

PUTTING FIRST THINGS FIRST

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

Here our Lord is continuing His consideration of the terrible danger that confronts Christians of becoming overburdened with the things that belong to time and to life in this world. He divided His teaching into two main divisions, the danger of hoarding up earthly and worldly things, and the danger of being oppressed by them or being worried about them. Basically it is the same problem, but it tends to affect people in these two different ways.

In the previous verses our Lord was reasoning this thing out with the people. He reasoned like this, "Is not the life more than food and the body more than raiment?" By that He meant that if God has given us the life and the body, surely He will look after it; if He has done the greater, He will surely do the lesser. Eventually He summed it up in the statement, "O ye of little faith." That is really the cause of the trouble. Any worry about life and its contingent circumstances is finally due to a lack of faith. He contended that if only they had greater faith they would get rid of all this proneness to worry.

Christ uttered a very important statement to the effect that to be worried and anxious about food and drink and clothing, and your life in this world, is to be like the Gentiles. The Gentiles were the heathen. The Jews were God's chosen people. It was they who had the oracles of God and the special knowledge of God. If I am worried about the things which I lack, then I am really living as a heathen, who does not have any revelation or knowledge of God. His view is entirely limited by his own thoughts, and he lacks the light from above. Our Lord is saying, if you are living a life full of anxiety and worry you are taking the pagan view of life, you do not seem to be helped at all by Christianity.

Such a view of life determines one's way of living and controls one's behavior. "As a man thinks so he does." You can always tell what a man's philosophy of life is by the way in which he lives and by the way he reacts to the things that are happening round and about him.

"For after all these things do the Gentiles (the heathen, the pagans) seek." This word "seek" is a very strong one. It means that they seek earnestly, that they are continually seeking these things, that they really live for these things. It can be truly said that they are consistent. They live for these things. Are we like that? If these things are first in our lives, says our Lord, and if these things monopolize our thinking and our living, then we are no better than the heathen. There are so many spiritual worldlings in one respect. If you talk to them about salvation, they have the correct view, but if you talk to them about life in general, they are worldlings. If you listen to their ordinary conversation about life in this world, you will discover a heathen philosophy. They are worried about food and drink, they are always talking about what they have or what they do not have. These things really control them. They are always thinking and talking about them. That is to be like the heathen and Christ says that a Christian ought not to be like that.

These words about seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness were spoken by Christ to a group of worried people, who were disturbed as to how to make ends meet. Most people are anxious about something. If it is not about food or clothing, it is about their health or their children, or about the future. When Christ saw how such anxieties were occupying the thoughts and distracting the minds of those who were before Him, He told them to turn their minds from these material things to something higher.

Food and clothing, like peace and happiness, are by-products. They are found by seeking something better. Christ said that the one secret of freedom from care is to seek first the rule of God and let Him take care of the rest. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness: and all these things (which you need for doing His will) shall be added unto you."

Christ is here suggesting a technique for the solution of our problems, which runs counter to our thinking and practicing. He is saying that the first step toward getting what we need is a right relationship with God and to His program. He is saying that the enthronement of God is the shortest possible route to the solution of every human problem. Because we refuse to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, the things we need are denied to us rather than added to us. The attitude of so many is: "Seek ye first the kingdom of knowledge, or money, or recreation, or fashion, and religion can then be added if you happen to like that sort of thing." It is wrong to try God only as a last resort.

Some put last things first, but intend to attend to first things by and by. Their great concern is to establish themselves in business first; to succeed in their professions first; to get on in the world first; and then to become religious and seek the things of God. This is a definite reversal of the command of Christ. It is living in a state of deliberate disobedience. Such a person runs the constant risk of dying without getting prepared for death.

I. The Pursuit.

"The kingdom of God." Seeking His kingdom means giving our hearts to His love and our minds to His purpose. Our great quest in life should be to please God, to obey Christ and to follow the leadership of the Holy Spirit in winning souls and building up the kingdom of God. Life for the Christian should be increasingly a God-centered experience. As we are seeking first the kingdom of God our kingdoms must be subject to His kingdom, our wills yielded to His will, our means surrendered to His control, our powers under His direction, our rulership under His guidance and our all committed to His way and care.

"I surrender all, I surrender all,
All to Thee, my blessed Saviour,
I surrender all."

It is only as God is made the center of the life that the life assumes its true proportions, imparts its deepest joys, and produces its greatest blessings.

II. The Precept.

"Seek ye first." This great good is to be sought -- "Seek ye first." The word translated "seek" is a strong one; it means to seek earnestly, intensely, again and again; it includes the idea of eagerness, solicitude and importunity. This law of seeking in order to find is in harmony with the rule of life in every department of effort. If a man wants money, he must seek it; if he wants learning, he must pay its price in hard study. Ignorance he may have without effort.

Among the hindering influences to seeking the kingdom of God are the intensity of business, the busy life of our times and the current of public opinion. But, if we are to follow the Lord fully, we must dare to be singular.

God is to have first place in the life. Before all other interests, no matter how attractive or necessary, comes God. We are in danger of making the means of living the end of living: of being so much concerned about making a living that we forget

to live. The primary things in life are often neglected because of our absorption in things which are merely secondary. Life's greatest blessings and joys are to be found, not in the putting of self first, by desiring things in the form of wealth, pleasure, social prestige, fame, or achievements, but in the putting of God first. The dangerous tendency is to place self, friends, money, power, property, and all else first, allowing God to be last. If we will place first the kingdom of God, then His church, His work, His will and His power will be first and foremost all the time. Putting God first takes faith, surrender, yieldedness and courage. It also involves our personalities, our possessions and our plans. The care of the soul is to take precedence over all other things; and the affairs of this life are thus to be made secondary to those of the life to come.

Put first things first in point of time. We are to seek them first as a matter of highest importance. Other things may be important, but not comparable with these. Seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness can make you happy here and now. We were made for God; to love Him, to live in fellowship with Him, to praise Him, to serve Him and to do His blessed will. The proper order of our human pursuits should be God first, others second and self last. In your life is God first or is pleasure, money or family first?

III. The Promise.

"All these things shall be added unto you." Unless this command is obeyed, the promise will not be fulfilled. The promise is closely related to the pursuit and the precept. The kingdom of God is not set in opposition to the things of the world for which men seek; it is set above them. It belongs to a realm which is higher than the physical and the material. It has to do with the essential life of man. A faithful pursuit of the kingdom of God guarantees the supply of all needful things.

We need to realize that in all things our first duty and responsibility is to God Himself. The Old Testament prophets were constantly stressing the law of divine priorities. I wonder what the Shunamite woman thought when Elijah the prophet applied to her for room and board. She explained that her little store of food was almost gone; there was but a small quantity of meal in the bottom of the barrel and a little oil to mix with it. She was going to do a last baking for herself and her son, and then there would be nothing left, but Elijah, the man of God, said, "Make me a cake first." One could imagine her exclaiming, "What, make you a cake first! You, a stranger, when I and my son have so little left!" The answer might well have been, "Yes, it is a question of priorities; hereafter you are to run a boarding house for God. Put God first and He will look after you and your needs." So off she went and did as she was bidden and lo, she had more than enough as long as the famine lasted and the prophet remained as her guest. She gave God the first place and He in turn honored her faith and saw that she did not come to want. He will never be the debtor of any person. This is just a picture of what He will do for all of us when we give Him the first place in our lives. Our Lord Jesus insists on this again and again. Whatever you do, do not fail to put first things first, to recognize the importance of honoring God above everything else.