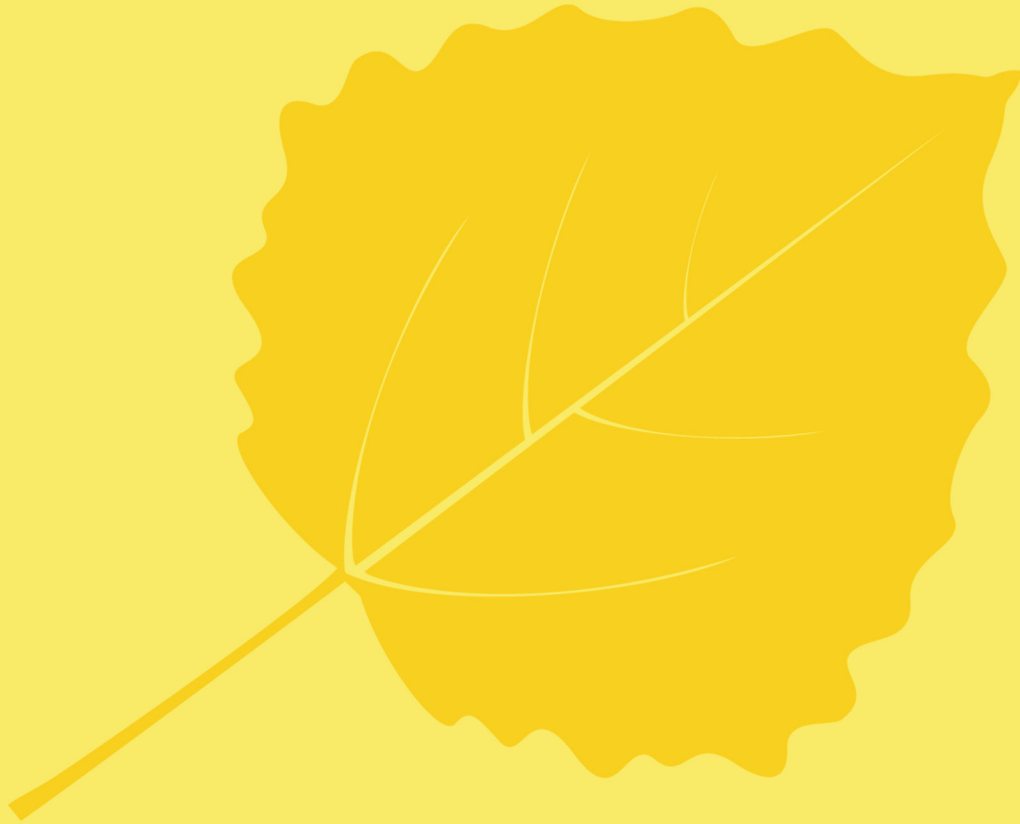


1stTHINGS1st



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 - The Power of Priority • Mt. 6:25-34 • Tim McConnell • August 20, 2017

If you don't give God your first thought, you won't give God a second thought. That's the thing. If God doesn't sit in the right place in your life, He probably has no place in your life because God just doesn't fit in those slots down at the bottom of the priority list. God is first. What would it really look like to have God first in every part of your life? What if you and I put God first—everywhere? What if we were able to put away our worries and anxieties and false pursuits, and, like Jesus says, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:33)? With God in first place everything else falls into place.

I remember when my daughter brought home a project she had made in the second grade. We were living in Charlottesville within walking distance from the school, and would often walk home together. She pulled the project out of her backpack and handed it to me, a garbled mass of yarn, small pictures and bits of metal from a clothes hanger. I held it in my hands and stared at it a minute. She was smiling and proud. "Wow!" I said, "That's great!" My grandfather used to say to me, "Well, that's real good Tim!" No matter what I did, "That's real good Tim." I was twenty years old before it occurred to me he might be faking. "Wow! That's great!" I said to my daughter. But then she reached out and grabbed the right piece, and as she held it in front of me all the lines straightened out and all the pieces fell into place. It was a mobile. That's the power of priority. What comes first determines where everything else hangs. With God in first place everything else finds its place.

