



Stress – Lesson 3

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Stress

Lesson 3: Priorities & Stress

Bible: Matthew 6:31-34

Description: Not having your priorities in the right order can lead to a very stressful life. Trying to figure out what your priorities should be can be stressful, but having the wrong priorities can be even more stressful. Thankfully, the Bible tells us a lot about what our priorities should be.

Supplies

- 2 Large white t-shirts
- Paint
- Paintbrush
- 2 ropes
- Tape
 - Before the game, tape the two ropes together, forming one long rope. Tape them tight enough that they will stay together, but not so tight that they can't be pulled apart when tugged on
- Ten stackable items, varying in size. Example: books, plates, etc. Anything flat that can be stacked on top of something else
- A timer

Game: Stackable

Divide the group into four teams. Lay out the stackable items in any random order, as long as the biggest item is not first and the smallest item is not last.

Tell the students that the objective of the game is to be able to stack all ten items in the order that they are in and carry them to the other side of the room. If they drop the stack, they have to start over.

Let the first team go and time them.

Once they've completed the task, rearrange the items again in any order, as long as it is not largest to smallest. Let the second team go and time how long it takes them. Repeat for the third team.

When you are laying out the items for the fourth team, lay them out from biggest to smallest, in the order they will stack the easiest. Their time will be the shortest.

Teach

In the game we just played, you guys tried carrying a stack of items four different ways. The last team was able to complete the challenge in the shortest amount of time. Now, how many of you think that their success was because of the order the items were in?

The challenge worked best when the bigger things were first on the stack and the smaller things were on top, right?

Well, it's like that in life, too. It's least stressful when the most important things are first. If the less important things are first, things can get messy and unbalanced, just like they did in that game.

Not having your priorities in the right order can be really, really stressful.

If you're confused about what your priorities should be, then you're in luck! The Bible has a lot to say about it. Let's take a look.

So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly father knows that you need them. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. – Matthew 6:31-34

As humans, our most basic needs are food and water. It's how we survive! So if we're without them, it would definitely be cause for worry and stress, right?

This verse tells us not to worry, but it doesn't just say not to worry about superficial stuff or things out of our control. It says not to worry about the most basic of things! And if we shouldn't get stressed over the most basic of things in life, we certainly shouldn't get stressed over other things, right?

This verse also lays out what our priorities should be when it tells us to seek God first, before anything else.

The words "do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" can seem close to impossible. I mean, not worry about tomorrow? If we could figure out the secret to not worrying about tomorrow, we'd never be stressed! How are we supposed to do that?

It's simple, really. If we really do seek God and His kingdom first, above all else, then we won't have to worry about tomorrow. Why? Because when you seek God and His will first, you're acknowledging that He is in control, so there's no need to worry about tomorrow or the day after that or the week after that.

This is a great example of how having your priorities in order can greatly decrease the stress in your life - seeking God above anything else leads to not worrying. Can you imagine how much less stressful life would be if you didn't worry? It would be amazing!

Let's look at another way the Bible talks about what your priorities should be.

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - His good, pleasing and perfect will. – Romans 12:2

This world that we live in isn't all good. And the pattern of this world - the "normal" way of doing things - is a sinful one. One that we don't need to conform to.

See, it's not normal to make it a priority to not conform to the world around you. But being a Christian isn't about being normal; it's about following Christ!

Conforming to the world around you and caving into a lifestyle of sin may be tempting, and may even seem fun at times but trust me, it's not worth it. Nothing leads to stress faster than knowing you're living a sinful life and being worried about the wrong things you're doing.

Instead, you should make it a priority to not conform to the lifestyle of this world. See, you may think that's not really necessary. Sure, you'll avoid doing the "really bad" stuff, but you don't need to actually spend time and energy focusing on not conforming to the world around you, right?

Let me show you what that's like. I need a volunteer to help me out.

Give the volunteer the white shirt to put on over their clothes, and you put one over your clothes, too. Get out the paint and paintbrush.

Okay, we're going to pretend that this paint represents things in a sinful lifestyle that I'm living. Begin to paint on your own shirt.

Now, you're a Christian, but you don't think it's really important to focus on not conforming to this type of lifestyle. After all, you love Jesus, and you actually know this stuff is wrong, so as long as you don't do any of it, you'll be fine, right?

While you're talking, start to stand closer to the student. Swing your arms around, bump into them, etc.

But here's the thing—the more you're around me, the more you're around my lifestyle and actions, the good and the bad.

Make sure you've touched the student's shirt enough the some of the paint has gotten on them.

Regardless of what you're actually participating in, it's all around you, and it's going to influence you. Because what's on your shirt right now? Paint!

I don't understand! How did it get there? You didn't put it there! You didn't even hold a paintbrush!

