

Cultivating a Life Rooted in Christ: Priorities & Boundaries

Summary of Rev. Jonathan Murray's Sermon – 9/27/2026

Rev. Murray's message centers on a shift in Christian discipleship: moving from *"How can I fit God into my life?"* to *"How will I shape my life around my relationship with God?"* This reframing becomes the foundation for understanding priorities and boundaries as essential practices for cultivating a life rooted in Christ.

1. Scripture as the Framework for Reordering Life

Drawing from **1 Timothy 4** and **Deuteronomy 6**, Rev. Murray emphasizes that faith is not an add-on to an already crowded life. Instead, Scripture calls believers to place God at the **center**—the hub around which all other parts of life turn. He quotes: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might."* This love is meant to shape decisions, habits, and daily rhythms.

2. Priorities: Naming What Matters Most

A priority is not merely something important - it is what determines **what we say yes to** and **what we say no to**. Rev. Murray notes that calendars reveal true priorities more honestly than words. He illustrates this with the "big rocks" metaphor: when the most important things (faith, family, vocation, relationships) are placed first, everything else fits around them. When lesser things dominate, the essentials no longer have space.

3. Practice: Training in Godliness

Paul's instruction to Timothy - *"train yourself to serve God"* - uses the Greek word **gymnase**, evoking disciplined training. Spiritual maturity is not accidental; it is formed through repeated practice. Rev. Murray lists practices that shape Christlike character: prayer, worship, Scripture reading, forgiveness, generosity, listening, resting, loving neighbors. These practices become the "training regimen" of discipleship.

4. Boundaries: Protecting What We Value

Boundaries are not walls to keep people out; they are guardrails that protect what matters most. Examples include:

- Setting aside protected time for prayer
- Guarding Sabbath
- Limiting distractions that shape attention

- Saying **no** when necessary, Rev. Murray reminds listeners that even Jesus said no at times—He withdrew to pray, rested, and refused certain expectations. Boundaries create space for spiritual growth and prevent depletion: *“You cannot pour from an empty cup.”*

5. Attention: The Most Critical Boundary

Paul’s instruction - *“pay close attention to yourself”* - invites believers to notice what is forming them. Rev. Murray warns that constant consumption of outrage, noise, or distraction reshapes the heart. A Christ-centered life requires intentional stewardship of attention, directing it toward what nourishes the soul.

6. A Simple Path Forward

Rev. Murray closes with three guiding questions for this season of life:

1. **What matters most right now?**
2. **What is one practice that will cultivate that priority?**
3. **What boundary is needed to make room for that practice?**

This “one priority, one practice, one boundary” approach keeps discipleship grounded, realistic, and transformative.

9/27/2026

Rev. Jonathan Murray

Sermon Series: Cultivating a Life Rooted in Christ - Priorities & Boundaries

Transcript

Please be seated. Our second scripture reading this morning comes to us from Paul's letter to Timothy. In fact, his first letter, chapter 4, beginning at verse 4. Listen.

⁴ Everything God made is good, and nothing should be refused if it is accepted with thanks,
⁵but it is made holy by what God has said and by prayer.

⁶By telling these things to the brothers and sisters, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus. You will be made strong by the words of the faith and good teaching which you have been following. ⁷But do not follow foolish stories that disagree with God's truth, but train yourself to serve God. ⁸Training your body helps in some ways, but serving God helps you in every way by bringing you blessings in this life and in the future life too. ⁹What I say is true and you should fully accept it. ¹⁰This is why we work and struggle. We hope in the living God who is the Savior of all people, especially those who believe. ¹¹Command and teach these things. ¹²Do not let anyone treat you as if you are unimportant because you are young. Instead, be an example to the believers with your words, your actions, your love, your faith, and your pure life. ¹³Until I come, continue to read the scripture to the people, strengthen them and teach them. ¹⁴Use the gift you have given, which was given to you through prophecy when the group of elders laid their hands on you. ¹⁵Continue to do those things. Give your life to doing them so your progress may be seen by everyone. ¹⁶Be careful in your life and in your teaching. If you continue to live and teach rightly, you will save both yourself and those who listen to you.

This is the word of the Lord. God is still speaking.

I was about to say, please be seated. We do have habits, don't we? Well, I don't think I really have to tell you that there is a difference between being busy and living with intention. Most of us know what it is to feel busy. Your calendar's full. Your phone constantly is buzzing. The emails need to be responded to. There's appointments to make, errands to run, people who need us, work that needs to be finished, children or grandchildren that need our attention. There's church responsibilities. There's community obligations. Perhaps maybe even a few things we would like to do for ourselves. And somewhere in the middle of all of that, we say, I really need to spend more time with God. And we try to squeeze into whatever space we have left that time with God. But the scriptures that we read today invite us to think about

