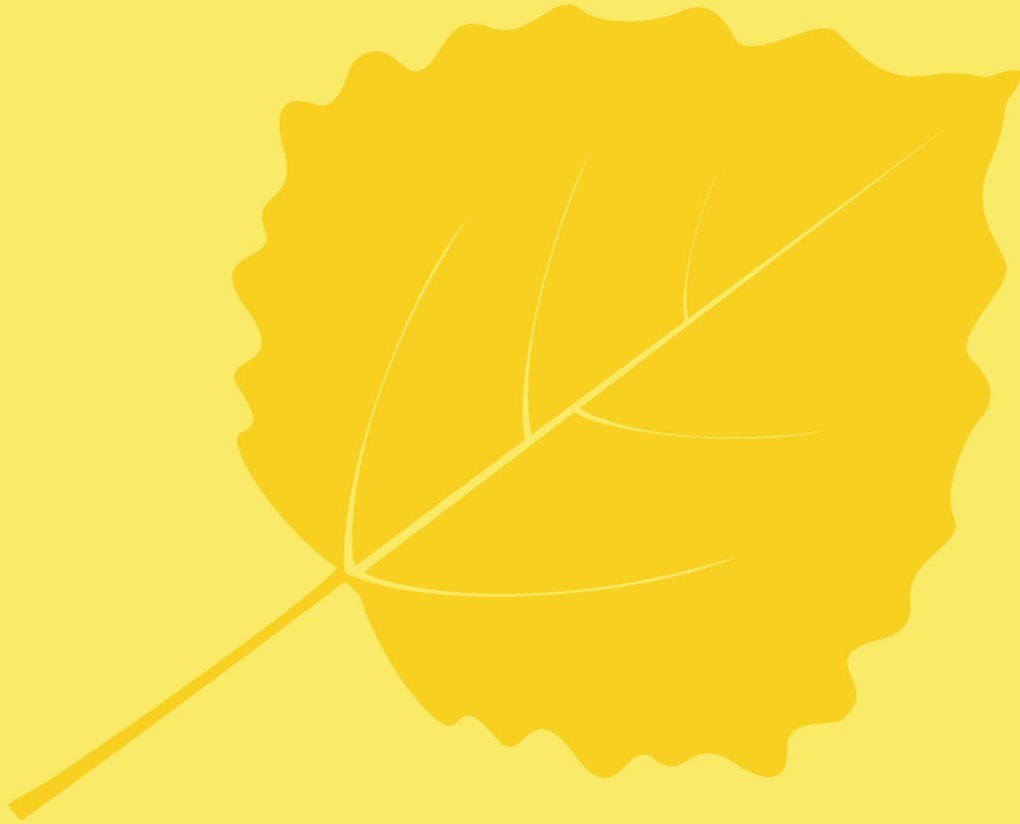


1stTHINGS1st



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 Serve Jesus • 1 Timothy 6:6-12 • Tim McConnell • September 3, 2017

Happy Labor Day weekend! In honor of all our labors and careers—quick workplace quiz. Fill in the blank. “The customer is always ____.” “Don’t put off to tomorrow what you could get done ____.” “There’s no I in ____.” You guys are doing great. You’re hired. Here’s one more, “Here at work, God comes ____.” At least a few of you knew what the pastor wanted you to say! In my career, God comes first. In my work life, God comes first. In my hopes for advancement and influence and productivity and value...God comes first. First things first. We want to give God preeminence in every place. Give God your first thought or you won’t give God a second thought. This Labor Day weekend, how about your work, your career? Is God first at work? What would it mean to give God first place in your career? If God is in first place, we should be able to say, we should *want* to say that even as we serve the company, serve the customer, serve the career goals before us, first, *first* I serve Jesus. Everything else falls in behind.

Now, I know we are in a lot of different places with career life. Some of us are just kids with no idea what it means to have a job. You need to listen, kids. You need to know from the outset how to serve Jesus first before your job. Or you may be retired. The career is in the books, there’s no changing it now so why talk about it? Listen, this is important now. Jesus can still change your career even after it’s done. Pray that Jesus takes up all you did and shows you all He did through you. I know many retirees who have seen their career shift in their minds because they had it all summed up, what they accomplished, where they finished out, what salary they achieved, and they thought that was it. But in retirement, submitting their now past work lives to the Lord, people start to come forward and explain the impact they had on them in ways that truly mattered. “When you taught that training, I could tell you were different.” “When you took time to stop at my desk the day my mother died...” “When you sent that note, you probably didn’t know what it meant.” Things you have forgotten the Lord can bring to mind to bless and reframe your entire career. Pray that Jesus takes hold of all you did and shows you what He did through you. Or you may not be in a paycheck job. You may be called to the home to raise children, or to service in other ways. Or you may be longing to find a job and unable to find that next open door. We are in a lot of different places today, but one truth reigns over all—Jesus comes first. First serve Jesus then serve in your work.

