

# First Things First

God wants our actions to reflect His priorities.

## LIFE NEED

Attempting to help teens get their priorities straight can be a scary proposition. In fact, many adults refuse to work with them because they see it as a hopeless task. However, there is perhaps no more rewarding ministry in the church than working with teens who are learning to think for themselves and who are making meaningful commitments to Christ. Perhaps no other age-group is more open to the gospel!

But teens are rarely able to get their priorities in order without some help. One example is in the realm of friendships. Because the sense of belonging is so important to teens, very few of your students would be willing to sacrifice their friends for their faith. They find it difficult to understand themselves as part of the kingdom of God, a vague concept. However, if adults and other teens in the local church make them feel welcome and accepted, their need for belonging will be met. They will more readily respond to the call to place God before friends or other priorities. Use this lesson to help your students understand that when they put God first in their lives, He will supply all their other needs.

## RESOURCES

- Magazines, poster board, glue, scissors
- Bibles, pencils, paper
- Priority slips, envelopes, chalk/marker board
- Copies of *Priority Situations* handout
- 3" x 5" index cards, pencils

## BIBLICAL REFERENCES

Haggai 1; Matthew 6:33

Haggai was the first prophet to address the Jews who returned to Palestine after they were released from captivity in Babylon (536 B.C.). **Haggai 1** teaches us a lesson about making God's priorities our own. Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonian army and still lay in ruins. The returning Jews built themselves houses and planted crops. When their crops failed and famine and poverty set in, the people became discouraged. These events distracted the Jews from one of the main goals they intended to accomplish upon their return to Palestine: rebuilding the Temple (**vv. 1-2**).

Sixteen years later God spoke through the prophet Haggai. His prophetic career lasted only three months, but he was an important influence as the returning Jews struggled to find God's will in their futures. Haggai rebuked their selfishness and urged them to get their priorities straight and get to work on the Temple (**vv. 3-11**). The importance of this task went beyond simple urban renewal through construction projects. All the personnel and activities associated with the Temple served to identify the Jews as God's chosen people and gave them the primary means of relating to God. Without the Temple as the focus of community life and identity the Jews could have become just another lost civilization, with no role to play in God's plan of redemption for all peoples. Under the leadership of their governor, Zerubbabel, and the high priest, Joshua, the people listened to Haggai (**vv. 12-15**). After four years of hard work, the Temple was finally and joyously completed.

Jesus addressed the issue of priorities in terms of a person's citizenship in the kingdom of God. This was not as concrete as the Temple, but in both cases the emphasis is on one's identity as a member of God's people. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught about one's attitude toward material possessions and cautioned against worrying too much about such things. Jesus reminded His hearers that our first priority should be to seek the kingdom of God (**Matthew 6:33**). When we have made this priority the primary focus of our lives, all other needs and priorities will find their proper places.

## PREPARING THE TEACHER

The subject of priorities pops up all over the place these days. Self-help books encourage people to take control of their lives. Motivational speakers travel the lecture circuit telling people that if they will just follow their patented time management steps (usually seven of them), they will be a success in their business and personal lives.

Although such methods are certainly helpful, we must also recognize that many of them simply help us to align the already busy areas of our lives into manageable portions. These methods fall short of a complete solution because most of them fail to take the gospel message seriously. While that may seem like a trivial thing to

***Things which matter most must never be at the mercy of things which matter least.***

—Goethe

say, it is an essential truth. In other words, Christians can never manage their priorities without knowing the One who is the ultimate Priority Maker.

Time after time in the Old Testament, God, through the prophets, had to remind the Israelites to realign their priorities. They continually put other things first in their lives and put God on the back burner until they needed Him again. The people of Israel had to realize that God demanded their primary allegiance by giving themselves completely to Him.

Jesus recognized the truth of the Old Testament accounts that told of the negative consequences of not arranging our priorities properly. He also taught about the positive results of keeping our priorities straight. He said that if we will seek the kingdom of God first, we can rest assured that God will be present in our lives and will supply our spiritual needs. God does not promise that we will have everything we want; He simply promises to provide us with our basic needs.

