

Relationship: The Key Ingredient

“You will find your joy in the LORD. . . .” The mouth of the LORD has spoken (Isaiah 58:14).

Scripture: Isaiah 58:6-14

Song: “Bread of Heaven”

When I was first hired as a cook for a small café, I painstakingly labored over each item I prepared. I was especially meticulous about the pie crusts. Pleasing my boss and providing our customers with something tasty and pretty that would make their day extra special was important to me. After several years and thousands of pie crusts made while isolated in the kitchen, the work lost its meaning. I still strove to do a good job, but my heart was not in it anymore. The joy and love I had once expressed through preparing food returned only when I reconnected with those I was serving.

In today’s passage, God reminded His people of the importance of their relationship with Him. They were going through the motions of obedience, but sadly it had lost its meaning because they were not focused on the Lord himself—the one they were meant to serve.

God does not want us to miss out on knowing Him or experiencing His blessings. Instead of mere busywork, He invites us into something much better: a loving fellowship as we center our focus on Him.

Father, it’s only in relationship with You that my life has real meaning. Help me refocus on and draw near to You today. In Jesus’ name, amen.

September 11–17. **Megan L. Anderson** is often covered in muddy paw prints, courtesy of the guests at her dog daycare business. She also enjoys walking with and feeding her human friends.

Love Is the Rubric

At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath (John 5:9).

Scripture: John 5:1-9

Song: “He Touched Me”

In the 1970s two Princeton social psychologists conducted an experiment with seminary students who were tasked with preparing and delivering a message on the Good Samaritan. In this experiment, students were put under various levels of urgency to get to the location where they were to preach. Researchers planted a stranger on the ground along the route, seemingly in need of help. Among students under the greatest time pressure, only 10 percent stopped to help the victim. Only 45 percent of those under medium pressure stopped, and 63 percent of the least-hurried checked on the victim. Practicing what they were about to preach proved challenging under the stress of the perceived expectations of their academic supervisors.

Jesus understood the difference between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. God had commanded His people to keep the Sabbath holy. It was important they not labor but focus on rest and worship. Yet Jesus knew that helping the disabled man would be more glorifying to God than being a stickler for religious rules and meeting others' expectations.

God's laws are given in love. We are meant to reflect God's love in all we do. We may fail to meet others' expectations when we prioritize love, but in God's eyes we have succeeded.

Father, help me to recognize the spirit of love in Your law and put it into practice. In Jesus' name, amen.

Missing the Miracle

Because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute him (John 5:16).

Scripture: John 5:10-16

Song: “God of Miracles”

One night after a long, stressful week, a group of friends gathered at one of their colleague’s homes for a night of board games. Once gathered, everyone seemed relieved, laughing until their muscles ached as they celebrated reaching the weekend. But when a die was suddenly hurled across the table and against a wall, guests were stunned into silence. In frustration, the host had lobbed the piece, feeling that the group was not paying due attention to the rules and structure of the game. Recognizing this wrong attitude, the host apologized, and everyone enjoyed the rest of the evening together.

In today’s passage, the Jewish leaders were similarly fixated on the rules of the law instead of its essence. They were so frustrated that the healed man was carrying his mat on the Sabbath that they missed the opportunity to celebrate and marvel at a miracle. Sadly, instead of experiencing joy in worshipping God for giving the man a new hope for his life, they turned their hearts against Jesus.

When our attention is fixed on what God deems most important, we get to experience the wonderful things He is doing in and around us. Our hearts are free to enjoy worshipping and fellowshiping with Him and with other believers. Our lives become celebrations of Jesus’ redemptive power in us and in those around us.

Father, I want to align my priorities with Yours so I never miss opportunities for praising You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Representatives of God's Love

In his defense Jesus said to [his accusers], “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working” (John 5:17).

Scripture: John 5:17-21

Song: “O to Be Like Thee”

In 1916, Jeannette Rankin became the first woman elected to the US House of Representatives. Until that time, with no effective voice in national leadership, women were frequently marginalized and vulnerable, powerless to help enact laws that would protect their families and futures. Rankin's election was an enormous encouragement to the rising suffrage movement that would eventually secure women's voting rights. With Rankin in the House, women had a presence in the halls of influence. “I am deeply conscious of the responsibility,” Rankin said in her victory speech, and she tirelessly used her voice to advocate for peace, fairness, and safety.

