Getting Priorities Right

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Preacher: Don Kiang Yap

[0:00] Good morning, church. Let's pray. Father God, as we come before you, thank you.

Thank you for giving us your word. We pray that as we open up your words, speak to us so that we may know you better and love you more deeply.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. If you have attended any time management course, you would have probably heard of Stephen Covey's four quadrants.
Look on the screen. I hope you understand what the screen means. My question is this. In which quadrants should we invest our time and energy?
Simple question. Can you answer? What quadrant? What quadrant? The answer is quadrant. Quadrant one and?
[1:04] One and two. Quadrants one and two. This morning, we are doing a study on Ezra chapter three. The Jews have just come back from Babylon.

It's a new chapter in their lives. It's a new beginning with God. What are their priorities for this new beginning?
Like these Jews, there are times in our lives when we need a new beginning with God. We need a fresh start. We need a new chapter.
Sometimes, we need a new beginning because of our sins. Because we have drifted away from the Lord. We have moved so far away from God. We have lost our first love for Him.
We are so disappointed with ourselves. We feel so defeated. We feel that hope is all gone. We need a fresh start. We need a new chapter.
[1:59] We need a new beginning. You may ask, is a new beginning possible? And if it is possible, where do we start? How do you begin again with God?

What must we do first? What are our priorities? Where should we be investing our time and energy? Our passage this morning tells us how we can get our priorities right for a new beginning.
First of all, remember that our God is a God of new beginning. The year is 583 BC. The Jews have just returned from Babylon.
Some of them have been in Babylon for 50 years. Some 70 years. They were exiled to Babylon because God punished them for their sins.
Now, at last, the Jews are returning to their homeland. The distance from Babylon to Jerusalem is 1,600 kilometers. And it took them four months to travel from Babylon to Jerusalem.
[3:05] Finally, finally, they arrived at Jerusalem. But everything has changed. The city of Jerusalem has been destroyed. The great temple built by Solomon is no more.

It's completely destroyed. It's gone. The altar of the sacrifice is also gone. The altar of the sacrifice is also gone. Completely destroyed. What was once beautiful and magnificent is now just a heap of rubble.
A heap of stones. The city has become like a ghost town. A ghost town. A dead town. And yet, God promised a new beginning for this desolate ghost town.
In Jeremiah chapter 33, all the references are all in the handout. Now, I won't quote the whole references. You can refer to them. In Jeremiah chapter 33, the Lord has promised that this deserted town will be full of life again.
God will restore the fortunes of the land. There will be sounds of joy and gladness in this town once again. Our God is a God of new beginning.
[4:21] Remember the story of King David? When King David repented of his sins. Sins of adultery and murder. The prophet Nathan said this to David.

The Lord has taken away your sins. Remember the story of Jonah. When Jonah was vomited out of the great fish. The great fish threw Jonah out of his belly.

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Then, the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. Remember the story of Apostle Peter? Peter denied the Lord three times. Peter was disappointed with himself.
He was very heartbroken. But the Lord Jesus, after his resurrection, appeared to Peter. And Jesus renewed the call to Peter.
Jesus said to Peter, Peter, follow me. Have you failed the Lord miserably? God graciously offers you a new beginning.
[5:20] Our God is a God of second chances. But where do you start? Where do you start? You start by going back to the foundations. Ezra chapter 3 verse 1 says, When the seven months came, and the Israelites had settled in their town, the people assembled together as one in Jerusalem.

Notice the word seven months. For the people of Israel, the seven months is a very important month in their spiritual lives. The seven months marked the beginning of the Jewish calendar.
It is in this month that they celebrated three important festivals. The day of atonement, the festival of trumpets, and the festivals of tabernacles.
The Jews were looking forward to this seven months, like the way we look forward to our new year. They have not been able to celebrate these festivals for 70 years in a foreign land.
Now they are back home. Imagine, you haven't celebrated your new year for 70 years. The kind of longing, the kind of anticipation, the kind of mood, the kind of feelings, the kind of excitement and euphoria.
[6:37] The people recognized the importance of this moment. They recognized the importance of this moment. And so they were united in their purpose to celebrate the festivals.

