

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

This text is a part of the Sermon on the Mount, which is one of the most solemn and instructive portions of the Bible. The Gospels give us something more than the story of Jesus. If we follow Him through the pages there is unfolded to us a map of life. We are constantly coming upon situations we can recognize. We have been there. This and that difficulty and perplexity is one which we ourselves are facing and for which Christ has the light we need.

We are meeting one of these situations today. At one point Christ had before Him a crowd of people who were worried and anxious about their daily bread. They did not know what tomorrow might bring. Hunger and cold were their next-door neighbors. Christ saw how this anxiety was filling their thoughts, distracting their minds, and corroding their hearts.

On that situation He flashed His light. He bade them 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.

"Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." These words are among the most familiar in the New Testament, and their meaning seems quite clear. Jesus is saying that a proper relationship to God — devotion to His cause and way of life — insures, with a kind of inevitability, successful living. So, this thing we call "religion" is not so irrelevant a matter as a great many people suppose. It is no ornamental extra. It is no decorative fringe. It is not something which one may dip into if he has a spare moment and nothing else on his mind. Religion is life's great imperative. It heads the list of indispensables

Here is one of those profound insights of Jesus, the truth of which becomes increasingly clear with the passage of time. It really is amazing how many things do come right when a man sets God first in his life. He who puts the Kingdom of God and His righteousness before and above all else has solved at one stroke a host of unmanageable problems. The trouble with so many in our day is that they want to take hold of life by the wrong end, and so nothing will come right. Their lives are a miserable and baffling mess simply because they will not come to terms with the living God. Because they are not right with Him, they are all wrong with themselves and their fellowmen.

In this text Jesus is suggesting a technique for the solution of our problems — a technique which runs counter to our own thinking and practices. He is saying that the first step toward getting what we need is a right relationship to God and to His program. He is saying that when we enthrone God, we are taking the shortest possible route to the solution to every human problem. Because we do not seek first the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness, the things we need are not added to us, but are subtracted from us.

So often, we disagree with Christ; His way is not our way. We think we know better. How few have actually adopted Christ's technique! How few really put God first in their lives! How few seek before all else the righteousness of His Kingdom! So many put God last, and if they try Him it is only as a last resort. 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 on if you happen to like that sort of thing."

Some are even embarrassed to talk about God and His Kingdom in ordinary conversation. We: "Fear to own His cause"; we "Blush to speak His Name." Perhaps some do this because

it hurts their ego to admit that they cannot manage without Him. Perhaps it is because some are afraid that others of their crowd will think them peculiar. It really is amazing to what lengths some people will go to avoid seeming "religious." Because of this silly complex, some take on only as much "religion" as is necessary for respectability. They purchase a Bible. They join a church, and they even attend worship services occasionally, but as for putting God and His righteousness first in their lives -- well, they say one must not be a fanatic.

The art of living life well consists largely of knowing upon what to put the emphasis. Some things are good enough in themselves, but become a definite hindrance when given an undue prominence in the life. There are some things in life that are primary, things which we must do; there are other things which are secondary, things which we may do, if we have time left after doing the things that are primary! And we must never confuse the relative value of things primary and secondary.

This verse is a distinct call to put first things first. Some people put last things first to the utter neglect of first things. This is the case with those whose great concern is to become rich and great in the world. There is danger of allowing ones whole attention to be taken up with the cares of this world. Many things are nothing else but this world. They devote all their time and energies to wealth-getting and honor getting. Everything good may be choked with all their lives by "the deceitfulness of riches" or "the cares of this world." The same is true of those whose minds are absorbed with the pleasures of the world. There are those who follow the "glory of this world" in all its rounds of frivolity, vanity, and folly, to the utter neglect of God and their eternal well-being.

Some people 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; to become rich or great or honored first, and then to become religious, that is, to seek the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. But this is a sad mistake, because it is a definite reversal of the command of Christ. It is living in a constant state of deliberate disobedience. It is a mistake because of the danger that one may die in the midst of his days without being prepared for death. It is a great folly.

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.

The only way we can act wisely and obey Christ is to put first things first. We are to seek them first in point of time. We must neither put it off nor let anything else get in ahead of it. This is the prior engagement of life. This is to be the first thing. 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 is the one thing that can make you happy both here and hereafter. We were made for God; to love Him, to praise Him, to live in fellowship with Him, to serve Him, and to do His holy will. The true order of our human pursuits should be God first, others second, and self last. Ask yourself some very plain questions. Does God come first in my life and does His business hold the supreme place or does my business hold supreme place? Is God first or pleasure? Is it God first or money? Does my family come first or does God?

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 that 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.