

Putting First Things First

Contributed by Gordon J. Pennock
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I once read an amusing story about a farmer who told his wife, as he tumbled into bed, "I'll plow tomorrow." "The next morning," as the story goes, "he started to lubricate the tractor. But he needed oil, so he went to the shop to get it. On the way, he noticed that the chickens had not been fed. He started for the crib to get some corn, but he found some sacks there which reminded him that the potatoes needed sprouting. He headed toward the potato-pit. En route, he spotted the woodpile and remembered the shortage of kindling at the house. But he had to chop it first, and he had left his axe in the chicken coop. As he went for his axe, he met his wife who was feeding the pigs. With surprise, she asked, "Have you finished the plowing already?" "Finished?" the farmer bellowed, "I haven't got time to get started!" This story illustrates what happens to too many of us on too many days-especially preachers. We plan a day's work, but then, we get an unexpected telephone caller or visitor who wants to discuss with us some personal problem or Bible question. And of course it is important that we do so. So the work that we planned must be set aside for the present. Or, it may be that we are informed of someone who is sick or hospitalized, so the planned activities must be postponed in favor of such missions of kindness and helpfulness. These interruptions are of course gladly and cheerfully accepted, because we recognize that priorities must always play a part in every plan. What we must avoid is the upsetting of meaningful and important plans by trivial incidents or matters which are mundane and of but momentary value. An interesting Biblical lesson along this line may be drawn from the record in Luke 10, verses 38 through 42. While visiting in the home of Mary and Martha of Bethany, Jesus saw contrasting dispositions in these two women. While Mary "sat at the Lord's feet and heard His word, . . . Martha was cumbered (distracted) about much serving." Poor Martha! She was so concerned and preoccupied with the details of entertaining that she failed to take advantage of Jesus' presence in her home by sitting down and listening to His word, like Mary did. And, thinking that what she was doing was so important, she felt unjustly treated by her sister and complained to Jesus about Mary's indolence, as well as His apparent indifference toward it. He responded in words which need to be heeded by all who are faced with the sometimes perplexing problem of priorities. He said, "Martha, Martha, thou art anxious and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful; for Mary hath chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her." Yes, it is also necessary for us to make careful evaluation and give proper priority to the many worthwhile demands upon our time. Surely, we will never have the time to do all the things which can and should be done. Consequently, we must use discrimination in choosing what we do. Like Martha, we need to be careful to choose "the good part" or that which is "needful." When we speak of priorities we refer to matters all of which may be proper but only of relative value when compared with others. It was in this vein that Jesus was speaking when He said: "Seek ye first his (God's-GJP) kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things (food, drink and shelter) shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33). Note, that Jesus did not say, seek ye only God's kingdom and righteousness, but rather seek them first. Jesus certainly knew as well as we do that man has certain physical needs which must be satisfied if he is to survive. Spending time and energy to provide for these needs is not only proper but a serious obligation, as spelled out in such passages as these: "If any (man) will not work, neither let him eat" (2 Thess. 3:10); again: "Let him (the Christian-GJP) labor, working with his hands the thing that is good, that he may have to give to him that hath need" (Eph. 4:28). Plans and provisions to supply these needs nevertheless become sinful whenever we allow them to subordinate and displace our obligations to God and the neglect of our spiritual needs. Friend, let us keep our values unmixed and our priorities straight. Put God, His kingdom and His will, first in your life and everything else that is needful will be enjoyed as a bonus. —Gordon J. Pennock, Truth Magazine