discipleship differently. We need to shift from the question of how can I fit God into my life to the question of how will I shape my life around my relationship with God. And this is where priorities and boundaries become part of cultivating a life in Christ. Now last week I proposed that your calendar is a theological document. It will tell you where you spend your time and what's really important to you because we can proclaim all sorts of things. Serving my community is a priority or my family is important or God is central. But look at your calendar, see where you spend your time. That'll tell you the truth. Deuteronomy 6 begins with some of the most important words in the Jewish faith, in the Jewish tradition. Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. This is the Shema. And that word Shema, as you heard from Dorothy, means hear. But it's not simply hearing a sound like hearing traffic go by. It means to listen intently and then respond. In other words, hear this and then live differently because of what you heard. And then comes that heart of the passage that Jesus ends up quoting. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. Notice what it doesn't say. Love God when you have time. Love God when everything else is taken care of. Give God whatever time and energy you have left over. The invitation is all your heart, all your soul, all your mind. Now the word translated to heart is lavav. Now in today's society, we associate the heart with our emotions, with our feelings, but in the Hebrew scriptures, the heart is actually the foundation for our thinking, our choosing, our will, our being. So loving God with our lavav, all of our heart, means keeping God at the heart of how we make decisions. Now that word translated might is mayode. It has the sense of muchness or abundance. And the command is to love God with all your mayode, with all of your capacity, with all of your abundance, anything and everything that makes you, you. Now this is not asking you to add one more thing to an already overcrowded calendar. It's that call to organize or actually reorganize your life around what is most important, what matters most. Start with the center and then move to secondary and tertiary things. Because whatever is at the center will shape everything else. Think about a spoked wheel. At the center of that wheel is a hub and then the spokes extend outward. The hub is the center, and if it is actually at the center, the wheel turns properly. But if the center is off, it turns awkwardly, almost like an oval, and everything else is affected. Our lives work much the same way because we have work and we have school and we have friends and we have family, we have rest and recreation, we have church, we have community. Those are all important. But scripture says It's at the center around which all of them are meant to turn, our love for God. Problems arise when we allow something else to become the center. And when that happens, our lives move awkwardly. Problems arise when we allow something else to become the center. And that's why priorities matter. A priority is not something simply that is important. A priority is something that helps us determine to what we say yes and to what we say no. Now the letter to Timothy is from the Apostle Paul. Timothy is the young man that Paul met during

his travels. Paul was captivated by Timothy's deep faith and the gifts for ministry. So Paul mentored Timothy. He took him on these journeys, teaching Timothy everything that Paul knew about Christ and what it means to live life with God and for God. Now as Paul is writing to Timothy, Timothy is leading the church at Ephesus. Paul continues to travel and he sends this letter letting him know that I'm continuing to think about you and I'm continuing to pray for you because the struggles and demands of ministry are heavy. So Paul writes to Timothy to give guidance and to remind Timothy of what's most important. He says, train yourself to serve God. Now that Greek word for train is going to sound very familiar. Gymnasia, as in gymnasium. What do we do in a gymnasium? We train. We exercise. We practice. We discipline ourselves. Paul is saying you don't simply decide to become spiritually mature. You practice your way into it. Think about an athlete. An athlete doesn't become strong because they simply go, today I'm going to be the fastest. They train. They practice. They look Usain Bolt began intense training at 14. Seven years later, he took the gold medal in the 100 meter sprints in the Olympics in 2008. He dominated for the next two Olympics as he continued his training, increasing his speed in the 100 meters from 10.03 seconds, which was the fastest at the time, to sub 9.7. He made choices about what he would eat. He made choices about how he would spend his time. He established a boundary around things that interfered with his goal. Because he understood that what I repeatedly practice shapes who I become. Paul is saying the same thing is true spiritually. What we practice is who we become. So do we practice prayer worship, reading scripture? Do we practice forgiveness, generosity, and serving? Do we practice listening, resting, loving our neighbors? But here's where we need to talk about boundaries. Now that word boundary makes some people uncomfortable because it feels like a wall or a barrier or a closed door. But boundaries aren't necessarily about keeping people or things out. A boundary is also about protecting what we value most. Think about these high mountain passes. Have you driven on them? How the road follows the rise and the fall and the turn around the mountain geography. What's almost always on those high mountain pass roads? Guardrails. Hopefully so. You want the guardrails there because it keeps you from going into dangerous territory. Now if you hit the guardrail, it's going to cause some damage, but not nearly as much as if the guardrail wasn't there. A boundary says this matters enough for me to protect it. If prayer matters, we establish a boundary around that time. If family matters, we establish that boundary around our time together. If Sabbath matters, we establish a boundary around that period of time where we do not engage in work. It's about answering, what am I trying to cultivate? Listen again to those words from Deuteronomy. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children. Talk about them when you're at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Notice that rhythm, at home, away from home, when you work, when you rest. That pretty much encompasses everything. The practice of faith is

woven into ordinary life in creating that fabric that others can witness through us. The ancient Israelite relationship with God was meant to shape every part of their daily lives, from morning to evening, to home and travel, to work and family, and every conversation in between. The Shema says love God with all of it. The goal is to cultivate a life in Christ is present with all of the different compartments of our lives. Each of us has the same 24-hour amount of time each day. What distinguishes us as Jesus followers is how we shape those hours. When asked, can you, sometimes we reply, I don't have time. What we really mean is I haven't established that as a priority. Because if it was a priority, you'd have time for it. We could say, I want to spend more time in prayer, but if I wait to pray until everything else is done, prayer is going to get pushed to tomorrow. If we establish that simple boundary before I, and you fill in the blank for yourself, I will pray. It could be before you look at your phone in the morning. It could be during your first cup of coffee, if you drink coffee. It could be at 10.30 in the morning. It could be at 2.15 in the afternoon. It could be at 6.17 in the evening. but it's naming that specific time and putting a boundary around it to protect that time and space. That is a priority becoming a practice and a practice that will form us. Our attention is constantly being drawn from emails to headlines to text messages to push notifications to alerts and to what we give our attention shapes us. One of the most important spiritual boundaries we can establish is around our attention. Paul says to Timothy, pay close attention to yourself. In other words, notice what is happening inside of you. What is forming you? What are you consuming? What voices are you allowing to influence you? What are you repeatedly giving your attention? Because our attention is shaped by what we take in. If we spend hours every day consuming outrage, Outrage begins to feel normal. If we are surrounded by noise, silence will become uncomfortable. As a Jesus follower, my attention belongs to my center, from where I draw my life. Now there's another boundary that may even be harder for some of us, saying no. Not to me, of course. Some of us have gotten this impression that being Christian means you have to say yes, someone needs help. Yes. We need someone to lead this committee. Yes. This activity needs another volunteer. Yes. Another person needs our attention. Yes. And eventually we discover that we have said yes to so many things, even good things, that we no longer have room for what matters most to us. I want you to go back and reread through the Gospels. Jesus didn't say yes to everything. Jesus withdrew to pray. Jesus rested. Jesus left the crowds and even sent the disciples on ahead. Jesus did not say yes to everything. He sometimes said no to those expectations others were trying to place on Him. That wasn't selfishness. That's faithfulness. Sometimes the most spiritual thing we can answer, I can't do that right now. Or I can help, but I can't lead. Or I have a commitment with my family. Even I need to rest. A boundary can be an act of love because when we say no to something, we're also saying yes to something that's a priority for us. Paul tells Timothy, pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching because in doing this you will save

yourself and your hearers. Paul is teaching Timothy to become intentional, an expression that I constantly find myself repeating to myself. You cannot pour from an empty cup. When my cup is empty, I have nothing to give. I have to make time to care for and refill myself with God's Spirit in order to be pastor. Paul is telling Timothy and us, keep practicing, keep growing, keep paying attention, keep cultivating, because discipleship doesn't have a destination. None of us will wake up any day I am finally completely Christ-like. No. Every day we're waking up asking, what am I doing to cultivate that life so I can participate with God? That's what Paul means when he tells Timothy to train himself to serve God. The Greek word *gymnase* reminds us that spiritual growth requires practice, training. Deuteronomy reminds us what all that practice is about. Love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. Now please, when you get home today, do not write a 37-step spiritual growth plan. I'm not really worried that you would, but I want to make sure you don't. I want you to consider three questions. What matters most in this season of life? Second, what is 1 practice that could help cultivate that priority? And third, what do I need to say no to in order to make room for that yes? It comes down to one priority, one practice, and one boundary. I've got an illustration this morning I'm going to try. Hopefully it works. I've got large rocks up here, which would be the most central aspect of my life, the things that are most important. It would be my relationship with God, it would be my marriage, it would be my kids and my family, my vocation. And then I've got other things, smaller rocks, which more like pebbles really, which would be more like the secondary things. It could be other friendships and relationships. It could be rest and recreation. It could be things that are important, but not most important. And then I had a large jug of sand, all the tertiary things, things that need to get done, but they shouldn't dictate my day. And if I start with the sand, if I start with all those small things and I add in the secondary things and then I try to add in larger things, it doesn't fit. But on the other hand, if I start with what's most important, if I start with what is really central and I take care of those, keeping those as that priority, And then I add in those secondary things. Those end up filling in very nicely, but they fit around the larger. I'll hold it up in just a second. See? It looks pretty full until I add in everything else. some of those tertiary things can get pushed to tomorrow. Because it doesn't matter as much as our priorities. It doesn't matter as much as those secondary things that we name. It does matter. The tertiary things are those laundry, the grocery store runs, the running of the errands, the self-imposed to-dos. But if I give my attention to what's less important, I won't have room for my priorities. If, on the other hand, I keep my priorities first, that big rock priority, it allows me to live a God-centered, word-saturated, Christ-minded, spirit-guided life, and these priorities remain central. Deuteronomy gives us the center. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might. Paul gives us the practice, train yourself in godliness. And together that gives us a way of thinking about our boundaries, protecting what you are cultivating. Because boundaries are

about creating space for something to grow. How can I shape my life around God? That priority, that practice, that boundary. And if we do that faithfully, we'll discover something beautiful. We are allowing what we practice to shape us into who God has created us to be. Amen.