business. And Don went and found fabric and asked him about it.

And he said that fabric could hold up great. And he upholstered it for me and charged me way too much.

[10 : 25] And I took that chair home and sat down in it. And I liked it. And I wore it out. It didn't hold up like he said it would. And it began to have an Archie Bunker kind of look to it.

And when we moved from Mississippi to here, my wife told me that my chair was not going. My chair wouldn't make the trip.

My prayer life has sunk ever since we left that chair in Mississippi. It looked rough, but it was special.

I don't mind them interrupting me now. When they were younger, it bothered me more, I guess. I don't mind it now.

When there's a need. I put on more than one day somebody had a question.

[11 : 31] Or a call came that I needed to answer. And I don't mind that. Jesus don't mind that either. Because prayer is a priority.

And I'll be back. If not before the day is out in the morning. Jesus made it a priority. He prayed at his baptism. He prayed at the start of his ministry.

He prayed before choosing the 12. He prayed after feeding 5,000. He prayed after cleansings. He prayed after healings. He prayed before the cross.

Look throughout his life. Again and again and again and again. Prayer was a priority. Not only that, I'll tell you another priority he had was preaching.

Preaching was a priority. It says in verse 38 and 39, And he said to them, Let us go to the next towns that I may preach there also. For that is why I came out.

[12 : 31] And he went throughout all Galilee preaching in their synagogues. Notice that his burden was not giving people what they wanted. They wanted more healing.

Healing pointed to his power. Healing pointed to his authority. Healing would open their ears to hear his message as they watched him work and move in their lives.

But the healing itself was never just about healing the body. Never was. Matter of fact, none of his miracles were just about the miracle itself.

There's always a message there. It was always about the message. And they came to him and they said, The people that you are ministering to want more of you.

They want you to come back and see them again. And he said, Let's move on. And he did. And Matthew, who gives us more details than Mark does, because Mark's in a hurry and don't give a lot of details, tells us that he spread, that word spread all across Syria.

[13 : 41] And that he went throughout Galilee to small villages. The word there is small villages. When they had a town of a decent size, they'd build a wall around it, a protective wall. Like you may, a fence around your yard or something.

But not in these little villages. They were too small to have a wall around them. And this speaks of him going to those villages. They were small, but they were big enough for Christ to go to.

Matthew tells us that he went to the Decapolis. That is ten Roman cities that are filled with Gentiles. That he also went to Judea. That he also went on the other side of the Jordan.

It's estimated that he spent weeks, possibly even months, going from town to town before he ever came back to Capernaum, where he set up his home base of sorts.

There are as many as 240 Galilean villages sprinkled throughout that region. And Christ traveled throughout that area.

[14 : 41] Large crowds came with sick and possessed people. And he cured them. And when he cured them, he preached the gospel to him. And the message spread. And he said in verse 38, this is why I came out.

You know what he's talking about? This is why I came out of the desert. This is why I do ministry.

But to preach the word. His focus was on praying and preaching. And he did a lot of other things.

But none of them was more important than getting the message out. As a matter of fact, it's obvious in the book of Acts that the apostles picked up on the priorities from Christ.

Because I want you to look at the selection of deacons in Acts chapter 6. In the selection of deacons in Acts chapter 6, it says in verse 2, And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, It's not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.

Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

[15:47] And do you know what happened when they focused on prayer and preaching? Acts 6, 7 says, And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.

It works, folks. Prayer and preaching works. God chooses to use prayer and preaching. It was a ministry priority for Christ.

Not only that, but another priority for Christ was overcoming evil. Once again, demons come to him. And when they came, he cast them out.

And it was an ongoing battle. Mark emphasizes this demonic struggle, this demonic battle, how they continue to confront Christ in all of his ministry.

Matthew emphasizes the healing a lot more. Mark focuses on the demonic possessions and oppressions. He leans hard in these brief accounts to the empowering prayer of Jesus and the powerful preaching of Jesus and the power of Christ over the underworld of evil.

[16:57] Satan confronted him through the demon-possessed. And every time he did, Christ conquered them. Every time. And he always will. He was set on overcoming evil.

He prioritized it. He also prioritized changing lives. We see it again and again, and we see it here through the account of the leper.