Where are your priorities? How can you be sure that what you believe is consistent with what you really do? One simple way to discover the answer to these questions is to look at your checkbook or monthly credit card statement. This can tell you a lot about the priorities that call for your material resources. Look at your calendar. What does it tell you about what things you spend your time on? These are all clues to what our true priorities are. Use the questions in the sidebar on this page to further evaluate your own priorities. Use the results to enrich your time preparing and teaching this lesson and to consider how you can share your own life with your students.

***As if you could kill time without injuring eternity.***

—Henry David Thoreau

### Think back to when you were a teen:

- ☞ What was your top priority?
- ☞ What determined your priorities?
- ☞ Were your priorities properly aligned?

### What about your life now:

- ☞ What is your top priority?
- ☞ Do you ever struggle with keeping God and His purposes No. 1 in your life?
- ☞ What other priorities are you tempted to put ahead of God?
- ☞ How can you keep God No. 1 in your life?

### Think about your class:

- ☞ How many of your students have God as their No. 1 priority?
- ☞ What are the things they struggle with that keep God from being No. 1?
- ☞ What other priorities do they tend to place as No. 1?

## TEACHING THE LESSON

### NOTES

### LIFE

*Student Goal: Determine what they regard as their top priorities.*

#### **What's No. 1 in Your Life?** ⌚15

Supply your class with several contemporary magazines, a piece of poster board, scissors, and glue (or tape). Try to make sure at least half of the magazines are teen related. Ask your students to work together to create a montage of pictures that represent items teens might consider important in their lives. (If you have a large class, break into several small groups and have each group make a montage.) Allow about 10 minutes to cut, paste, and decorate the montage.

After the students have finished, display the montage on the wall. Using a large, black marker, draw a large "No. 1" on the top of the poster board or right in the middle of the montage. Then, ask your students the following questions:

- **How can you tell what is No. 1 in a person's life?**
- **What factors determine whether something is No. 1 in a person's life?**
- **What are the top things in your life?** (It may be helpful to have them list on paper the top things in their lives, so they can refer back to them later in the lesson.)

After your students have had a chance to respond to the above questions, say, **Why should it matter what we make No. 1 in our lives, as long as we serve God? Well, let's look at how God's Word answers that question.**

### TRUTH

*Student Goals: Understand the message of Haggai; decide what a Christian's priorities should be.*

#### **Newspaper Reporting** ⌚15

Have students find partners for this activity. Then distribute blank pieces of paper to each pair of students. Inform them that they are to write a short newspaper article for the *Post-Exilic Press*, a newspaper that helps its readers understand the Bible. Your class is to write an article about Haggai's prophecy in Haggai 1. The article needs to be no more than two or three paragraphs and should explain in simple terms what Haggai 1 is all about.

Your students will probably need some background to this passage. Provide some Bible dictionaries or commentaries, or share some of the information found in the Biblical References section. It may be helpful to

## NOTES

break the passage into three main sections like the following: (1) verses 1-2; (2) verses 3-11; (3) verses 12-15. Have your students write one paragraph that communicates the idea of each section. Allow the pairs about eight minutes to write their stories.

When your students have finished, have each pair read their stories. If you have a large group, you may ask just two or three groups to read their stories. As each group reads, listen for any reference to the shift in priorities that Haggai challenged the Jews to make.

After the students have read their stories aloud, ask these questions:

- **What things were the Israelites doing?** (Building houses, growing crops, working, eating, drinking, clothing themselves)  
**How important do you think those things were?**
- **Why did those things seem more important than rebuilding the Temple?**
- **What are some good things that we do that often become more important than God?**
- **God wanted the Temple to be rebuilt. What does that tell us about His priorities?** (Worship of Him and identity as a people who worshiped and honored Him)

Have a student read aloud Matthew 6:33. Explain that this scripture passage points us toward God's priorities for His people.

