

Text: Exod. 23:10-19

Title: "Citizenship priorities for Israel"

Time: 1/2/2022 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: Someone seeking to become a citizen of our nation can find a sample curriculum for what a U. S. Citizen needs to know about our country at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services website (uscis.gov). The curriculum contains three units.

Unit 1 covers topics like U. S. geography, American symbols and celebrations, George Washington, and the three branches of our federal government.

Unit 2 covers Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, the Bill of Rights, and what it means to fight for our rights.

The last Unit covers the wars of the 1800's, Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War, and U. S. history since 1900.

Our passage this morning reads like a curriculum for Israeli citizenship. Here the Lord lays out some specific priorities of life that He expects for His people. In the historical context of Exodus 23, His people were the nation of Israel. Today, His people are members of true local churches. But even today, the Lord thinks of His people as citizens of His kingdom, albeit a kingdom not yet of this world (John 18:36): "For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself" (Phil. 3:20-21). The word translated *conversation* there is the word *citizenship*.

So, while the visible organization of the assemblage of God's people has changed, God has not changed, nor have

the priorities He has for the citizens of His kingdom. Israel's list of citizenship priorities also speaks volumes about the Lord's priorities for us as members of a true local church. I am going to organize the passage under five of these priorities in our study this morning.

I. Prioritize people over profits (vv. 10-11).

Illustration: I saw a *Forbes Magazine* article that said that Chic-fil-a per-store sales have led the industry for years (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/caroltice/2014/08/14/7-fast-food-restaurantchains-that-rake-in-2m-per-store/?sh=7ec4cba5ff82>). The one restaurant that is open six days a week instead of seven outsells by far its competitors that are open seven days a week. We are not surprised by that statistic, of course, because we have been in the long lines of Chic-fil-a waiting to order our delicious meal.

The company's website has a short video explaining why they are closed on Sunday. It begins: "It's not about being closed. It's about how we use that time." The video shot then ascends to the sky, where we find this message: "So while we're off today, we hope you can be with your family and friends. That's the thought behind each Sunday story – delivering recipes, activities and inspiration that might bring you a little closer together."

I think it is fair to say that in this small way Chic-fil-a illustrates for us what it means to prioritize people over profits. That is a lesson that the labor movement taught the industrial revolution the hard way, but it is a principle that members of local churches should live by as God's citizens.

Application: In these verses, the Lord requires not that business be suspended one day a week, but one year every sev-

en years. The reason this is done is so that the poor who do not own any land can utilize the land of others to store up food for themselves. And then the text goes even further to say that whatever is left over for the poor, the animals will benefit from. So, the Lord is not only prioritizing people over profits in this passage, He is prioritizing animals that way as well. The order is simple - #1 well-being of needy people; #2 well-being of animals; and #3 more profitability.

This, of course, challenges our flesh right where one of its chief idols resides. Jesus explained the challenge for us: “No man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and hold on to the other, or else he will love the one and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt. 6:24).

So, what do our priorities look like? Have we prioritized profits over people? Have we made an idol of mammon?

II. Prioritize the spiritual over the physical (v. 12).

Illustration: What do you think of when you think of refreshment? We can read advertisements for products like Orangia Sparkling Citrus Drink, which Pepsi touts as “ideal for quick, on the go refreshment” (orangina-na.com). A nice walk on a beautiful day spring day can be refreshing after being couped up during a long winter. Maybe it is diving into a cool lake on a blistering hot day that does the trick. When we think of being refreshed, we normally think of a physical need of ours that has been met.

Application: Our passage mentions the Sabbath again, but it does so in a unique way. Here the Lord is concerned about the rest needed by oxen and donkeys and the refreshment needed by the son of a servant girl and a for-

eigner who happens to be lodging with an Israelite family. One word describes the physical need of the animals, and another describes the need of people among Israel, who would have been the least informed about spiritual things.

The word translated *refresh* in this verse is a verb form of the noun that means *soul*. It literally means *to be souled* or *to soul yourself*, and it is used only here and in two other places in the Old Testament. I point that out because I do not think that the Lord's concern here is primarily the physical refreshment of the handmaid's son and the foreigner who is visiting. One of the usages of this word in Exod. 31:17, translated *be refreshed*, describes an activity of the Lord on the seventh day of the creation week. That verse says that Lord ceased creating [therefore, today's evolution was not involved] and that the Lord was refreshed.

Well, we know that our Creator God is omnipotent and never in need of the physical refreshment we need (Isa. 40:28, "Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding").