The leper that came to him. Leprosy was a debilitating disease in that day. There was very little medicinal help for skin diseases.

And because leprosy was so contagious, so disfiguring, so feared, any discoloration of skin caused alarm. Do you remember back in spring of 2020 and they told us that if we'd go home for two weeks and isolate, that COVID would go away and we'd never deal with it again.

And we all went home, shut the doors, lassoed each other in the face. Looked out the window, saw somebody walking down the street and said, how dare them?

[18:17] They're spreading it. If anybody got a tickle in their throat, we'd throw them out. What are they trying to kill us?

What are they doing here? You remember that? People would cough and you'd look at them and go, what in the world? Somebody sneezed.

We used to be, God bless you. Now it was, get out of here. You're killing somebody. It's a whole different thing. Well, I'm going to tell you something. That's the kind of alert that people have with leprosy.

And no wonder it was horrible. I mean, they'd panic when they saw a discoloration on their skin. Because it might be. Outside of America, it was a plague that would stay with the afflicted for life. Today it's called Hansen's disease. There are medical concoctions that help today. But Dr. Paul Brand was a leading leprosy surgeon in the 20th century.

[19:24] And he dedicated himself to ministering to them. Phil Yancey, and he wrote a book called The Gift of Pain. He wrote a couple books about it.

He did extensive study on it and treatment of it. And he said this. He said, and I quote, he said, It's a radical disease of the whole person. It attacks not merely the skin, but the blood, the flesh, and even the bones.

Until the unhappy patient begins to lose his extremities and to rot by inches. The disease acts like an antiseptic, bringing numbness to the extremities as well as to the eyes and the ears and the nose.

It is a painless hell. End of quote. The numbness causes you to not be aware of a burn or a cut or a break.

Infection, gangrene. Disgusting and smelly wounds just eat the skin. The digits and the features of the face fall away. It's horrible physically.

[20:24] But it's also horribly socially because you were made an outcast. You were dangerously contagious. Nobody wanted to be around a leper. It was awful in the way it progressed.

It was such a progressive death upon the body. On top of that, Mosaic Law isolated lepers from social contact. They were forbidden to come within six feet.

You remember? Ain't that interesting? I think COVID was six feet, wasn't it? You know? If the wind was blowing and someone had leprosy, they couldn't come within 150 feet. And surely there was somebody with a 150-foot tape measure around.

They were to wear rent, worn out, torn clothing. They were to shave their head. They were to cover their mouth. If someone accidentally approached them, they were to yell, Unclean!

Unclean! And listen, they were required to leave not only community, but they were required to leave their family behind. To dress the part and to warn others of their malady when they came. [21 : 37] In the days of the New Testament, there was no disease that was regarded with more terror and pity. The instructions in Leviticus 13 and 14 tell us how to deal with it.

And it speaks of symptoms and procedures to deal with skin diseases. It actually mentions symptoms of 72 different skin disorders and diseases that were often feared to be leprosy. However, I want you to make no mistake. If it was leprosy, there was no hope for them outside of a touch of Christ. And that's exactly what this man attempted to do.

He approached Jesus. Unheard of for a leper to approach anybody. He boldly declared the power of Christ. He didn't yell, Unclean! There is no account of that. But instead, requested healing. And in pity, the Scripture says, it also means compassion. In compassion, Jesus reached out and touched him. No one touches a leper. But Jesus did.

[22 : 45] He spoke healing and immediately the man was healed. And then he tells the man to deal with his cure lawfully. Make it official with the priest as the law demands.

He also tells the man not to say a word about it to anyone. Why did he say that? Well, Jesus' ministry was filled with healing.

But his ministry was not about healing. It was not about the many other things that people were distracted with about him. His goal of preaching the gospel in as many places as possible would not be possible with a crowd following him from place to place.

The villages that he wanted to attend would not be large enough to accommodate the crowd that would follow him. Tensions would rise sooner. His ministry would be cut short.

His ministry would be cut short. So he told the man, don't tell anybody. Just go deal with it. But this man told others.

[23 : 56] And Scripture said they came from every quarter. That publicity limited Christ from being able to go from town to town. Luke tells us in Luke 5 verse 16, he would withdraw to desolate places and he would pray.

Why? Because prayer was the power behind his ministry. And he remained dependent upon the Father throughout his ministry. Even to the garden on the night of his arrest.

