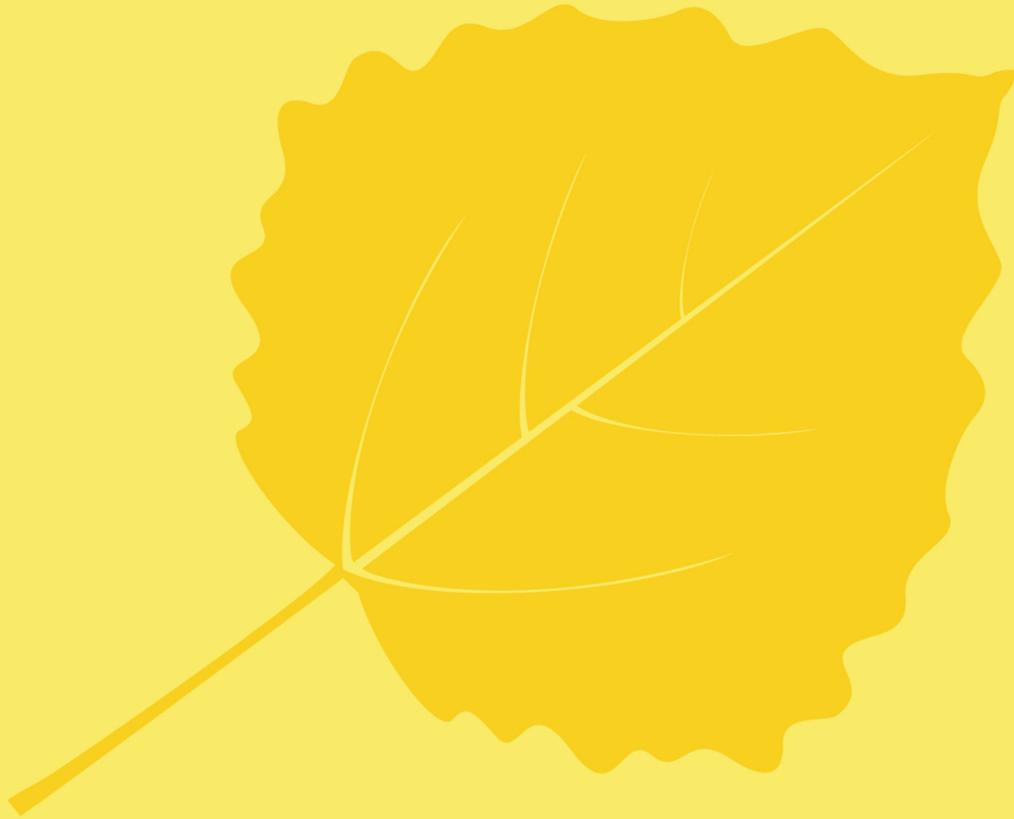


1stTHINGS1st



What's really in first place in our lives? We say God is first, but our schedules, commitments and finances tell another story. Setting God in the highest place is not just right, it's good! When God is first, everything else falls into place. It's time to let God be God. Let's study our priorities until God is at the head of our lives and order everything around Him through worship, obedience, service, prayer and generosity. God in first place—let's put **First Things First**.

First Things First - First Resort • Mark 1:35-37 • Tim McConnell • October 8, 2017

It's been a heavy week, but cast your minds back to last week at this time. Wasn't it great last weekend when the Broncos beat the Raiders? Wasn't it sad that the Patriots lost to the Panthers? Sometimes a few things go right. You know why it's called a Hail Mary? It's called a Hail Mary because it is a last-minute desperation play. It's when the quarterback launches a pass into a crowd of players in the end zone—anything can happen. It's a desperation play, so it's named after a Catholic prayer. See that's what people think of prayer. It's a desperation play. A last resort. I've done all I can do, I might as well pray. I was talking to a friend who is starting a new job here in town as a Pediatric Orthopedist. He said he hopes he can pray with his patients and their parents, but he's aware that they might see that as a cause for concern! "I thought you had this, Doc. I mean you're taking my kid back there for surgery. You know what you're doing, right? Then why the prayer? Why should God be involved?" Prayer isn't a last resort. Prayer isn't a desperation play. Prayer should be our first resort. Prayer is a life plugged into the power of God.

A few weeks ago in this series First Things First, I said let's keep God our first commitment of the week and first appointment of the day. We talked that day mostly about the first commitment of the week—making a point to offer God the worship he is due, giving the Lord one hour of worship on the first day of the week. And we challenged ourselves to go ten weeks in a row. First commitment of the week. But what about first appointment of the day? If not the first thing you do when you wake up, then the first priority of any day. Keeping God in first place means keeping up a life of prayer, every day. But I sometimes lose track of my prayer life. Honestly, I'm better at reading the Bible than I am at praying. Why is prayer so hard? We don't usually have to force ourselves to do things we know we need. I don't have to remind myself to eat. If I'm sick and there's a pill to take every day to be healed—I don't forget to take it. But somehow, with prayer, it gets pushed aside. Then I'm living a life unplugged from God, disconnected. If I don't connect with God, I'm disconnected from the source of life.

Jesus models a connected life; a life connected to God in prayer. Jesus who is God talked to God. I know it's confusing, but in his time here on earth Jesus modeled a prayer life for us. One that stayed

connected. One that took time to be with God in prayer as a first priority. Mark 1:35-36, "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed." It's pretty simple. It's pretty clear. "Early in the morning." You don't have to get up early to pray, but what that says is this was a priority for Jesus. You don't wake up before dawn to do something—anything—unless it's critically important. "Jesus got up, left the house and went off." You have to do it. You have to actually get up, actually move out, actually leave other things and make prayer a priority. "To a solitary place." Do you have a place where you can retreat alone with the Lord? There he prayed. He communicated with God. He plugged in. Right before these verses Jesus was pouring himself out in ministry. He had preached that day, went into spiritual combat for someone, healed Simon's mother-in-law, then stayed up late healing and setting people free from spiritual bondage. After this passage he's at it again. But this morning, bookended by the demands of ministry, we see that Jesus made it a priority to get alone with God the Father in prayer. To recharge. Even while, as the disciples said, "Everyone is looking for you!" Jesus got away to pray. He knew he needed to attend to first things first and make sure he was plugged in and connected. Don't try to live life unplugged. Prayer is a life plugged into the power of God.

You are already praying. Everyone prays. There's a good argument out there that every meaningful piece of art is a prayer. Every poem and painting, every song and Netflix series, every novel and every good movie are prayers. Why? A good movie sees the world the way it is and longs for the way it ought to be. It conveys something we all know about how things really are, and it makes us want it to be different. That's a prayer. The question is, does that prayer connect with God? Last weekend in Las Vegas we suffered the worst mass shooting in US history. One man was able to take the lives of 58 innocent victims and injure 527. And we all see the world as it is, and we all long for the world as it ought to be. Jason Aldean was on stage performing when the shots began. He appealed to the public the next day saying, please don't just say you'll send your thoughts and prayers. Please pray to God for these people. Pray to the God in heaven for these people on earth. Are your prayers connecting with God?

There are two schools of prayer it seems. Those who pray up and those who pray down. Those who pray up say, I'm praying to elevate my soul to heaven. I'm praying to feel the joy of communion with God in the heavenly places, to be fitted for his Kingdom and to experience the peace and assurance of his presence. Paul said "God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:6). Pray like you know it's true. Peter wrote to the church, pray with your eyes on the Kingdom above looking to Jesus, "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy" (1 Peter 1:8). Pray up with joy and know you belong to heaven. Others pray down. They say, I'm praying to bring heaven down to earth. I'm praying to see God's power move to change what is wrong and broken down here. God is bringing heaven down here. That's what the promise of the Kingdom of God is all about. That's what Jesus is doing. God is on the move making the future Kingdom present right now, and I pray to be a part of that. I pray to bring up there down here.

Jesus didn't teach us to pray up; Jesus didn't teach us to pray down. Jesus taught us to pray both. When his disciples asked him please teach us to pray, Jesus said pray like this: "Our Father who is up there in Heaven, all glory and honor to your name." Pray up. Pray to see your Father God in heaven where all his glory shines. Pray to be one with God who sits on high and draws you into his loving presence. But then pray, "Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth down here as it is in heaven up there." Why do we pray in Jesus? Why do we pray in Jesus' name? Because Jesus connects up there with down here. Jesus died on the cross to pay for our sins that separate us from God's presence. Jesus died on the cross to restore access to God from here, to connect up there with down here. He died on the cross to atone for sins then he took the wood of that cross, you see, and he built a bridge, a bridge stretching from here to heaven, from right where you are to where God reigns on high, a bridge from here to eternity. Prayer is meeting Jesus on that bridge. Jesus says, walk with me on that bridge. Here the pains of earth reach all the way up to heaven. Here the glories of heaven make their way down to earth.

Some pray to get elevated to God's presence in heaven, others appeal to God to bring heaven down here. Praying in Jesus is both. Jesus says stand with me on the bridge awhile, stand in the breach, stand in the gap with the longings of the world on one side and the glories of Heaven on the other. Prayer in Jesus is not an empty exercise of positive visualization or hopeful expression. Prayer in Jesus unleashes the forces of heaven on the field of combat. In Jesus, down here meets up there; in Jesus up there meets down here. Who else can connect heaven and earth? Proverbs says "Who has gone up to heaven and come down? Whose hands have gathered up the wind? Who has wrapped up the waters in a cloak? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is the name of his son? Surely you know!" (Proverbs 30:4) And then Jesus said, "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man." (John 3:13) Prayer is time walking with Jesus, lingering with Jesus on the bridge he made between heaven and earth. What is his name? Surely you know. His name is Jesus.

What should it take to gain access to God? What would be fair? What's a fair expectation for you or me to gain a hearing in the presence of the Lord God Almighty, Creator of the Heavens and the Earth? I'd understand if you said, well to get to God you have to, you know, travel to Peru and climb Machu Picchu, take forty days to fast and purify yourself with water and oils, know the secret code, recite the magic incantation, then maybe, if the schedule is opened up, you might be able to gain a moment's hearing with the Lord. To tell you the truth, I'd say that's fair. That's more than fair. For me to talk to God? That's more than fair.

In Christ, we have ready access to God the Father in heaven. Just a moment's thought, just a turn of attention to Jesus and we are carried up into the heavenly places with God in prayer, and God is pouring his power into our lives. That's why Jesus modeled prayer. He stepped away three times in the Gospel of Mark to pray. This first one here, then again after the feeding miracles in chapter 6, then a third time in chapter 14 in the Garden of Gethsemane before his crucifixion. Jesus wants you and I to see, access to God has been won by him and gifted to us. To live life apart from prayer is to live life disconnected, un-connected to the power of God. But a life of prayer is a life plugged into the

power of God. It isn't a last resort. Prayer is a first priority. Prayer is the beginning and source of every good endeavor.

Prayer is something everyone does. Seeing the world as it is and longing for the world as it should be. This is something everyone does. Every movie is a prayer. The more powerfully it grasps reality and the more hopefully it expresses our longings and desires, the more effective a piece of art the movie is. *Star Wars: Rogue One*, a prayer. *Blade Runner 2049*. *Pirates of the Caribbean*. *Frozen*. These are prayers! Human prayers measured in hundreds of millions of dollars in gross profits. They are expressions of human longing. But not every prayer connects with God. Jesus doesn't just want us praying like that. Jesus wants us connecting with God in Heaven, standing in the gap, walking the bridge with him.

So, first things first. How can I stay connected with God if I make no time for prayer? First things first means holding my daily appointment with God in highest priority. Just imagine for a moment if you did. Let's do this exercise together. Think for a minute about the year ahead, from right now to October 2018. Think about all it will hold. What challenges do you see? What events are happening that need to go well? What life-stages are your family members going to pass through from here until October 2018? Now, I bet it's a lot. But you know there are even more things coming you have no idea are coming. What surprises are on the way? What unexpected challenges? Run all the way out ahead and look back on it all from there. Phew! That was a lot! Did you make it? Okay, now imagine going through it all with Jesus, connected to God in constant daily prayer. How is it I don't forget to eat, I don't forget to breathe, I don't forget to sleep or take a pill I need to heal my body...but I forget to pray? A life of prayer is a life plugged into the power of God. Plug in.

STUDY GUIDE

FIRST THINGS FIRST • First Resort

Mark 1:35-37

Start It

- "Prayer is the only entryway into genuine self-knowledge. It is also the main way we experience deep change—the reordering of our loves. Prayer is how God gives us so many of the unimaginable things he has for us. Indeed, prayer makes it safe for God to give us many of the things we most desire. It is the way we know God, the way we finally treat God as God. Prayer is simply the key to everything we need to do and be in life. We must learn to pray. We have to." Tim Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*

Study It

- Often people think, I've done all I can do so I might as well pray. Is prayer a last resort for you? Do you find it difficult to keep up a life of prayer?
- Read Mark 1:35-37. What has been happening in Jesus' life before and after this passage? Why do you think Jesus prayed? Wasn't he God and already intimately in contact with God the Father at all times?
- Mark writes with an economy of words; nothing is wasted. Why is it important that Jesus rose "very early in the morning, while it was still dark" (v. 35)? How much of a priority is prayer in your life?
- What can we learn from Jesus' method of prayer in this short passage? Jesus "got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place" (v. 35) where he prayed. What does this teach us about strategies of establishing a prayer life?
- What difference has prayer made in your life?

Pray It

Almighty God, in Your Son Jesus Christ and by the power of Your Holy Spirit, You have granted us access to Your personal presence in prayer. Teach us to pray, O Lord. Train us to lift our souls to heaven in prayer and witness Your glory. Exercise us to call Your Kingdom down to earth that all may see glimpses of full life, know Your power, and live. We pray, in Jesus' name, amen.

Live It

Take the next seven days and commit to 15 minutes of prayer each day (use a timer if you need to).