

# The Priorities of Jesus

Luke 6:17-38

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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We are on our second Sunday of the 2025 Faith Questions sermon series. This week's question is another interesting one.

## **Would Jesus like our church? How are we showing, growing God's love?**

*Would Jesus like our church?*

That's not only an interesting question, but it's an interesting way of putting it. And to be perfectly frank, a mildly anxiety-inducing way of putting it!

What if the answer is no? And if Jesus *wouldn't* like our church, what might this say about its pastor?!

And hang on a minute, is Jesus even *allowed* to not like us? I mean, even if he doesn't *like* us, he has to *love* us, right? It's kind of in the job description!

These sorts of questions sent me scurrying off to the source of this week's question to learn more.

I was quickly assured that the way the question sounds more provocative than it was intended to be!

The person who asked this week's question was clear that it was not some kind of a veiled expression of dissatisfaction with our church, but rather as a kind of temperature check.

Are Jesus' priorities our priorities? As we look ahead to our AGM and as we consider how our church might invest or engage in the year(s) ahead, are we continuing to lean in Jesus-y directions?

January is a month where a lot of people are often re-examining their own personal priorities, asking if their habits, practices, and behaviours reflect who they want to be.

Perhaps it is also a good time to do so as a church as well.

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The logical first question is, “What *are* Jesus’ priorities?”

I think most of us have a general idea. We think that Jesus would like us to be good, kind, decent people. We should be generous and compassionate. We should try to love our neighbours and share our faith.

Our church should reflect this general composite picture.

But is our general picture correct? Is it leaving some things out? Do Jesus’ priorities extend beyond us being good, kind, decent people?

How do we even know what Jesus’ priorities are?

Well, it’s hard to think of a better place to start than his most famous sermon.

In Matthew 5-7, we have the more well-known and longer Sermon on the Mount, but Luke’s gospel records a very similar sermon, which we have heard a portion of today.

Jesus begins with the beatitudes, calling “blessed” the poor, the hungry, the weeping, those who are hated and insulted because of their allegiance to Jesus. He promises a heavenly reward to those on the bottom, linking their experience to that of the prophets of old.

Unlike in Matthew’s version, Luke also includes a “woe to you” addition here. “Woe to you who are rich and well fed, woe to you who are laughing instead of weeping and to you whom everyone speaks well of.”

This is uncomfortable reading.

I just went through a pastoral review where I was kind of hoping to be spoken well of at least a little bit! And I am well-fed and probably rich by any global calculus.

But Jesus' priorities undeniably involve a massive inversion of who and what we should value. He turns things upside down, demanding that we recalibrate our understanding of what it means to be blessed.

The world's metrics are not to be the church's metrics. The world values wealth and status and influence. It values the winners, those who know how to optimize happiness, to live their best lives.

Too often, the church chases after these same things. But it shouldn't. And we shouldn't.

Jesus goes on to talk about loving enemies, doing good to those who hate us, blessing those who curse us, praying for those who mistreat us, giving without conditions.

*Do to others as you would have them do to you.* One of the most succinct and memorable expressions of his teaching we have.

So far, so good. Or so far, so hard!

Jesus' priorities are radically countercultural and counterintuitive. They are not easy. Indeed, they are virtually impossible!

Have you ever tried to actually do good to someone who hates you? To bless someone who curses you? To love someone whose politics differ from yours? To give without *any* expectation of reciprocation?

In the last portion of our reading today, Jesus says these words:

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." <sup>38</sup> Give, and it will be given to you.

Could there be a better word for our cultural moment than this?

All around, we see people who are eager to condemn, to write off, to cancel, to meticulously itemize the wrongs of others, to make snap judgments with partial information.

Jesus' followers are to be those who are characterized by mercy, by forgiveness, by generosity, by a refusal to condemn.

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So, these are at least some of the priorities of Jesus. He holds before us a radical, demanding way of life.

Are these our priorities as a church? Are these the directions in which we are leaning?

My instinct is to say, "Well, the answer should probably be 'no,' right? We shouldn't be so arrogant as to claim that our priorities map wonderfully on to Jesus'! Surely, we are always going to be falling short of such a lofty standard!"

And this is true, to a point. Every church will be getting some things right and some things wrong or at least less right.

But as I look around, it seems undeniable to me that I must also say, "yes." Our church *is* leaning in the direction of Jesus and his priorities.

We lean in the direction of those Jesus called "blessed."

Whether it's the ways in which we contribute to feeding the hungry (soup kitchen) or welcoming the stranger (our work with refugees) or supporting prison ministry or peace and justice work through MCC or our Voluntary Service program which welcomes young adults into community and gives them a context in which to serve vulnerable people, the idea that God is to be found and that God is to be served on "the bottom" is deep in our church's DNA.

We lean in the direction of generosity.

Our church is unbelievably generous. I have been here for almost fourteen years. Over the course of those fourteen years, I have had a front row seat to this.

I get to see and hear a lot of things that others don't. I get to see examples of spectacular and awe-inspiring generosity that I cannot share with you because the people want to remain anonymous.

I want to brag about people in our church, but I can't, because they quite rightly remind me that Jesus said we weren't supposed to make a show of our giving. But I can assure you that there are things happening in our little church that regularly amaze me.

We lean in the direction of service.

Our church is clearly convinced that what we believe is revealed by how we live and what we do.

On Friday, we had probably twenty people mobilize to serve a mourning family as they buried a husband, father, and grandfather. Many of the people who served did not know the family. They simply did it because they believed it was something Jesus would want them to do.

One person said simply, "It is the right thing to do. It's what I would want someone to do for me."