When the Jews gathered in Jerusalem, the temple was already destroyed. And the altar of sacrifice was gone. At that time, Joshua was a high priest and Jerobabal, the political leader.
And the first thing these two leaders did was to rebuild the altar in the original place. When the altar was built, they had opposition. Opposition from their hostile neighbors.
Their neighbors don't like what they are doing. We'll learn about, we'll learn more about this opposition in Ezra 4 and 6. Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they continued to build the altar.
No fear of man can stop them from doing the work of God. Joshua and Jerobabal are examples of leaders who know what to do first.
[7:44] First things first. Church leaders must know their priorities. What are our priorities? You know what our priorities? Our priorities in KEC, in this church, are based on four core convictions, which are always printed in the bulletin.

Please refer to page 2. What are they? They're at our top portion of page 2. Let's read them together, the four bullet points. Okay, let's read together. Are you ready?
Pretty sure. Bullet points, huh? The first one, to be centered on the gospel of Jesus Christ, to be driven by God's word, to focus on growing disciples and to be a community of truth and love.
We pray. We pray that our church leaders are given God's wisdom so that they lead us by their examples and set the direction for this church. First things first.
But the leaders cannot do all this alone. They can set the direction, but the people must follow follow them. We read that the people of Israel came together as one man.
[8:56] they realized the significance of what their leaders are doing. And so they said, let's join together, let's join together. All those people recorded in Ezra chapter 2, chapter 2, are now working in one accord.

What a wonderful picture. As the body of Christ in this church, we must be united in our purpose to restore and rebuild what has been broken in our lives.
To rebuild what has been broken in our church and also in the communities. When we stand together, when we stand together, we become a powerful force for change.
We cannot just, we cannot just let the leaders do all this job. The congregation need to come together to support them as one man. Why did Joshua and Jeroboam begin with the altar?
Why is this the foundation? Because, because they want to, you see, they want to build the altar first because they want to sacrifice burnt offerings to get right with God.
[10:05] They want to worship God. This is so important that the burnt offerings are mentioned a few times in these six verses. Exactly how many times? How many times?

Open your Bible, extra chapter 3, verses 1 to 6. You can count them how many times the word burnt offerings appear. I'll give you a few seconds. Count them. Just count them how many times.

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If you know the answer, shout the answer. If you cannot shout, use your fingers to show how many times. I'll give you a few seconds. Look, chapter 3, verse 1 to 6. How many times? Yeah.
Oh, so fast. Five times. Every verses, every verse, except verse, all the verses have this burnt offerings except one. Verse?
One. Except with one. All the other verses. Verse 6. See what 6 says, okay? Refer now, using your Bible, open. Verse 6, what does verse 6 say? Verse 6 acts like a summary of the previous five verses.
[11:03] Verse 6 says, on the first day of the seven months, they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord, though the foundation of the lost temple had not yet been laid. It is like saying, the foundation of the temple is not ready.

No, the foundation is not ready yet. But, that does not stop us from offering sacrifices to God. We want to get our priorities right. We want to worship God as soon as possible.
We want to get right with God as soon as possible. It is at the altar that the Jews can find forgiveness of their sins. Without forgiveness of their sins, they cannot draw near to God.
The altar was the link between God and man. It was the place where they brought their animals. They brought their goats, their lamb, their bulls to be offered to God.
All these sacrificial animals pointed ahead to the Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord Jesus Christ is God's perfect sacrifice for sins. Jesus Christ is the one for all sacrifice for all our sins.
[12:15] If you have never begun your journey with God, you must begin at the cross. Jesus died on the cross for our sins. My sins and your sins.

This is the foundation of our faith. Jesus Christ has solved the greatest problem in your life. Our greatest problem is not political, religion, whatever problem.
Our problem is the problem of our sins. So Jesus Christ has settled the greatest problem in our life. This is the foundation of our faith. Yes, you can now earn God's forgiveness by doing good works. All your good works will now be good enough for God. only by putting your trust in Jesus Christ can you find forgiveness of your sins.
If you do put your trust in Jesus Christ, you will have to die in your sins. And that means eternal separation from God. If you are a believer, but you have drifted away from God, you have moved so far away from God, and you want to come back, but you start.
[13:28] The cross is still the place for a new beginning. 1 John 1.9 says, If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and he will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

It is still the blood of Jesus that purifies us from all our sins. So, we start by going back to the foundation, and next we continue on in obedient worship.
That's the third point. And let me just comment briefly on each of the sacrifices mentioned in this passage. Please refer to Exodus 3, verse 5. All the sacrifices, about four of them, are mentioned in verse 5.
So, you just open your Bible and concentrate on verse 5. First, we have the burnt offering. The burnt offering was completely burnt, completely consumed by fire.
Burnt offering signifies two things. The complete offering of the worshipper to God, and the complete acceptance of the worshipper by God. This burnt offering was offered every day, both morning and evening.
[14:41] And then next, we have new moon sacrifices. New moon sacrifices are monthly sacrifices. Every time the new moon appears, they sacrifice to offer sacrifices to God.

Then, you have the sacrifices for all the appointed sacred festivals. The sacred festivals are annual festivals, annual festivals. So, they also offer annual sacrifices.
Then, we have freewill offerings. Freewill offerings are voluntary offerings. They show the gratitude of the worshipper. in short, the Israelites offer daily offerings, monthly offerings, annual sacrifices.
We as believers no longer sacrifice burnt offerings to the Lord. Instead, we can offer a sacrifice of praise. Hebrews 13 tells us that we can offer sacrifice of praise the fruits of our lips that profess His name.
One thing we can emulate the Israelites is to offer daily sacrifices, daily sacrifice of praise to God and also at regular intervals.
[15:53] King David wrote in Psalms 145 verse 2, I will praise you every day. I will praise you God every day. I will praise you forever. That is daily sacrifice of praise.

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We can also, it's also good to have special worship moments like our weekly Sunday worship service. Now what we are doing now? Then, monthly Holy Communion, what we did last week. Then we have yearly good Friday services, Easter services, Holy Communion, Christmas celebration, yeah. Okay. Just a slip of tongue.
All this will enrich our worship of God. They provide a good rhythm, good rhythm for our worship, daily rhythm, weekly rhythm, monthly rhythm, and yearly rhythm.
And do you notice something about all these offerings in Ezra chapter 3? All these are given wholeheartedly without any expectation of something in return.
[16:56] Worship is something we give to God. Sometimes we think of worship in terms of how it benefits us, how it will benefit us. We only worship if it makes us feel good.

If I don't feel good, I don't want to worship God. I don't sing praises to God because I don't feel good and it doesn't make me feel good. I don't want to sing the song. No. That is the wrong attitude of worship.
The correct attitude is thanking God and praising God should be our priority. Not how we feel. Even if you're lousy, we can still worship God. We can still praise God. And you also notice that people did not just show their obedience by bringing their offerings.
They also celebrate the festivals. Festivals in accordance with what is written. One is mentioned by name. The Festival of Tabernacles. During the Festival of Tabernacles, the Jews were built temporary shelters temporary shelters, the tents.
The tents that you camp in, temporary tents. They would leave their homes and camp in these shelters for one week. They stay in this shelter as a reminder to themselves how God has watched over the ancestors during the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.
[18:18] Listen carefully now. The Jews that came back from Babylon can easily see the similarities between their return from exile and the first exodus.

In the first exodus, it took the Jews 40 years to reach the promised land. In the return of the exile from Babylon, it took them four months. But in both these events, they had to live in temporary shelters until they reached their destination, the promised land.
So the festival of the tabernacles is doubly meaningful to them. And that's what I think is mentioned here. There are other festivals, they don't mention it.
They mention especially the festival of tabernacles because it's doubly meaningful to them. We have seen how we are to go back to the foundation and continue in obedient worship.
But perhaps you're still worried, you still wonder, and you ask, have I done enough? Well, let me tell you a story. This is a true story. There was a pastor, there was a pastor in a radio, on a live radio broadcast.
[19:31] This broadcast was a question and answer program. The audience would call in with a question and the pastor would answer the question. We have about three minutes left in the program.

