

## The Jesus Priorities by Ken LaPrade

Before the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel (or Ephraim) by Assyria in about 722 BCE, Hosea and Amos both spoke out forcefully to these people, offering stern rebukes for religious errors, (like idolatry), along with blatant, oppressive social corruption. Despite such darkness leading to imminent national destruction and the urgency of the call for repentance, a vast, restorative hope is repeatedly offered, such as in Amos 9:8-15. Within this tumultuous context, Amos uttered the following in 8:11-12:

There, days are coming (a declaration of the Lord Yahweh) when I shall send famine throughout the country -

Not famine of bread, nor thirst for water, but rather of hearing Yahweh's words. People will wander from sea to sea and roam from north to east,

To seek Yahweh's word, but they won't find it. (The First Testament)

We know from other Scriptural statements (like 2nd Peter 3:9/1st Timothy 2:4/ Acts 17:30-31) that God in fact earnestly desires that all folks come to repentance (a profoundly changed mindset), while acquiring salvation coupled with the knowledge of the truth! Why then the dire warning by Amos about a famine of hearing Yahweh's words? Perhaps, just as in ancient times, now in modern times - people must get deeply disentangled from distorted priorities, profusely experienced in widely confused social/religious contexts, before even being able to genuinely seek Yahweh's words without vague, muddled results! Undoubtedly, we live in an era in which a diverse plethora of religious and political opinions clamor loudly, (and often quite divisively), for exclusive attention. Thus, the thought of a dire famine of really hearing Yahweh's words might well be relevant! Maybe, on one hand, folks nowadays get easily enticed to hop on the next popular, erroneous bandwagon. On the other hand, they might get so bombarded by distinct views of what is real, that they are tempted to take all truth claims very lightly; they cynically throw up their hands in frustration and say: "Whatever!"

As a simple back to basics solution, it might be wise to pay close attention to the key priorities which Jesus himself carefully stressed in the four gospels, while occasionally taking into account their roots in the Hebrew Scriptures. As a possible starting place, here is a brief overview of what I am here calling "the Jesus priorities": (1) his creed, (2) his prominent prayer, (3) his basic teaching emphasis, and (4) his declared mission. As we briefly peruse such information, we can simply ask ourselves, "Do such topics truly fit together in a coherent way? Or, are such 'priorities' merely a futile exercise in disjointed tidbits of random ideas?"

### **The Creed of Jesus**

When asked (Mark 12:28-34a) by a scribe, an expert in the Law, about the top priority of all the commandments, Jesus did not hesitate; he replied with the SHEMA (meaning "Listen"), citing Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and then combining it with Leviticus 19:18.

So, in Mark 12:29-31 he answered, "Listen, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with your whole mind, and with all your strength.' The second is, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these."

The expert in Jewish teaching (v. 32-33) wholeheartedly agreed with Jesus by emphasizing three points: (1) "Right, Teacher, you have spoken on the basis of truth in saying that He is one, and there is no one else besides Him", (2) "and that to love him with all your heart, all your understanding, and all your strength" - (3) "and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." In v. 34a we see that Jesus noticed that the scribe had answered thoughtfully or intelligently, so he said, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God."

Neither Jesus nor the scribe downplayed the supreme importance of the true God (Yahweh in Deut. 6:4-5) being one! In fact, Jesus himself never, ever diminished the unique role of God as the heavenly Father; he continually declared such phrases: "My Father is greater than I", "My Father is greater than all", "from the only God", "this is the life of the age to come - that they may know you, the only true God ...", "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God", and many other statements to support his unitary creed! Fortunately, there is a current abundance of scholarship to clarify this topic, and to biblically and historically refute the speculative doctrines (like modalism, Binitarianism, Trinitarianism, etc.) that later invaded and distorted Christianity. It is certain that people cannot really follow Jesus without honestly adhering to his creed!