Or you might know the illustration of the jar and the rocks. Take a jar and then take three equal portions of sand, gravel and rocks. If you put the sand in first, then the gravel, there is no room for the rocks at the end. But if you put the rocks in first, then the gravel the smaller stones find their way into the gaps. Then you pour the sand over it, and it doesn't look like there's any way at all for the sand to fit—but it does. For added ooh's and aah's you can pour a jar of water in there after that. The point? If you let the little things take up all your time and energy in your life, there will be no room for the big things. But if you prioritize the big things, the little things will find their way in. This came from Stephen Covey's, *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Being highly effective might not be your only goal in life. Super-productivity isn't the highest good. We might want to aim at something more like, oh I don't know, love God and love neighbor. But it is helpful—and we are supposed to be good stewards,

wise managers of the time and energy God gave us. That's the power of priority.

Are the big things at the top? Is the most important thing up on top holding everything else below it? Are the big rocks going in first? Are first things first? Because for me, maybe it's just me, I'm sure none of you struggle with this but for me, sometimes there is just a little deviation between what I intend to do and what I actually do. Every now and then, just every once in a long while—I realize that there is a gap between what I intended to do when I woke up in the morning and what I actually did when I lay my head down on the pillow again at night. Just every now and then. Anyone else? This series is designed to help you shorten that distance, close that gap. It's one thing to have priorities in your head or even in your heart, but it is another thing to work those priorities out into action—the actual things you actually do with your actual body. Intention without action is empty. Intention without action gets you nowhere. What's in your head and your heart has to get to your hands. Then your life changes.

Jesus knew the power of priority. "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:33) One time Jesus was with His friends Mary and Martha, and Martha was running around trying to put on a good lunch while Mary sat at Jesus' feet to hear His teaching, "'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.'" (Luke 10:41-42). Only one thing is needed. Priority. Or once when He was asked what the highest priority is of all the commandments, "Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:37-40) Jesus knew about priority. He was reiterating what God had already revealed. The top of the Ten Commandments puts God first in all things: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:2-3) That's priority. Don't put anything above God. But what happens when we do? What happens when a false god creeps in and takes the first slot? Chaos. That's what.

Jesus, in this passage pulled from the middle of the Sermon on the Mount—one of the most beautiful

and profound teachings on human ethics ever presented—Jesus says watch your priorities. Put first things first. Otherwise things start to fall apart. Jesus says to put away worry. “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?” (Matthew 6:25) We are tempted to run after things as though there is no God. Look at the birds, look at the lilies of the fields and know that God knows how to take care of things—He knows how to take care of you. “Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?” (Matthew 6:27) Worry is a useless emotion. This doesn’t mean we do nothing. The flowers pull nutrients and grow; the birds don’t just sit there with their beaks open waiting to be fed. We too work and save and all that. But worry is a useless emotion. It can’t lengthen your life; actually it shortens your life. But it’s even worse than that, if I can point this out quickly—you’ll have to read and study it on your own—but worry is worse than useless, it pushes you to false gods. Just before this passage Jesus is talking about all the things we turn into idols, into false gods, all the things we start to worship in God’s place. And the reason we do that, He says, is worry. Worry actually creates false gods. Go back and see. “Therefore,” Jesus says, “do not worry.” Don’t go chasing after things in the world as if there were no God. Instead, have faith. Instead seek the kingdom.

“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:33). Break it down. “Seek his kingdom.” John Stott wrote, “God’s kingdom is Jesus Christ ruling over his people in total blessing and total demand.” To seek the kingdom is to desire above all else the growing reign of Jesus—over your heart, over your family, over your city, over your world. Seek first the kingdom. Seek “his righteousness.” Seek the glory and righteousness of Jesus. We are quick to seek our own righteousness—I love to stand on the righteous side. What does it mean to seek “his righteousness”? It might be a bigger challenge. How easy it is for anything and everything to slip into the top seat of our hearts. Seek first His kingdom, His righteousness, God first in all. Give Christ your first thought or you won’t give Christ a second thought.

So let’s return to Charlottesville, my home for many years. I promised last week to say more. When symbols of hate like this emerge and we see people marching with torches with racial hatred on their lips, Nazi swastikas and KKK leaders in full garb, when we see people taking to the streets looking for violence,