But you also didn't make a decision to be sure to keep paint off your shirt.

Had you made the decision that you weren't going to get any paint on you, you could have done that! We still could have hung out and talked, but you could have stood a little further away from me. You could have been more aware, and when I got too close to you with the paint, took a step back.

It's the same way with conforming to the patterns of this world. You cannot escape sin - it's all around you. But you can make the decision not to conform to it. You can always be thinking about the way you should live, making sure to not let certain things become a part of your life.

If anyone else walked in right now and we asked them who they thought had been painting, they would think we had both been painting. They wouldn't be able to tell that you hadn't touched any paint or even held a paintbrush.

You aren't meant to conform to the patterns of this world. You are meant to be set apart.

When you think of having your priorities straight and how that can cause stress, this may not be something you think about. You probably think of good priorities as being something more along the lines of making sure your homework is done before you hang out with your friends. But let me explain this to you.

I need two volunteers.

Hand each volunteer one end of the rope that's been taped together in the middle. Have them stand close enough to each other that there is a lot of slack in the rope.

There's no doubt about it; being a Christian is difficult. We're supposed to be in this world but not of it. We're not supposed to conform to the patterns of this world, yet we still have to live here.

That's why having clear priorities is so important. Because when you don't - when you think that you can just coast along and everything will be fine - this is what happens.

Ask the students to both take a step back, lessening the slack of the rope, but not pulling it tight yet.

On one hand, (*point to one end of the rope*) you know what's right and wrong. You know what you should and shouldn't do. And hey, maybe you even make sure you don't do the things you know are wrong.

But on the other hand (*point to the other end of the rope*) you haven't exactly made it a priority to not conform to the world around you.

Have students step back until there is no slack in the rope at all.

Without clear priorities, you're pulled each way. If you don't decide to make sure certain things don't influence you, then they're going to influence you.

Being pulled in two different directions? That's extremely stressful.

Have the students pull on their ends of the rope until the rope snaps in the middle.

How can you expect to not be stressed when you're being pulled two different directions? Eventually, you snap.

Can you see how having the right priorities is essential to fighting stress?

**Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself."
- Matthew 22:37-39**

Lastly, let's talk about the most important priority of all.

While there are a lot of things in life that will probably always be a little unclear, this is not one of them. In this verse, Jesus laid out exactly what our main priority should be. He even helped by adding what the second one should be!

Your number one priority in life should be to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind. And once you get that in place, your number two priority should be to love others.

Your heart, soul, and mind...that's all of you! It's everything you have! Your very top priority should be to love God with everything you have.

Let me just tell you this...if you can truly make this your top priority, the rest of your priorities will fall into place, and your life will have much less stress.

Small Group Questions

1. When you think about the stress in your life, how much of it do you think comes from not having the right priorities in the right order?
2. Is worry something that causes a lot of stress in your life?
3. Do you think that seeking God first, above everything else, would decrease stress?
4. What do you think it means to not conform to the patterns of this world?
5. When you think about your priorities, is not conforming to the world one of them? Do you think it should be?
6. Do you agree that if you don't make clear decisions about the lifestyle you have that you will be pulled in different directions and that it will cause a lot of stress?
7. Do you think it's helpful that Jesus laid out exactly what your number one priority should be?
8. Is loving God with everything you have your number one priority right now? If not, is that something that you want to change?
9. How do you think that loving God above all would make you less stressed?
10. Do you think God cares about the things that stress you out? Do you think that maybe that is why He told you these things, things like not worrying and not conforming to the world and loving Him above all else, so that your life could be better and less stressful?

Teach Close

Today, we covered a topic that you maybe hadn't thought of before. I mean, sure, you know that not having your priorities straight can lead to stress. But maybe you were thinking of responsibilities like homework and chores as priorities, not the things we discussed in this lesson.

I hope that now you see how important it is to consider these things.

Like I said, if you make loving God with everything you have your top priority, I guarantee the amount of stress you have in your life will go down. Why? Well, for starters, it helps you make a lot of decisions without even thinking about it.

Because if you love God with everything you have, you're going to want to follow His word the best that you can.

So those verses that we talked about - about not worrying, about seeking God first, and about not conforming to the patterns of this world - well, those are no-brainers! Because you want to do everything you can for the one you love more than anything else, right?

If you have a lot of stress in your life, look at your priorities and ask yourself these questions:

- Am I loving God with everything that I have?
- Am I loving those around me?
- Am I purposefully not conforming to the world around me?
- Am I worrying about what may happen instead of trusting in God to take care of me?

A lot of the unnecessary stress in your life could be taken away by dealing with those four questions.

Jesus loves you guys so much, and He doesn't want you to live a life full of stress. He loves you so much that He actually told you exactly what your priorities should be in the Bible. Why not try listening to them?