Jesus never modified the SHEMA itself, but he did offer a spiritually innovative perspective by elevating Leviticus 19:18 (loving one's neighbor as oneself) to being the second great commandment. The scribe in Mark 12 agreed that this second top priority trumps the Torah's requirements of burnt offerings and sacrifices. Interestingly, in another context in which Jesus called attention to these two top priorities, (Luke 10:25-37), the scribe present, who wanted to justify himself, asked about the identity of his neighbor (v. 29). When Jesus spoke, giving a vivid parable, he used the roles of two Torah observant people, a priest and a Levite, whose strict priority was to avoid potential ritual contamination (as in Leviticus 21:1-2 and Numbers 19:11-17). Perhaps, to avoid having contact with a dead (or soon to be dead) person, they both walked by instead of offering help. In contrast to the priest and the Levite, the "Samaritan" (ironically, a person despised as impure by zealous Jews) is the active model to emulate - being a compassionate "neighbor", according to Jesus' bold priorities. As new covenant norms, obviously pioneered by Jesus himself, developed in the gospels and other N.T. writings, it became abundantly clear that a bulk of old covenant standards, including those which starkly separated Jews from Gentiles (such as required circumcision, strict food laws, calendar observances, animal sacrifices, etc.) have become obsolete - due in part to Jesus' strong "love your neighbor" priorities. Jesus himself lovingly brought Gospel/ salvation insights to Samaritans (John 4) and healing to folks who were not Israelites (Matthew 15:21-28/ Luke 7:1-10 / Luke 17:11-17) despite the fact that his professed mission was only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel: Mt. 10:5-6/ Mt. 15:24.

In commenting briefly about some practical factors involved in loving one's neighbor as a top priority - (supremely exalted by Jesus), one can focus wisely on an extremely wide range of Scriptural directives,

ethical norms, and insightful examples! For example, when Jesus challenged the rich young man in Mark 10:17-22, he exhorted him concerning his priority regarding personal wealth (v. 21) because he (Jesus) felt love for him, offering him future Kingdom treasure (i.e. "treasure in heaven"). In the context of the Leviticus 19:18 command about loving one's neighbor, verse 17a states, "You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart, you may surely reprove your neighbor ...." Such necessary, loving reproofs at specific times are beautifully balanced by the tactful gentleness (2nd Timothy 2:24-26) clearly required of God's servants. Not only should we be involved with "warning the unruly"; we should also be proactive to "comfort the faint hearted, to help the weak, to be patient with them all ", according to 1st Thess. 5:14.

Yes, there are times to exhibit tough love as Stephen did in Acts, chapter 7, towards an obstinate audience, (and as Jesus also did, quite often), provided that one is as deeply forgiving as Stephen (7:60), corresponding to how Jesus had an extensively forgiving heart (Luke 23:34).

Back in Mark 12:34 we previously noticed that Jesus was well aware of the scribe's intelligent response - and told him he was not far from the Kingdom of God. As we will soon see, "Kingdom of God" vocabulary is not vague speech for present, ethereal realities, but it is directed toward concrete promises of immense future renovation.

### **The Prominent Prayer of Jesus**

There was a popular, two-part prayer practiced among devout Jews during Jesus' ministry called the KADDISH (meaning: "the sanctification"):

"Magnified and sanctified be His great Name in the world He created according to His will.

May He establish His Kingdom during your life and during your days, and during the life of all the house of Israel, even speedily and at a near time: say Amen." (p.238, *Our Fathers Who Aren't in Heaven: The Forgotten Christianity of Jesus, the Jew* by Anthony Buzzard)

It is not hard to see the direct parallel here with the first two parts of the prominent prayer (Matthew 6:9-10 / Luke 11:2) taught by Jesus:

Sanctified be Your Name

May Your Kingdom come and Your will be done on earth

Nevertheless, just as Jesus expanded the SHEMA's declaration (Deut. 6:4-5) about God being one - and loving Him with all one's being, by elevating the Lev. 19:18 priority to love one's neighbor as oneself, he does something quite similar with his primary prayer.

In addition to (1) Regarding God's name as holy and (2) professing faith in God's coming Kingdom and God's will being done on earth (during a renewed future), Jesus, in essence, adds to these two top priorities of the traditional Kaddish Prayer. He adds three panoramic aspects of what might be called intercessory prayer (Mt. 6:11-13), prayer for one another: (3) the collective petition for daily bread

needs, (4) asking for our mutual forgiveness (as we are honestly diligent to forgive others), and (5) protection and guidance when tempted or tried, being delivered from the evil one's attacks.

As in the previously studied creed of Jesus according to which we honor God uniquely as the one He truly is, loving Him with all our heartfelt effort, and then loving our neighbor in the same way in which Jesus himself modeled bona fide love toward other people (John 13:34-35), our prayer life should be expansive and dynamic. Not only do we pray that God's name as the heavenly Father be held in awe, since He is holy, and that His ultimate Kingdom agenda come to pass here on the land (or on earth) as He has promised. We pray fervently, meanwhile, for one another's essential needs in terms of daily bread supplies, complete forgiveness of debts, and rescue from evil.

In both (1) the creed of Jesus and (2) the prominent prayer of Jesus we have seen a stated connection to the Kingdom of God. Why such a repeated focus?

### **The Basic Teaching Emphasis of Jesus**

Of the varied parables (comparative illustrations) which Jesus taught, one is regarded as foundational (Mark 4:13) to understanding all the rest: "If you don't understand this parable [the illustration about the sower and the four soils], how will you understand any of the parables?" In this context Jesus had stated (in v.11a): "The divine secret of the Kingdom of God is given to you...." In the Matthew 13 version of this same parable, v. 19 explains that when the sower's seed fell along the path, it means that "when anyone hears the message of the Kingdom and doesn't understand it, the Evil One snatches away what was sown in their heart." Of course, in the context, only one of the four responses to the word of the Kingdom produces worthwhile fruit, the one who constantly perseveres in the message. Mt. 13 then gives a whole series of Kingdom-oriented comparisons: weeds among wheat, a mustard seed, leavening dough, a treasure buried in a field, a pearl of great price, and a dragnet cast into the sea. Some pictures demonstrate vital calls to respond now and grasp the supreme value of the Kingdom - and others portray future times of restoration and judgment.

Mark 1:1's opening about the Gospel of Messiah Jesus, the Son of God, quickly shows John's preliminary role in preaching and conducting a baptism of repentance (v.4), followed by (v. 14-15) Jesus' own heralding of the Gospel of God, saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand, Repent [have a genuine change of mindset] and believe in the Gospel." Or, as verse 15b is expressed in The Second Testament, "The season is filled out and the Empire has come close! Convert and be allegiant to the gospel!"

In about 118 instances of specific Kingdom vocabulary used by Jesus, the future fulfillment, a literal Empire to be administered by "the Son of Man" and the saints who faithfully believe him - is always in view. Mt. 5:5's inheritance of the land (the earth) for the gentle is a quoting of Psalm 37's repeated emphasis, in which land is being promised to the humble. We have already seen the coming Kingdom idea in the prayer Jesus taught us; furthermore, Mt. 6:33 notes that we should seek first His Kingdom and be right with Him. Though now is the time to respond correctly to the Kingdom Gospel, by dedication to obeying his meaningful words, the actual arrival of the Kingdom involves the future

implementation of a new worldwide order when Messiah Jesus returns, as clearly seen in Mt. 19:28-29, Luke 19:11-27, Luke 22:28-30, etc.

This whole glorious, renovated earth picture in which God's never ending reign (to abolish former, corrupt human empires), along with the active participation of "saints" (meaning believers who have been made holy) is a solid promise. This scenario had been the subject of several prophets beforehand, as seen quite clearly in Daniel 2:44-45 and chapter 7:13-14, 18, 22, 27. Resurrection from among the dead, so that faithful believers be rewarded - is a vital part of this entire picture: Daniel 12:2-3 / John 5:25, 28-29 / 1st Cor. 15:20-23 / Rev. 11:15-18.

There is no doubt that a scholarly overview of Jesus' basic teaching emphasis indicates this dramatic Kingdom goal of history when Jesus returns. The righteous, non-violent Empire (Isaiah 2:1-4) of which Jesus urgently prophesied is not a reign of good, positive ideas or feelings in one's heart, (according to poor translations and errant interpretations of Luke 17:20-21), which badly fail to take into account the nearby context of verses 26-35 and chapter 21:5-36. Nor is the coming Kingdom the current spread of "the church", a prevalent way of thinking which is terribly misguided!

### **The Declared Mission of Jesus**

Before briefly looking at what can be called the specific mission statement of Jesus, it might be wise to consider a few antecedents concerning the idea of the Good News (or Gospel) having been previously heralded. You might be familiar with the concept in Galatians 3:8, "So the Scripture, seeing in advance that God would declare His approval of Gentiles [non-Jews] by their faith, proclaimed the Gospel [Good News] ahead of time ...." The context, (including the times of Abraham which are recorded in Genesis, chapter 12ff), involves Abraham's having truly believed God, God's promise of descendants (especially one specific "seed"), the inheritance of land in a real, physical way (as not yet fulfilled - Acts 7:4-5), and blessings on all nations.