what are we to do? We must immediately and clearly say, as we did last week, any attempt to divide and espouse hatred along racial lines is absolutely and categorically opposed to the ways of God and the love of Jesus Christ. It is a moment to speak clearly and forcefully the truth of God’s Word and of God’s ways—that all men and women were created equal, from one blood, equally in the image of God; that Jesus’ mission was and is to tear down the dividing walls of hostility between us (Gen 1:27; Eph 2:14). Is there a diabolical lie seeping in again about some supposed difference in value among those created by God? Tell the truth; dispel the lie. Quickly. Accurately. Acts 17:26 says, “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth,” or in the old King James “from one blood.” One blood, all people. To seek first the Kingdom of God is to long for and seek that same dream expressed by Martin Luther King Jr when all men and women are judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. That must be said and more. We who are Jesus followers have a responsibility to say those true things again and again, but even more to get out of our own context and try with all we have to empathize across racial lines and seek to understand. If I’m not a person of color then I want to imagine what it feels like to be a person of color watching this hatred, feeling it directed at me or to be a parent trying to shield your child from a hatred you believed was long gone and hoped they would never know. We all have to let our hearts break with them and stand to oppose the hate, and to oppose it not with more hate but with love.

Hate cannot be overcome with more hate. No more than lies by more lies, or darkness by more darkness. Martin Luther King taught, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” And don’t you feel pulled and tempted to descend into anger, fear, name-calling, hatred? This is the radical challenge of the Jesus way. In the Jesus way hatred based on racism is wrong, but in the Jesus way hatred of those who hate is also wrong. When hate inspires hate we are lost. Isaiah described it long ago, a world where we “look for light but all is darkness;” justice is nowhere to be found and righteousness stands far away; “truth has stumbled in the public square.” (Isaiah 59) What now? In a world with no truth only the loudest shouts win. There is no objective seeking and sacrificing for the common good, only kicking and spitting and screaming, jumping into the trench warfare and declaring ourselves righteous. We need the Jesus way, the way of love. Seek *His* kingdom, *His* righteousness and let all these things follow.

Are we too far afield? Listen, bring it back to our passage and our challenge. If you don't give God the first thought you won't give God a second thought. What happened in the streets of Charlottesville is what happens in our hearts—when God is not in first place the loudest shouts win. That's the point. If God is not on the landscape, if the light of God does not shine in the streets, all is darkness and groping along the walls without hope. All is confusion and your life is like a disordered mob with no real place to go. But into this comes Jesus. Isaiah again, "So justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter. Truth is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey. The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm achieved salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him." His own arm—Jesus. "'The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins,' declares the LORD." (Isaiah 59:14-16; 20) In walks Jesus. The Redeemer will come. The light will come. The truth will come. Righteousness will be revealed in the face of Jesus. Come Lord Jesus! We need you!

"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:33). Seek first. To seek the kingdom of God is to long for the reign of Jesus to take over every aspect of your life. The way you spend your time; the way you approach your work; your public positions and private attitudes; your loves and your dislikes; your very thoughts and desires and actions. Jesus rules. Jesus reigns. The Redeemer will come to Zion. We need Him. Not just in our streets, but in our hearts. Not just in our hearts, but in our streets. We need Him. In first place.

STUDY GUIDE

FIRST THINGS FIRST - The Power of Priority

Matthew 6:25-34

Start It

- Of all the different things coming at you each day, some of them are important and others are not. You have priorities in your life. You have things you know are more valuable than others. Maybe you even have an order of values written down, a list of the things you value most—faith, family, friends, fortune...they don't all have to start with "F"! When you run through a day or a week it can be difficult to keep the most valued things in the most valued space. Looking back on a day we may find that we spent the most time and energy on the least valuable things. A day becomes a year; a year becomes an age and soon a lifetime.

Study It

- Read Matthew 6:26-30. Are we supposed to worry about our lives? Are we supposed to plan and work to sustain our lives and those around us? What is worry?
- What does the phrase "God will provide" mean to you? How do we trust in God's provision?
- Read Matthew 6:31-34. What does Jesus mean that the "pagans run after all these things"? How is a Christian meant to be different? (cf Matthew 6:19-24).
- Read Matthew 6:33. Why is the word "first" important to what Jesus instructs here? What does it mean to seek "his kingdom"? What does it mean to seek "his righteousness"?
- When Jesus says that "all these things will be given" do you think he is promising wealth and prosperity for following him? What is he promising?
- How do you allow tomorrow to worry about itself? Does each day have enough trouble?

Pray It

Almighty God and Heavenly Father, You provide for us out of Your fathomless storehouse all things good and beautiful. We have life and breath and daily bread from Your loving hand. Help us to know peace and contentment in what You give. Help us to keep Your Kingdom and Righteousness ever before us as of first priority. You are first, and You are last, and You are in all things to be glorified and adored. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Live It

List your priorities in life. After one week, estimate how much time and energy was spent on each.