*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*

I see countless other examples of little acts of care and kindness, a meal delivered, a phone call at just the right time, a car repaired, a little note of encouragement, people going out of their comfort zones to meet a need in the church, whether it's helping out with music or working with children or whatever.

We lean in the direction of loving in difficult directions, across differences.

Again, I've been here almost fourteen years. I know some of you fairly well. I've had the opportunity to hear at least a little bit about what you think about this or that issue.

And I know that we don't all agree about everything! Yet, we believe that the One who has called together is bigger than our differences, and that loving one another is more important than being right.

I find this inspiring.

I think this might be among the more important witnesses for our time and place where most people hive off into like-minded communities, online or in real life, where so many define themselves by who they are not (i.e. "those people").

I recently read an article by Philip Yancey called “Small is Large.” He was praising what is possible in small churches and I couldn’t help but think of our church when I read these words:

[T]he majority of Americans, like me, still attend churches with less than 200 members. We show up on Sundays to hear less entertaining sermons and less professional music—though we have no trouble finding a parking place. Why?.. I came across this paradoxical observation in G. K. Chesterton’s book *Heretics*:

“The man who lives in a small community lives in a much larger world.... The reason is obvious. In a large community we can choose our companions. In a small community our companions are chosen for us.”

Precisely! Given a choice, I tend to hang out with folks like me: people who have college degrees, drink dark roast coffee, listen to classical music, and buy their cars based on gas mileage ratings. Yet after a while I get bored with people like me. Smaller groups (and smaller churches) force me to rub shoulders with everybody else.

Henri Nouwen defines “community” as the place where the person you least want to live with always lives. Often we surround ourselves with the people we most want to live with, which forms a club or a clique, not a community. **Anyone can form a club; it takes grace, shared vision, and hard work to form a community.**<sup>1</sup>

It does indeed. Grace, shared vision, and hard work.

Which brings me to the challenge or a question that I want to set before us as our AGM approaches.

I have just talked about the ways in which I see our church doing its best to make Jesus’ priorities our own.

But this isn’t a one and done kind of thing. It’s not something we just check off and move on. It is something we are always doing on the journey of faith and in the life of our church.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://philipyancey.com/small-is-large/>

The question is: What might Jesus' priorities be in our particular time and place? What is our particular moment calling for?

Jesus' priorities do not change, but the context in which they are expressed does. 2025 is not 1975 or 1995 or even 2005.

If the data is to be believed, our time is characterized by a deep and pervasive loneliness, by a kind of undefined spiritual hunger that coexists with plummeting church attendance and biblical illiteracy, by skyrocketing addiction, depression, and anxiety, by social decay and the breakdown of families, by a weakening of ties to institutions that were once taken for granted.

What should our little church do in response? What should we be in response?

As I was thinking about this question, I tried to frame it in my own mind in kind of a two-pronged way to keep it manageable.

**What's one way Jesus might be inviting us to lean out?** How can we serve our city or our world? How might Jesus' priorities find expression out there?

**What's one way Jesus might be inviting us to lean in?** How can we strengthen our own church community and relationships? How might Jesus' priorities find expression in here.

I encourage each of us to be thinking and praying along these lines ahead of our annual meeting on February 8. And I hope you will come and contribute on February 8!

We're going to be spending a bit of time over coffee having conversations about these things.

Whether you are an official member or not, if you call this church home, your voice matters, and we want to hear from you.

We always want to be asking the question of how our church is living into the priorities of Jesus.

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I want to end with the question as it was written. *Would Jesus like our church?*

My temptation when I heard that question was to make a list, to itemize all the ways in which we were doing enough things to make Jesus like us, to earn Jesus' approval.

I wanted to prove to myself and to you that we were likable, that we were "good enough," that we were Jesus-y enough to get the gold star (or at least a passing grade).

It was a temptation that I did not manage to avoid (I did, after all, talk about all the ways I see Jesus' priorities reflected in our church).

But even as I have done it, I recognize the error that this approach contains.

We do not earn Jesus' approval. We do not do enough good things to make him like us. Life is not a test where we must get enough right answers to convince Jesus that we are acceptable.

*While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*

*We love because he first loved us.*

We must never forget this, lest we become like the older brother, angrily pointing at his glowing resume to a father whose grace he resents, while the younger brother is off enjoying the party.

Christian faith asks us to hold two things together.

On the one hand, we believe that faith actually asks things of us. It matters how we live our lives. It matters whether we give ourselves over to love and to the pursuit of justice and peace or to their ugly opposites. It matters if we are oriented toward the inversion of value that the kingdom of God proclaims, where last are first and first are last, where the unlovely and broken, the poor and the needy, the ones constantly stepped on or stepped over are somehow "blessed" and reveal the priorities of Jesus.

And yet, on the other hand, Christian faith also speaks loudly of a grace that is available for all the failures and the screw ups, the ones who keep on making the same dumb mistakes over and over again, the reckless and wasteful, those in crisis and those leaving a path of destruction in their wake.



The sinners who sin in ways that we can understand and those who sin in ways we'd prefer to distance ourselves from.

We believe that God shows up in all the ugly, un-sanitized corners of our world and our lives and speaks of a mercy that goes far beyond our scorekeeping.

Christianity is nothing if it is not also a word of hope for those who feel like they're failing. Even at church.

Perhaps the most staggering truth of the gospel—the hope proclaimed by Easter—is that the ultimate reality with which we all have to deal is not a test that we succeed or fail at, but a Love that bursts out of an empty tomb, overwhelming all of our striving, redeeming all of our failures, reconfiguring the landscape of reality entirely.

This is the hope of the gospel. This is the hope that it is our church's task to proclaim and to embody to a world in desperate need of good news.

May we do so with freedom, with creativity, with openness, and with joy.

Amen.