Why? 1 Timothy outlines the problem pretty clearly for

us. Your work life, your career life, your ambitions and aspirations, this whole area is a minefield for your soul. If you are going to navigate this, you need a guidance system, a north star and a compass. You need to see Jesus out in front in every decision you make about your career. Paul is writing to Timothy his trainee. Timothy is now the pastor of the church Paul founded in Ephesus. So take note of the context here. Paul is not talking about Wall Street or the Foreign Exchange or the cutthroat commercial real estate market in Athens...he’s talking about pastors! People in ministry. These are pernicious little temptations; they can move into any heart that fails to put Jesus first in a career. But what we learn applies to every career.

Let me jump around a little bit for the sake of our message. We start with verse 10: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” (1 Timothy 6:10) Have any of you ever been motivated by money? You have? Oh my! Listen, money itself isn’t evil. Money is just potentiality. Money is pure potential. It can become many things—it can become a home for your family, help in medical need, a life experience like travel or family vacation, security. Or it can become help for those in the community in need of help, relief for the poor, aid for those in disasters like in Texas right now. It can also, in God’s hands, become eternal Kingdom work—kids coming to faith in Christ, marriages being rescued and restored, missions making the name of Jesus great across the globe, or churches expanding worship opportunities and reaching more and more of their city with the good news of the gospel like an expanding lake with ever-expanding shores. Money can become beautiful things. But the love of money. Eagerness for money. That can take your heart and pull you straight out of God’s purposes. Don’t love money. Love God; love people; use money. The love of money is like a root, a seedbed of all kinds of evil. I don’t even have to list examples—you just take a minute and think about the week’s news. Where did the lying, the abuse, the murder, the marital discord, the government corruption, the global collapse of justice all come from? Somebody wanted more money. “Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.” (1 Timothy 6:9) That’s the problem.

The solution? Jesus first. Serve Jesus first. Love Jesus more. More than ambition, more than success, more than influence, more than money. Love Jesus first.

Serve Jesus first. Say, "Lord, I love you more than these." Look at verse six: "But godliness with contentment is great gain." (1 Timothy 6:6) Godliness with contentment is great gain. Do you know I don't read that a lot in the motivational business books? I don't get that a lot from the hyper-productivity, go further faster, more, more, more crowd. Do you? Godliness plus contentment equals...great gain! Godliness—I want to honor God first in all things. You might have a shortcut to fluff the bottom line, but I value godliness. I want godliness above all. Godliness plus contentment. What I have I have from the hand of God, and I'm content. I'm fundamentally grateful and content with what I have. If I can work hard and God pours out more blessing, wonderful! If I stay where I am, I am content in the Lord. John Calvin actually thought this is the most important verse to measure our careers against. 1 Timothy 6:6, "But godliness with contentment is great gain." Calvin said "there is a world of vices hidden in the soul of man...the desire for wealth, the lust of power, and the favor of men, also false ambitions and hunger for human glory along with other more secret evils." These all are tempered by 1 Timothy 6:6. I want godliness. I want contentment in the Lord. I want Jesus first in my career: "If a man has learned to regard God in every enterprise, he will be delivered from all vain desires." (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.6)

First things first. Jesus first even at work. God first in my career. What does it look like? I want to elevate four thoughts: **(1) Do what God wants.** What's the last time you put your whole career, your job, your work before the Lord with a truly open question, "Jesus, is this what you want me to be doing?" Maybe God wants you doing something else. Maybe God wants you to move into full time ministry or missions. Pastors are so quick to say that following God doesn't mean getting shipped off to Africa that we sometimes fail to say that following God might mean getting shipped off to Africa! I had lunch with a friend who is headed into full time missions with his wife and two kids in a country in Central Asia. He said, "Come see me next year." I laughed, "Yeah, right." But he was serious. "Don't count on it!" Who knows, maybe I'll get there. But what if God is calling you to a full career change? We are quick to bounce our kids on our knee and say "You can be whatever you want." But that isn't true and puts horrendous pressure on them. We should say, "You can be whatever God wants you to be." We should all want to do what God wants. Then when you go back to your job, you'll know God wants you there because you asked, and you were willing to go and do whatever God wants.

(2) See work as mission. Putting God first at work means seeing your position as an outpost of God's Kingdom, asking every day why God might have put you there and who God wants you to reach in your sphere of influence at work. God may have put you there to shed the light of Christ into a situation of darkness that may not otherwise be reached. Remember, nobody likes to be seen as a project or a problem that needs to be fixed. Just be a friend. That's the best method of reaching others with the light and life of Christ. Be a friend ready to sacrifice and invest in the well-being of others. Maybe your work is a mission field. But maybe your best witness is good work! **(3) Pursue excellence; add value.** Sometimes the best Christian witness is a Christian doing their best. Be excellent at what you do. Pursue excellence and know that doing your job to the best of your ability is something God can use to reveal His own goodness and glory. Seek to add value to your organization or business. Don't seek to be valued; seek to add value. We can do these things as believers because we remember what it says in Colossians 3:23, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters." I'm not working for a paycheck. I'm not even working for my boss. I'm working for Jesus, no matter what I'm doing. That changes the game.

(4) Reframe the work. Maybe you haven't thought about this. But as children of God, shaped by worship and formed for the Kingdom, as people living with a Jesus perspective, we can sometimes see things differently than those around us. There are many companies right now trying to reframe the purpose of their industry. It's not just a coffee shop – we are offering life experience. It's not just a phone – we are offering world enhancement and global intellectual progress. It's not just a car – it's a family security device. Some of this is just hokey marketing! But it is something to be grateful for when industries want to find larger goals and see larger purposes than bottom line profit. Profit is not an evil thing! But sometimes we can help companies see the larger impact of the industry. A friend of mine works for The Weather Company (weather.com, and the Weather Channel). It's owned by IBM. The company decided to do something about the tropical storms in the Pacific, so they created a special project to create a new system of analytics and communications for that region as an act of charity. Not only did they decide to do this without profit, but they began to see it as a way to train their best leaders. So they didn't just send volunteers, they culled their best and brightest. My friend, Lee got selected and has been training now for months. Soon he'll be in Philip-

pires for six weeks installing the best new predictive analytics to save lives when the next storm hits. I love it! Now, is IBM going to use this as a marketing and public image communications piece? You bet they are! But lives are being saved. New values are being inculcated in the industry. All because business was reframed with a view to being a good neighbor. How can a Christian be a part of that? Maybe God has put you in a place of influence to reframe the work and bring meaning, and open up conversations about things that matter in your workplace.

It's easy to get carried away with ambition for wealth and success. Our scripture tells us: "But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses." (1 Timothy 6:11-12) When we stand for Christ in our careers, when we serve Him first in our ambitions and our work, we can resist the temptations and create beautiful things, beautiful purposeful industry that helps people thrive and honors God. The old Presbyterian Book of Common Worship contains a prayer for the workplace: "Almighty Father, who by Thy Son Jesus Christ hast sanctified labor to the welfare of mankind: Prosper, we pray Thee, the industries of this land, and all those who are engaged therein; that, shielded in all their temptations and dangers, and receiving a due reward of their labors, they may praise Thee by living according to Thy will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen." (1948 Book of Common Worship) Did you know I pray for your work? I pray for your industry to prosper. I pray for you to do well and for God to bless our efforts. I want you to be successful in your career and fulfilled in your vocation. I want you to be the most valuable employee on the payroll! Then I want you to tithe! Why wouldn't we want that for each other? Why wouldn't we pray for God to bless our industries and keep them noble and honorable? Fight the good fight at work. Keep Jesus out in front. Serve Jesus first, and everything else will fall into place.

STUDY GUIDE

FIRST THINGS FIRST

First Serve Jesus

1 Timothy 6:6-12

Start It

- "Most of us cannot and do not live extraordinary lives. Instead we live in families and in neighborhoods, working and worshipping week by week in rhythms that make the sum of our lives, season after season, year after year. Life cannot be other than that." (Steven Garber, *Visions of Vocation*). Most of our time and energy is spent on work. You might be in the pattern of paid work, you might be in unpaid work, or your career might be finished and behind you. We derive a huge amount of our identity and value from our work.

Study It

- Read 1 Timothy 6:6-8. How is "godliness with contentment" a great thing? What might we gain from these? Is it difficult to be content?
- Read 1 Timothy 6:8-10. How is the "love of money" the root of all evils? What evils stem from it? What are some examples of the desire to get rich causing people to fall into a trap?
- Read 1 Timothy 6:11-12. What is the "good fight of faith" we need to engage? Talk about the value of each virtue listed in verse 11. How could each of these help you to fight the good fight?
- What does it mean to put God in first place in your career? Have you had experience attempting to keep Jesus first in your job or vocation?

Pray It

Almighty God, You blessed and ordained the privilege of labor in Genesis, instructing the first man and woman to keep the garden and work to care for it. We thank you for the privilege of meaningful work. Help us to keep You first in our jobs and careers that we might honor You in all we do. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Live It

Reach out to a friend who seems to keep God on the forefront in the workplace; take time to discuss the challenges.