When confronted about healing the infirm man on the Sabbath, Jesus affirmed His authority to do so as God's representative. Jesus was sent by God to speak His word and do His work, caring for the hurting and afflicted while challenging the religious leaders' self-righteous attitudes with truth. Jesus reminded the Pharisees that His Father is always working in righteousness and, as His Father's representative, Jesus will do the same.

As believers called to follow Jesus' example, we are His representatives. We are part of His plan to build His kingdom through proclaiming the gospel and demonstrating His care, especially for those who are vulnerable and helpless.

Father, help me represent Your love and character through service, especially to those who are in need. In Jesus' name, amen.

Priorities Speak

Observe [God's instructions] carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people" (Deuteronomy 4:6).

Scripture: Deuteronomy 4:1-14

Song: "Put God First"

During her 11-year term as prime minister of the United Kingdom, Margaret Thatcher famously never hired a chef as part of her staff. Instead, she chose to cook dinner for herself and her husband, Denis, whenever they were home together. Even when matters of national and international importance required late-night attention, she faithfully took to the kitchen, often inviting cabinet members to the meal. While this choice defied the tradition of previous prime ministers, it demonstrated Thatcher's priorities and perhaps also her understanding that the stability of a nation begins in the home.

In the book of Deuteronomy, God set in place laws and traditions that would shape the lives of His people in such a way that they would reflect His character. These God-focused priorities were intended for guidance, protection, and provision. They also made Israel a unique witness to surrounding nations.

Despite demands or responsibilities that may be pressing in on us today, as we prioritize God in our hearts, homes, and in all we do, He will lead us in wisdom and understanding. Honoring God as our utmost priority is a privilege, and as we walk in His ways, our lives will be a unique witness to those around us.

Father, grant me understanding to recognize and rectify anything I may be prioritizing over You. Help me to live faithfully in big and small matters. In Jesus' name, amen.

A Law of Hope

I have done what is righteous and just; do not leave me to my oppressors (Psalm 119:121).

Scripture: Psalm 119:113-128

Song: “Teach Me, O Lord, Thy Way of Truth”

The summer following his graduation from high school, the course of 17-year-old Jarrett Adams’s life shifted dramatically. Arrested on false charges, he was tried as an adult and was provided an inadequate public defense. Although innocent, young Adams was sentenced to 28 years in a maximum-security prison. While there, he used his time to diligently study the law, and after eight years of incarceration, he was able to get his sentence overturned. Reclaiming his freedom, Jarrett Adams became a nationally recognized criminal defense and civil rights attorney. Dedicating his practice to helping other falsely convicted people, he continues to work hard to help make the justice system more truly just.

The psalmist expressed a similar desire to see God’s justice enacted on the wicked and to see deliverance for the innocent carried out. Though the laws and justice systems of mankind are flawed, we can find hope in God’s faithful justice and mercy.

God can create unforeseen good out of even the most unfair and harsh circumstances. As we take His holy Word to heart and put His perfect law of liberty into practice (James 1:25), we can experience joy in our hope for the future. We may be subject to the wrongs of this world for a while, but total freedom from the oppression of sin will be ours in eternity.

Father, thank You for Your perfect justice and Your love-based law. Teach me to rightly apply it in each circumstance. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Ambassadors of the King

[Jesus said,] “Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own” (John 7:17).

Scripture: John 7:14-24

Song: “The King’s Business”

In the early 1600s, as the Western world awakened to India’s rich culture and wealth, King James did not want England to miss out on trade opportunities there. However, the Portuguese had been influencing India’s Mughal Emperor Jahangir against the English. It would take someone of noble character, well-educated, and impressive to gain the emperor’s respect. Sir Thomas Roe was chosen as ambassador to represent England’s interests to India. Once in India, Roe began his journey to the palace. Along his way he was met with harassment and demands by regional princes and governors. As a representative of his king, however, Roe refused to compromise his mission by submitting to their terms. This gained Emperor Jahangir’s respect and favor and ultimately secured England’s access to trade with India for many years.

Roe faithfully represented his king despite pressures that could have undermined his mission. Similarly, Jesus put the glory of His Father above the protocols and expectations of His day. Both understood that compromising themselves was not an option if they were to faithfully represent the ones who sent them.

Conducting ourselves with honor and integrity brings honor to our king. As we serve truthfully and selflessly, we convey God’s goodness to those who wonder, doubt, or even oppose us.

Father, use me to bring glory and honor to You as a faithful representative of Your kingdom. In Jesus’ name, amen.