The program is almost over, three minutes left. the pastor took one last call from a man. The caller said, I used to be a Christian pastor, pastor, I used to be a Christian, but my wife fell in love with another man and left me.
When she told me, when she told me that she was leaving, I got so angry, I took out the Bible and I tore the Bible right in front of her. Tore.
It ripped the Bible. And I denied God in the name of Trinity. I denied God in the name of the Trinity. His wife broke.
His wife broke and he cried. He started weeping. I know it was wrong. I know it was wrong to do that, but I don't think God will ever take me back. What can I do, pastor? The pastor glanced at the clock and saw that they had 90 seconds left in the program.
[20:42] 90 seconds. It was a dilemma because this kind of problem need at least one hour to discuss. How to counsel someone with this kind of problem in 90 seconds?

But the seconds were ticking away. The pastor has to say something quick. I don't know, Pastor Brian, sometimes you have this kind of pressure on you. He said, sir, the pastor said, sir, to the man, to the caller, sir, I don't have much time.
So let me tell you this one thing. I know God loves you just the way you are the caller replied, but I read the Bible, I told the Bible, I told the Bible, you know, I told the Bible, I told the Bible in front of my wife.

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The pastor then said, sir, I know that God loves you and he will take you back. The caller answered back, I deny God in the name of the Trinity. The pastor then replied, God loves you and he will take you back.
The man just cried, cried openly, you know, he can hear, the pastor can hear him crying. And now they were down to last 30 seconds. The pastor finally said, we are almost over, our time is almost over, so I want you to listen carefully.
[21:55] Your broken heart tells me that God will take you back. The Lord will always take back a broken heart. What wisdom sometimes God, a pastor, you wisdom sometimes, that kind of wisdom.

30 seconds, you know, he says this, your broken heart tells me that God will take you back. The Lord never turns away a broken heart. What a powerful statement.
When this program is over, I want you to get down on your knees, put the Bible, put the Bible in front of you, tell the Lord, you know the Bible is the Word of God and ask him to forgive you for tearing the Bible and for denying him.
Tell the Lord Jesus that you know he's God and ask him to forgive you. Ask him for a fresh start. If you do that, you will not be turned away.
After saying this, the time is over and the program is finished. The pastor never heard from the man again. He didn't know whether the caller took his advice or not.
[23:06] But the pastor has told the truth. No matter how great sin may be, if we turn to the Lord, it will surely pardon us. And how do we know?

How do we know we have turned to the Lord? When we go back to the foundations of the cross where Jesus sacrificed and we continue on in obedient worship, wanting to live for him, that's how we know we are turning back to God.
Now there's one more point we should make our priority. Point number four, never stray from the word of God.
How did Joshua and Jerobabal know the proper way of rebuilding the altar? We read in verse 2, in accordance with what is written in the law of Moses.
What did they observe? The festival of the tabernacles? We read in verse 4, in accordance with what is written. They were not making things up according to their preferences, according to their whims and fancies.
[24:16] They didn't take a survey to find out what people want. They didn't say maybe the old way of worship is no good. No good for the younger generation. Maybe the younger generation want a more contemporary way of meeting with God.

So throw away the old ways. But they didn't do that. They went back to the word of God and they obeyed it. There is nothing wrong with contemporary music and forms of worship as long as they do not violate scripture.
Just because something is old doesn't mean that it's bad or it's good. And the same can be said of the new. Something new doesn't mean it's good or bad.
Some of the old hymns are great. Some of the old hymns have great theology and the younger generation should learn them and pass them on. A song like How Great Thou Are.
Some of the old hymns the same can be said of the new music.
[25:25] Some new music also find hard to sing. I don't know how to sing. Even I listened to ten times to sing. But some songs are solid and edifying. Some are theologically shallow.

The standard we need to evaluate everything is does it line up the scripture? Does it glorify God? And does it promote holiness in God's people? Here's a note.
Sometimes we sing songs. The worship songs. I know what the author means actually. But sometimes the song we sing as if it's man centred.
It's about you. Not about God. You notice some song. I know what the author means actually. But sometimes we sing carefully. I think you sing the song many times. You find that the song can be man centred.
Talk about God only for you. Even Jesus Christ is for my sins. Actually the correct theology is this. God is for your good.
[26:28] God do all these things for our good but for his glory. Not for our good and for my glory. So you think everything happened to you for your good and everything bad happened to you then you don't want to praise God anymore.