### **Priority Slips** ⌚

Before class, write the following statements on one sheet of paper so that they can be cut apart into 12 separate slips of paper. Make photocopies of the sheet, one copy for each student in your class. After copying, cut apart the sheets into slips. Put each set of 12 slips into its own envelope. Here are the phrases:

Faithful in church attendance  
Studying the Bible to learn about God  
Sharing your faith  
Tithing at least 10 percent of your income  
Constantly seeking God's assistance in daily life  
Making good use of your time  
Looking for opportunities to help others  
More concerned about others than about yourself  
Modeling your life after Jesus' example  
Angry at what's wrong in the world  
Positive in your attitude  
Truthful and dependable

At this point in the lesson, distribute one envelope to each student. Then write on a chalk/marker board the following phrase: "A Christian's priorities should be . . ." Instruct your students to be silent and to choose which slips of paper from their envelopes would best complete the statement on the board. First, have students identify which four slips are the least important to completing the statement. These they are to put back in their envelopes. From the remaining eight, they are to choose

# Priority Pointers

Here are some questions to ask yourself when setting personal priorities:

1. Is it biblical? (Psalm 119:30)
2. Does it help you or hurt you? (1 Corinthians 6:12)
3. Is it the best use of your limited time? (Psalm 90:12; Ephesians 5:15-16)
4. Will it result in right or wrong thoughts? (Philippians 4:8)

Remember, if you do not set your own priorities, other people will do it for you!

the four most important to completing the statement. These four must be prioritized and numbered from 1 to 4 (with 1 being the most important).

After your students have finished ranking the slips, ask them each to write their top four in order on the board. Compare the students' different lists, and note which priorities seem to be most common. If you see a divergence of opinion in what the top priorities for a Christian should be, discuss why that might be.

Next, say, **Many of these priorities are good, but ultimately all of them fall under the priority of "modeling your life after Jesus' example."** Ask why this would be the most important priority for a Christian to have. Point out that all other priorities will naturally happen when we model our lives after Christ.



*Student Goals: Determine priorities for different situations; decide to make serving God their top priority.*

## **Priority Situations** ⌚10

Distribute copies of the *Priority Situations* handout to your students. Have a volunteer read aloud the first situation printed on the handout. Then allow your students to respond (either verbally or on paper) to the questions printed with that situation. Repeat for the other three situations, using a different volunteer reader for each. Tell your students that they are to refer to the passages from Haggai 1 and Matthew 6:33 as the basis for all their answers.

## **My Priorities** ⌚5

Distribute a 3" x 5" index card to each of your students. Ask them to work quietly as they list on the cards their top three priorities in life. Then close the class in prayer by using word prayers. Ask your students to say one or two words that tell God what area of life they sometimes struggle with by putting it higher than God. As the teacher, you should model what they are to do by starting the prayer. Once the students have had a chance to offer their prayers, close the prayer yourself. Pray that God would help your students to serve Him as their top priority.

## CREATIVE OPTIONS

### **Priority Planner**

As an alternative to the LIFE activity, have students write out their normal weekly schedules. They should include categories such as school; church; job; time spent watching TV, listening to the radio or music; and time spent reading, playing, sleeping, eating. Next, your students should write out how much time is spent in each category per week. Use this activity to help students identify what their biggest priorities are, based upon the amount of time they spend on them. Especially note what they do with "free time." Also, ask students how it would affect their lives if a particular category (such as TV) was taken away. Help them understand that what we give our time and energy to often reveals what our priorities are.

### **Group Singing**

"Seek Ye First," "For the Sake of the Call," and "I Give All to You" from the *All the Best Songs for Youth* chorus book (Lillenas Publishing Company, MB-748).

### **Drama**

If your class is creative and likes drama, have them break into groups and act out each of the Priority Situations in the VISION phase of this lesson.

### **Priority Interviews**

Have each of your students interview an adult whom he or she greatly respects. At the beginning of the next session, allow students to report the results of their interviews to the rest of the class. They should note reasons why they respect this person, what this person considers to be his or her top priorities in life, and how this person's priorities affect the way he or she lives.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*® (NIV®). Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.