Furthermore, three passages, within the context of the victorious, restorative future promised to Israel throughout Isaiah 40-66 might be instructive here, as these words brightly announce the Good News of realities to come, and Yahweh's ultimate intervention to tenderly care for his people! My emphasis is added in these references, starting with Isaiah 40:9-11a:

Get yourself up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news, lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for Him. Behold, His reward is with Him and his recompense before Him. Like a shepherd He will tend to His flock, in His arm He will gather the lambs ...."

By the way, the arm of the LORD might very well be a metaphor designating the future presence of the Messiah to represent God. See Isaiah 52:10, 53:1, and Luke 1:51.

Isaiah 52:7: How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news of happiness, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns!" The

context of this verse indicates that God will reign, in a mighty revamping event involving “new heavens and a new earth” (Isaiah 65:17-18).

Isaiah 61:1-2 has a statement which Jesus partially quoted in Luke 4:17-21, regarding things he did accomplish and will accomplish: “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God.” In this study we have already pointed out passages in Daniel, chapters 2 and 7, which actually describe this future, glorious reign.

So, when Jesus proclaimed his precise mission statement in Luke, it is totally in line with these former good news declarations in Isaiah. Luke 4:43 from The Second Testament: He [Jesus] said to them that “It’s also necessary for me to gospel other cities about God’s Empire, because for this I was commissioned.” To gospel (as a verb) simply means to evangelize or “announce good news.”

Effectively, in a sense, Gabriel even heralded the good news beforehand to Mary (Luke 1:31-33) when he said, “You will name him Jesus. He will be great ... and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his Kingdom there will be no end.”

This future Kingdom message was never rescinded, but it continued to be heralded persuasively throughout the entire book of Acts (1:3,6-7/ 8:12/ 14:22/ 19:8/ 20:24-25/ 28:23, 31). According to Jesus, this Gospel of the Kingdom - which he himself heralded (not a vague, washed out version of it) - is to reach folks in all nations (Matthew 24:14) before the close of this age! So, not only is the Kingdom of God the embodiment of the panoramic picture of the future hope of vast renewal, it is also the essential Gospel, the brilliant Good News to still be lovingly heralded.

### **Conclusion**

The Jesus Priorities, which we have briefly highlighted, truly give responsible attention to his vital words: (1) his creed (his unitary understanding of God and his essential two-part love focus), (2) his prominent prayer which highly honors God while tenderly addressing relevant needs of fellow humans, (3) his basic Kingdom emphasis in teaching, and (4) his Kingdom-oriented mission to tirelessly herald the Gospel, which is good news indeed! Coming Kingdom detailed promises, as studied briefly here, vibrantly link all four of these priorities, which are often badly ignored in modern, popular religion!

We will close by noting a couple of other primary biblical realities which help fill out the priority picture we have been viewing. First Corinthians 15:3-9, in highlighting truths regarding Jesus’ death for our sins and his resurrection from among the dead, indicates that these two key events are “among things of first importance”, (citing the OGF translation of verse 3). The reconciling, sacrificial death of Jesus and the resurrection from among the dead (on the third day) are not, however, the whole gospel! His words, including urgent Kingdom preaching, are obviously emphasized! In fact, Jesus and the apostles heralded the Kingdom Gospel (Good News) very successfully for maybe a couple of years, well before beginning to announce his upcoming death and resurrection, (which activity started in Matthew 16:21.) The modern sad, “dispensational” tendency to downplay and even disregard Jesus’ incisive Kingdom words,

while only exalting certain redemptive truths, moves very far away from exact biblical contexts! What a travesty to sternly avoid!

While it is undoubtedly true that Jesus' extensive, substitutionary death (1st John 2:2) is for the merciful forgiveness of our sins, the Kingdom-Gospel context (of implementing changed priorities to obey his words) remains just as true! It is mentioned (in Luke 24:47) after Jesus' death and resurrection, "That repentance [a changed mindset] for the forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in his name to all nations...." Jesus' Kingdom-Gospel agenda is certainly implied by: "in his name."

We can wholeheartedly embrace what is lovingly accomplished by Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection (a prototype of the general, future resurrection of others: 1st Cor. 15:20-23). However, we should joyfully accept such redemptive truths within the wide context of obediently, responsibly heeding the Jesus priorities, as solidly expressed by his Kingdom-oriented words of life!