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Think about this. Even bad our sacrifices of praise and worship in songs must be in line with God's word.
Romans 12 tells us about another sacrifice we can offer to God. Our bodies as a living sacrifice and this living sacrifice our bodies should not be conformed to this world but should be transformed by the renewal of our mind.
How to renew our mind? One way to renew our mind is to be filled with God's word. We have to feed on God's word. Jesus says in Matthew chapter 4 man shall not live on bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.
We should know God's word more and more. We should study God's word more word more and more. You know the problem of our situation now is we know the words of the politicians more than the word of Jesus.
[27:50] We know what the politician says but we don't know what Jesus says and we are so impacted by what politicians say and we are not impacted by what Jesus says. Be careful. Don't let your emotions be controlled by the politician.

Let your emotions be controlled by Jesus. We should let the word of God impact our life. I forgot a friend who was so impacted by God's word.
He came to believe in Jesus through reading the gospels. One day in a secondary school English class English class from 4 to 5 our teacher asked us to write something about the flood in Kluang. My hometown Kluang. After off the screen first. The teacher said something about the flood in Kluang.
So we wrote and wrote and we hand up the essays to the teacher and the essays then marked checked but the teacher returned to us. You know what my friend that friend got zero for his essay.
[29:02] Zero. for writing the flood in Kluang. So you know why? He didn't write about the flood in Kluang. He wrote about this. Now screen. He wrote about this.

My friend wrote about this. He wrote about Noir's flood. Not Kluang flood. Now I want to ask you parents.
Parents listen carefully. If your child wrote this kind of essay and got zero for eight, what would you say to your son or to child? What would you say?
What would you say? Think. What would you say? Would you say son? Because he's a boy, okay? Would you say son? You say my daughter, okay? Would you say son?
You are so stupid, ah? You cannot tell the difference between Kluang flood and Kuching flood and north would you praise your son for writing some stuff in the essay?
[30:06] Come on, I ask you young people now, how many of you try to write Bible stuff in your essay? How many of you? Very few. Very few.

Are you not happy as a parent, are you not happy that your son is so impacted by the word of God? Or rather you like your son to think like other normal can you see God's hand at work in your son or your child or daughter when he or she writes this kind of essay?
Last March, four months ago, I met up this friend. I went back to West Malaysia. I went to visit this friend, stay with him for two nights. I met up with him. And he told me if he were to write to write again, if he was to write again, he said he would write about Noah's flood.
Why? Because he said to him no flood is greater than Noah's flood. Maybe Noah's flood reached Kuluang last time. Kuluang is not existent.
This boy is not a stupid person. He is one of more intelligent among us. God's favor was upon him.
[31:24] He has got a scholarship to study in Oxford and Cambridge. He studied in both of these universities. He studied in Oxford and Cambridge. He qualified as a medical specialist.

Three years ago, God revealed to him that he should retire. He should retire from this lucrative job. Earning so much money, he should retire three years ago. And he spent more time on the word of God.
So they got more time with God. You know why? He said, but now I earned so much money, so much business, no time for God. So God said he retired. Completely retired, no more going back. So they can spend more time on God's word. Let the word of God impact our lives, our thinking, and our behavior. I want to close with this. What do you do with broken cups and plates?
Most of us will throw them away. But the Japanese has an art called Kintsugi is the art of putting broken pottery pieces back together with gold.

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[32:31] Gold. You can create beautiful piece of art out of broken pieces of pottery. All of us are broken people. You can take off the...

Melissa, no need... No need... Only day over. This is not an important one. Just for illustration. The real thing is this. All of us are broken people. We are broken by our sins, broken by sins of others. But when we surrender our brokenness, whatever brokenness to Jesus, he does not just patch us up with gold. He does not just patch us up with gold. He uses something more precious than gold to restore us.
He uses his precious blood. When you come to Jesus, he does not just patch you up. He does not just patch up your brokenness.
He makes you completely whole, completely new again. The Bible says, anyone who belongs to Christ becomes a new person.
[33:35] The old life is gone. A new life has begun. What a beautiful message. New, every morning is new. The verses of the Lord is wonderfully new.

Let's pray. Father God, you know what we have gone through in our lives.
Thank you. Thank you for sending Jesus to die on the cross for us. cross. We can have a new beginning. In Jesus Christ, we are made completely whole again, no matter what has happened in our lives, in the past.
In Jesus Christ, a new life has begun. Amen.

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