So, what does Exod. 31:17 refer to when it says that the Lord ceased creating and was refreshed? We find the answer in Gen. 2:2-3. It tells us that the Creator did two things on the seventh day. He ceased creating on that day, and then he blessed and sanctified the seventh day. The cessation from creating had to do with the physical world. The blessing and sanctifying focused on spiritual meaning and significance. In this way, the Lord literally "souled Himself," i.e. He focused on spiritual things, not physical things.

I point all this out to say that I believe that when the Lord tells Israel to cease working on the Sabbath and to "soul

themselves” instead, He is saying that He wants them to take the appointed time necessary to prioritize spiritual things, the meaning of spiritual blessing and sanctity, over the mundane activity of day-to-day physical chores. He wants them to prioritize the spiritual over the physical. Paul put it this way: “If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God” (Col. 3:1-3).

Where is our priority? On what is our affection placed? Is the spiritual more important to us than the physical?

III. Prioritize fidelity over friendship (v. 13).

Application: The monotheism of this instruction is clear. Fidelity in Israel is defined by worshipping the one true God and destroying the man-made gods of idolatry.

But a unique detail about the verse is that it is the one command in this list of priorities that is plural and not singular. It ends in the singular – each of us personally must be loyal to the one true God and put away our idols – but it begins in the plural, meaning that we must be circumspect as a community about fidelity to the one true God.

Faithfulness to Him must be more important to us than our connections to one another. We discipline our church membership to ensure that we are circumspect as a people about this. We are our brothers’ keepers, and we are willing to lose a friend who takes up the worship of idols instead of obedience to the one true God.

IV. Prioritize assembly over absence (vv. 14-19a).

Application: For the Israelite, assembly priorities meant three trips to the tabernacle a year to be with fellow countrymen. For the local church member, assembly priorities mean arriving at the appointed place and time for planned gatherings, especially on the Lord's Day. Our assembly instructions are very different in visible ways from those given to Israel, but they are the same in important invisible ways. Let me note four simple invisible similarities of God's assembly times for both Old and New Testament believers:

1. They are times for entering into a special dwelling place of God's presence (v. 14, "unto me"; v. 15, "before me"; v. 17, "appear before the Lord GOD"; v. 19, "the house of the LORD thy God"). Matt. 18:20, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." 1 Tim. 3:15, "But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth."
2. They are times for celebrating the gospel (v. 15, the Passover and the death of Christ; v. 16a, Pentecost and the resurrection, ascension, and creation of the Spirit-baptized body of Christ as the first-fruit of them that sleep; v. 16b, the feast of Tabernacles, celebrated as pilgrims at the end of the harvest; at the end of our harvest, Christ shall return and our pilgrimage will be complete).
3. They are times for generosity (v. 15, "none appear empty-handed"). Our giving is a response to the Lord's great gifts to us - Rom. 8:32, "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" 1 Cor. 16:2, "Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him."

4. They are times for male leadership (v. 17, “all thy males”). Keil and Delitzsch insightfully point out that the injunction that all males appear is not a prohibition against females appearing, but it does highlight the need for husbands and dads to lead by command and example when it comes to worshipping the Lord. Eph. 6:4, “And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.”

V. Prioritize family health over its destruction (v. 19b).

Application: What a simple ordinance this is, and yet still its teaching is profound. Mothers and their milk care for the life of their offspring. They do not take part in the death of their children. The teaching of this simple verse from the Lord tells us to prioritize family health over the family-destroying perversions of the world in which we live, whether mere bitterness and hatred, or divorce, or child abuse, or spousal abuse, or abortion, or homosexuality, or gender dysphoria, or fornication, or adultery, or pornography, or incest, or (the list of the enemies of the family seems limitless today).

Let mothers be good moms who care for their children. Let them be good wives and daughters. Let men be good husbands and fathers and sons. Prioritize family health over destructive perversions. Have we prioritized the health of our family relationships the way we should?

Conclusion: People more than profits; the spiritual more than the physical; fidelity over friendship; assembling more than absenteeism; and family health more than its destruction. These are the priorities of the citizens of God’s kingdom. They define what it means to be a people of God, just like certain ideals make an American an American.

We have here, of course, also the priority of the King of the kingdom. The Lord speaks of the sacrifices of Israel as “the blood of My sacrifice” (v. 18). The sacrifices of Israel were His sacrifice. They were so, because He is the recipient of these gifts of worship. But more importantly, the sacrifices of Israel were the blood of His sacrifice because they symbolized the sacrifice He would make on the cross of Calvary for your sins and mine (Jesus: “this is my body which is broken for you”; “this cup is the new testament of my blood” (1 Cor. 11:24-25)).

Our need for salvation was His priority, and He died to secure our forgiveness. Because of what Jesus did on the cross of Calvary, “Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching