

“First Things First”

Matthew 6 is part of the Lord’s famous “Sermon on the Mount.” It’s a sermon of contrasts: between the cold, inconsistent and superficial religion of the Pharisees, and the genuine devotion and obedience that are necessary to follow Christ and realize the blessings of His kingdom. Our text will come from that sermon.

Matthew 6:31-33 “Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”

Well, this part of the Lord’s sermon was a great lesson in *priorities*. We tend to get caught up in things that seem very important to us, but in the grand scheme of things, they really aren’t. Oh, now, they’re important in their own right, but we fret over them, to the neglect of things that are far more important. Jesus tells His disciples that if they will put the kingdom of God first in their lives, everything else will fall into its rightful place. He tells them to put *first things first*. That’s a simple, yet difficult lesson for all of us. Today, we’ll look at some things that God wants us to place first in our lives.

One of life’s great challenges is the task of arranging our lives according to those things that are most important. Learning to prioritize can be a very difficult, but needful thing. In fact, if you ever want to learn to manage your time or your family or your business very well, you’ve got to learn to put first things first. A lot of the time, we waste our time on things that aren’t that important, and the result is, we neglect the things that really are. The biggest problem we have in that regard is that we don’t see things like God does. What’s important to us isn’t all that important to Him, and vice versa.

But, when we arrange our priorities as God does, and we learn to put first things first, we find that things work a lot better. We see everything in a whole new light. You’ll find that living the Christian life all of a sudden becomes a lot less difficult.

First of all, Jesus says that the kingdom of God is to be the very first thing that we seek in life. The Lord, in the Sermon on the Mount, made that imperative.

Matthew 6:33 “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”

Now, what’s the Lord talking about? In the preceding verses, Jesus talked about the anxiety that the Jews, God’s people, had for the necessities of physical life; such as, food, clothing, a place to live. We all get wrapped up and concerned with those things. No one—including the Lord—denies that those things are important in their own right. But, these people, in their faithlessness, were fretting and wringing their hands over them and making these things the supreme quest of their lives. Jesus reminds them how that God cares for the birds and all of His other creatures in the animal world, the grass, the flower of the field...Notice how God clothes them and takes care of them, so why should mankind, the crown jewel of His creation, think that God would care any less for them?

The Gentiles sought after those temporal things because of their lack of understanding of God. You would expect them to occupy themselves with the pursuit of earthly things because that's all they understood to do. But for the Jews to do so, being God's covenant people, was an extraordinary demonstration of a lack of faith in their God. Their worry over physical things was a reflection of Gentile influence on them, and it cast very serious doubts as to their ability to serve Christ in the kingdom into which He was about to establish and call them. So, He tells them that they must learn to seek the kingdom and the righteousness of God over everything else, and to rely upon God to provide the things that are needful for physical life.

Now, don't misunderstand: Jesus was NOT telling them that it was no longer necessary for a man to work for a living. In fact, the very opposite is true, according to Paul.

II Thessalonians 3:10 "For even when we were with you, this we command you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat."

Paul was very emphatic about the fact that a man works for what he gets, and if a man won't work, neither should he eat. But, the Lord is not telling us that these things are just going to magically fall down from the sky. What He's telling us in His sermon is that if we get our priorities straight, and if we seek Christ and the church before anything else, the Lord will see to it that we are able to obtain the things that we need to live on a practical level. And I believe that, on a very practical level.

I know some people personally, some very talented, educated, brilliant people, who have had to make some very great sacrifices in order to be faithful to Christ and the church. They've had to turn down very well-paying jobs or great opportunities because they knew that it would conflict with their responsibility to the Lord and His kingdom. Maybe it would've caused them to miss Sunday worship, or to compromise their morals or their principles. But, I've never known of a single person to go without the necessities of life, due to that decision. Somehow, God always opens doors. He always provides for those who are faithful. He didn't promise to make us rich, contrary to what some television preachers are preaching to you today. But He DID promise to provide for the needs of His own.

If the kingdom of God truly comes first in my life, that's going to be the number one consideration before I worry about a job or how much money I have in the bank. I'm going to worry about *am I satisfying the Lord? Does the Lord and His kingdom and His truth, come before all else?* And if the kingdom of God comes first in my life, and everything that pertains to it is of prime importance to me, then everything is going to fall into its rightful place within life.

Hebrews 10:25 "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching."

That is a much forgotten verse of scripture today. Some of the early Christians were being threatened by persecution because of their faith. As a result, they were absenting themselves from the assembly of the church. Paul told them that they had a responsibility to meet with the church. They couldn't abandon their faith and their duty to God. Friend, if the threat of imprisonment or death wasn't a good enough excuse to avoid the assembly of the church, how do you think the Lord feels about those who will miss

because of a job? or a vacation? or a NASCAR race? or a fishing trip? How about a ballgame? All of those things take precedence with many who claim to be disciples of Christ. Some people assemble very seldom with the church, maybe just a few times a year or during a season when everything just seems convenient to do so, when there's not this or that sporting activity or it's not deer season, and the kids aren't wrapped up in this trip or that activity with school.

Folks, if I'm seeking the kingdom first, it only stands to reason that the services and work of the church will be a priority and an appointment, as far as I'm concerned. Can I really say that I am *seeking first the kingdom of God* when I let just anything and everything hinder me from my worship to God and my coming together with God's people?

If you had a job interview tomorrow, I dare say you wouldn't think about putting that off in order to go to a ballgame. Would you call up your prospective employer and say, "you know, the fish are sure biting today, and I'd sure like to go to the lake today. Let's put that off until tomorrow, or next week." What if you had a meeting with the governor or the president or a senator this week? You wouldn't suddenly decide to go on vacation instead. That meeting would be a priority. How much more should an appointment with the King of kings be?

Acts 20:7 "And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread..."

Did you know that the apostle Paul delayed his departure from that city just so he could assemble with the church and commune that Lord's Day? Yet many frequent the assembly of the church only if there isn't something else to do. You see, this is one of those areas where a person has to simply make a decision about what's going to come first. If I decide that the church is going to rank first in my life, if Christ is going to come before all else, there will be no debate or deliberation about whether I'll assemble with the saints this Lord's Day or any other Sunday. I won't have to be pushed or pressured or shamed into showing up at the assembly of the church. I'll gladly be at every assembly I can possibly attend, because the church and its interests come first and foremost in my heart and life.

Psalms 122:1 "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord."

I firmly believe that is the attitude of every person who seeks first the kingdom of the Lord.

A Christian must also seek first the kingdom when it comes to his principles, his morals and his ethics. I'll be governed by the Bible's code of conduct, and make every decision in my life--without exception--on that basis. When I choose a job, I will ask myself, *will it interfere with my being a Christian?* before I look at any other consideration. When I choose a course of education I'll ask, *will this weaken me in my faith?* Some people don't even consider such. It's economic opportunity or educational opportunity that comes first. When I seek first the kingdom of God, I consider the will of the Lord first.

When I consider marriage, my first consideration will be, *will he/she help or hinder me in my quest for heaven?* That doesn't fall down on the list somewhere; that's number one on the list. Even when I decide to go on vacation, I'll ask myself, *can I find a local body of believers to assemble and worship with*

in Spirit and in truth? You know, if our priorities are the same as the Lord's, we will have the kingdom of God as our first consideration in everything we do.

Second of all, Jesus tells us that there is a first priority in the process of making our lives clean and pure in His sight. A lot of people make some kind of effort to clean up and rid their lives of sin or some vice or evil habit. But they don't go at it the right way. There's a key to success when it comes to righteousness, and it's recorded in this next passage.

Matthew 23:25-26 "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also."

In other words, these Pharisees were only concerned with what others saw and how they were perceived. However, Jesus said that there is a step that comes first. He didn't say *don't clean the outside of the cup because that's not important*. But He taught a lesson in priorities here that the Pharisees totally ignored. They were only concerned with other people's perceptions of them. They had ignored the cleansing of their hearts. Their hearts were corrupt and far from God.

That's really the root of any habitual kind of sin: it's the result of a heart that isn't right with God.

James 1:14 "But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed."

In other words, there is a heart problem there that allowed not merely for the sin to present itself, but for him to follow after it, for him to be tempted to succumb to that temptation. There is a heart issue there. You can try everything known to man to break the chains of sin; you'll never do it until your heart is renewed and changed. David couldn't be right with God after he had committed sin until his heart was broken by his sin, and was cleansed of the pride and the evil that allowed him to do what he did with Bathsheba and what he did in taking the life of her husband, Uriah. He begged the Lord for a clean heart in his psalm of repentance.

Psalms 51:10 "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me."

All sin begins in the heart, according to Jesus.

Matthew 15:18-19 "But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies:"

That's why the first and most important thing any of us can do is to seek the cleansing of our hearts by the washing of God's word, and to keep or guard our hearts from corruption.

Proverbs 4:23 "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life."

That's a priority: clean the inside, and the outside will be clean as well.

Thirdly, Jesus gives us another 'first' to attend to:

Matthew 7:1-5 "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye."

This is a very controversial passage today, and it is often misused and misapplied in our culture. The Lord gives us a very important process to follow when it comes to dealing with sin; particularly the sins of others. First of all, we should all remember that we ALL have our own faults. All of us have been sinners before God. That should humble all of us. None of us have the right to place ourselves in a position of inherent superiority over another. I don't have any right in the sight of God to view myself as better than you, nor you me.

I want you to carefully note that Jesus did not say it is wrong to point out the fault in another person. If you carry that away from **Matthew 7**, you've misunderstood. His statement has nothing to do with using the Bible, from a pure motive, as a means of judging doctrine, practice and personal conduct. In fact, did you know that we are commanded by Jesus Himself, to "*judge righteous judgment?*"

John 7:24 "Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment."

That simply means to apply the teachings of God's word to any and everything to determine whether it's right or wrong. Our judgment is to be "*righteous judgment.*"

So what is the Lord saying in **Matthew 7**? He is saying that before we make it our mission to help our brother with his faults, we need take care of our own faults. He is speaking in hyperbole when He speaks of a *beam* in our eye; His point being that we often focus, like a minute laser, on every problem in the life of another, while blindly, hypocritically look beyond the obvious and glaring trouble in our own lives. That's what the Pharisees were doing in disparaging the sinners of their day, while ignoring the corruption in their own hearts. They refused to judge themselves by the same standard they were applying to others. As the saying goes, the pot shouldn't call the kettle black.

Romans 2:21-24 "Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? thou that preachest a man should not steal, dost thou steal? Thou that sayest a man should not commit adultery, dost thou commit adultery? thou that abhorrest idols, dost thou commit sacrilege? Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonourest thou God? For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you, as it is written."

You see, these were the people Jesus was talking about in the Sermon on the Mount. They're not upholding God's law; they're making a mockery of God's law by their hypocrisy. So it is with the person who becomes a self-righteous, arrogant judge over others, while ignoring his own sins. I repeat: it is not wrong—in fact, it's very right and worthy—to help someone else get to heaven by showing them in

God's word, where they are wrong, and showing them how to be right. You are a friend to me, if you point out that I am in error. You are my best friend in the world, if you show me that I am estranged from God and in need of repentance. But it IS wrong to approach someone with a self-righteous, arrogant attitude in judgment, and refuse to apply the same standards to one's own life. So, Jesus isn't telling us not to judge; He's telling us to get our priorities right, and to attend to our own lives, then we'll be even more effective when we approach someone else with the word of God and we seek to bring repentance into their lives.

Finally, I want to talk to you about something else that is to come first, that will make a tremendous difference in how we live our lives, and in our success as a Christian. In **II Corinthians 8**, Paul writes about an effort to send financial relief to the poor saints in the church at Jerusalem. The churches in Macedonia were poor themselves, but Paul commends them because they dug deep in their pockets and gave a liberal amount to help their impoverished brethren at Jerusalem. In fact, Paul implies that they gave more than they were really in a position to give. Why? What motivated them to give so freely? The answer is found in **verse 5**, and it's not only the key to liberal financial giving, but it's also the key to a man giving the Lord the most of his time, efforts and talents.

II Corinthians 8:5 "And this they did, not as we hoped, but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God."

They gave themselves to the Lord. My friend, any effort to produce anything worthwhile for God's glory and the eternal good of others, is preceded by us giving ourselves entirely to the Lord, consecrating our lives to God. The problem with so many of us is that we want to give the Lord something we *have*. We want to give Him a certain amount of time or money, but that's not what the Lord wants first. He wants US. You see, when the Lord gets that, then giving Him our time and effort and energy and so forth won't be a problem.

The reason people have such difficulty serving the Lord is that they haven't given themselves to the Lord.

I Corinthians 6:19-20 "What? Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's."

When you become a child of God, your life does not belong to you anymore. It's not about what YOU want; it's about what GOD wants, because it is His to do with as He sees fit. We have our priorities all wrong when we try to offer something to Jesus without first offering ourselves. But when you give yourself first to the Lord, coming to church services won't be a problem. Living a holy life won't be a problem. Living a life separated from the world and consecrated to God won't be a problem, because we've given ourselves, beginning with our own hearts, to Him to make of us what HE desires.

Make God's priorities YOUR priorities, and you'll find that it will make a tremendous difference in your life and your success in living as a child of God.