While they crucified him, he prayed for those who crucified him. While he hung on the cross. Prayer was a priority in his ministry. As was preaching and overcoming evil and changing lives.

And I got news for you. We do the ministry of Christ. Pickens First Baptist Church is a Christian ministry.

Why would we not prioritize our ministry around the same areas that Christ does? I'll answer for us. That's exactly what we ought to do. We need to prioritize prayer.

[25 : 03] We need to prioritize in our lives. We need to prioritize in our families. We need to prioritize in our church. We need to prioritize it for our church.

If Christ was dependent upon prayer, it only makes sense that we make prayer a priority. I hear so many people talk about prayer in schools.

What about prayer in our lives? What about prayer in our homes? I'm not knocking the need for prayer to be everywhere.

Don't misunderstand me. But I don't depend on the public school to bring the spiritual nourishment to my children. That's not what their job is. That's my job. And it's my job to bring them to a place where they'll get that spiritual nourishment.

A place that's been prayed for. A place that is prayerfully prepared to do the task that is at hand. We can't lay that off on somebody else. That's our job.

[26 : 05] And the reason why it is so hard to educate children today in our world is because there's a lack of prayer and a lack of Christ in the homes in which they come from.

Now, there are exceptions in this rule. Some of you just knuckleheads. It ain't nobody's fault but yours. But a lot of children only get the nurture that they get in life from school.

No wonder they're a mess. I'm not saying we don't prioritize it in other places. I'm saying we prioritize it in our lives not just to talk about it but to do it.

I send a text out to a lot of people on Saturday. And I often put in that text and I don't do it flippantly. I pray over that text every time I send it.

I often ask you to pray. Pray about who you would invite. When you see that text, I just want you to drop your head for just a moment and say, Dear God, is there somebody that I need to contact?

[27 : 17] Is there somebody that I need to encourage? Is there somebody I ain't seen in a while that I need to invite back? Is there somebody that I need to reach out to? And then, Lord, what do you want to do in me?

God, prepare my heart today for what you'll do tomorrow when we worship together. And prepare those who lead us in worship. I covet your prayers for me.

I covet your prayers for me. Let me say and do exactly what God would have me to do. Nothing more and nothing less.

Pray that God would move in our midst. The movement of God in the house of God is an intangible that we cannot control.

We are dependent upon him to do what he can do. And he inhabits the praise of his people. We just need to take that before him faithfully.

[28 : 25] Pray for the worship hour. Pray for the message. Pray for your life group. Pray that God will provide through us everything that we need to minister the way he would have us to do.

We must prioritize prayer. We also must prioritize the preach word. Paul put it this way. In Romans 10, verse 14, 15, and 17.

He said, How then will they call on him in whom they've not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they've never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they're sent as it is written?

How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news? So faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of Christ. There are a lot of things that make a Christ-honoring church ministry.

But none of that can be void of the preaching of the word of God. It's a priority. It's a priority to Christ. It's a priority to the New Testament church. It's a priority that carries over to the 21st century church.

[29 : 30] We must stick to the word of God. We must stay true to the word of God. And understand me when I say, I'm fully aware of the weight of that responsibility.

We must prioritize the preach word. As well as overcoming evil. Does that mean we're going to cast out demons?

No, that's not what I'm talking about. I told you a couple of weeks ago that the man that met Jesus in the synagogue was possessed because he got into sin. And when he got into sin, sin got into him.

God does not need us to cast out demons. He needs us to remove sin from our lives. He needs us to not get into sin. Listen to how James describes the process of sin.

He says in James 1, 14 and 15, But each person is tempted when he's lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire, when it is conceived, gives birth to sin.

[30 : 35] And sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death. So it's a process. We get lured in. And when we get lured in, we bite.

And we get dragged into the boat of sin like a big fish that bit the wrong bait. And James says sinful habits bring death. It does. Sin brings death to marriages.

Sin brings death to dreams. Sin brings death to plans. Sin brings death to jobs. Sin brings death to testimonies. And if you die without Christ, sin brings death that leads to hell.

Sin brings death to death.

Snuffing out sin. As the great theologian Barney Fife said, Nip it in the bud. Knock it out from the start, folks.

[31 : 53] Never get involved in it. Because it's a trap and it's a stronghold that will drag you down and take others with you. It is a priority for Pickens First Baptist Church.

For not just me, but for all of you to stay out of sinful patterns in your life.

And when the Holy Spirit shows you what they are, stop them. Stop it. I was watching an old Bob Newhart show.

I never watched that. And somebody talked about how great it was. I don't know when. I don't know if he died. I don't know what brought it up. But somebody talked about it. So I watched someone.

He's a counselor. And somebody came in.

And they said, I do this and I do this and I do this. And he looked at them and he said, I want you to go home and do something. She said, what? He said, stop it. How did I do that?

[32 : 58] He said, stop it. Well, what if it doesn't stop it? And that's exactly what we must do with the sinful patterns in our life.

We ought to overcome evil. And it starts with us. And then lastly, we must have a ministry priority to see changing lives.

I find it fascinating this leper was told by Christ to not say anything about it, but he got a bad case of the can't help it. And he went anyway. Christ changed his life.

And when Christ changed his life, he had to tell folks about it. And if you're here today and Christ has changed your life, I got news for you. He's never told you to keep it quiet.

He never has. Christ has told us to go and make disciples, to lead them to Christ, to baptize them, to grow them up in the Lord. If Christ has changed your life, you need to get a bad case of the can't help it.

[34 : 02] You need to tell somebody what Christ has done in your life. Because when this leper was spreading the good news, the scripture says, they came out of every corner. If Christ has changed your life, let it be known.

Give him credit. Each and every opportunity, you have the opportunity to do it. Bring it up in conversation. Let folks know how it happened.

If you need Christ today, to change your life, let it be known.

If you need the Lord Jesus in your life, because you've never surrendered your life to Christ. And you come today and ask God to forgive you of your sins and to come into your life and to change your life and to empower you to rise above and help you to overcome the evil that comes into your life.

And the promise is that if we'll confess Jesus as Lord and that we'll believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead, we shall be saved, everyone that calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

[35 : 31] And if you've never been saved, I want you to know it's a priority of this church to not only preach the gospel and share the gospel, but to lead you through the gospel of Christ.

We'll stand in just a moment and we'll sing in the greatest priority of that time. And it's just for a few minutes. But the greatest priority of that time will be if there's one here who's never given his or her heart and life to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Today's the day of salvation. You come and say, preach, I need to be saved. Maybe you're here and you have been saved. You never acknowledged that public has been a private matter to you. You've never told anybody about it. And Jesus, by his commission and by his example, show us that we're to do that through baptism. God's changed your life. You can join this church by baptism and be a part of it.

Maybe God's drawing you to First Baptist Church. I know he's working in some of your lives you shared with me. So if God's leading you to be a part of this church, you come. Or maybe, maybe the Holy Spirit has shown you today that your priorities are not what they need to be.

[36 : 53] I want you to understand something this morning. If you're a born-again Christian, you have a ministry. It may be defunct in your life and not effective, but I'm telling you, God's placed upon you the mantle of Christianity and Christian ministry wherever he'd have you to serve.

And I realize that that's different for each and every one of us. Customized, individualized, and personalized for each one of us. It may be that someone's here this morning and you realize God's pulling you, calling you to ministry, to dedicate yourself to full-time ministry.

It's very possible that that would be the case and God's drawing you. And I'd love to guide you in that process. I've been there. Felt a struggle.

Understand it. Or maybe it's not public full-time ministry. Maybe it's just your own personal ministry, but the problem is you've not prioritized prayer in your life.

You've not prioritized sharing the gospel in your life. You've not prioritized overcoming the evil, not of the world out there, but in your own heart and life. You've not thought about dedicating yourself to seeing life change happen, beginning in you, and then watching it go to others through you.

[38 : 22] I'm just telling you that's where it's at. That was the priorities of Jesus. If that's the priorities of Christ, he says, we as Christians ought to have the same priorities. And so if anything hinders you from any of that today, make it right.

Lord Jesus, I love you. I thank you, Lord, for your word. Thank you, Lord, for the encouragement of it. I ask God that you'll lead us to simply be obedient, to follow your will and your way in whatever

you would have us to do right now.
In Jesus' precious name, amen.