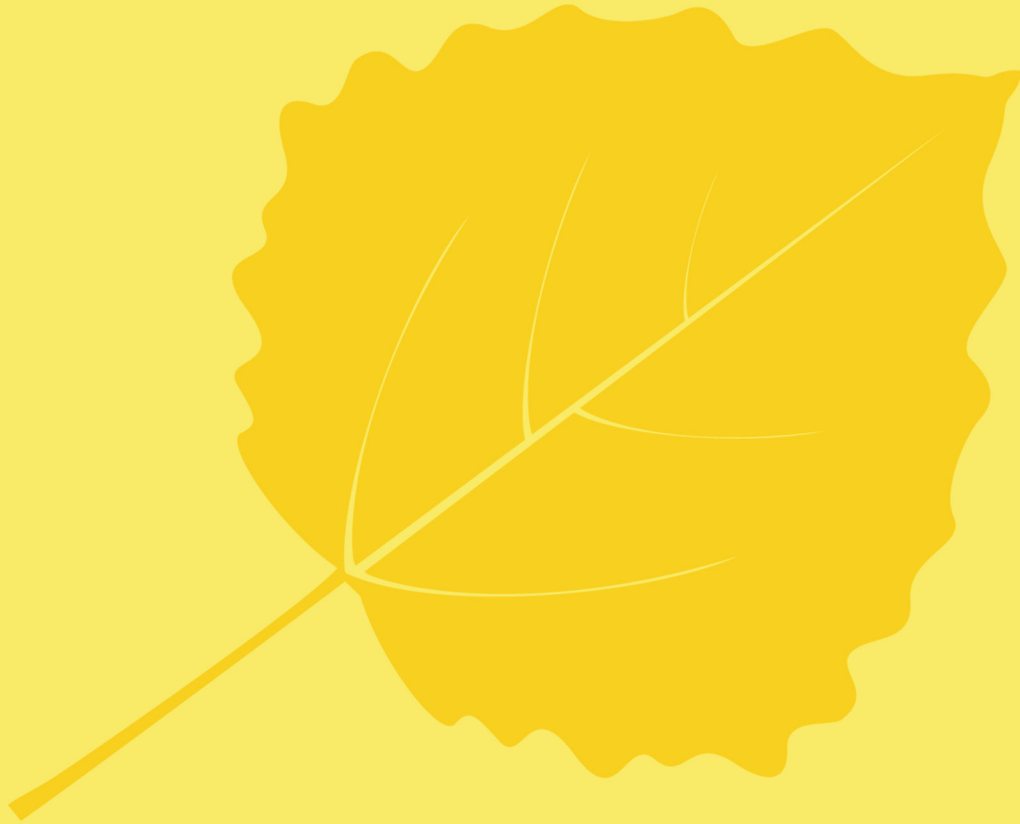


1stTHINGS1st



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 – You First • Romans 15:1-7 • Tim McConnell • September 24, 2017

Abigail and I met in college. I can still remember the first time I was able to be alone with her. We were in a group of friends that liked spending time together. It was pretty late but we all decided we wanted to watch a movie. Actually we *had* to watch a movie, and it *had* to be *Raising Arizona*. Since none of us had the tape (VCR tape—look it up, kids) that meant somebody had to make a run to Blockbuster to rent it. Again, I know I'm old. No need to rub it in. It's just then that my eyes met Abigail's and we both said, "I'll go." Out we went to my car, our first time alone together. Now this was at a time when women were in a pretty active conversation about whether or not to allow a man to open a door for you. So not only was I sweating through my scalp to be alone with this girl, but as we approached the car I didn't know whether to open the door for her or not. I stepped forward to open the door. She caught my confused, deer-in-the-headlights look, and she said, "Tim, you can open as many doors for me as you'd like." Boy did that sound promising. I was glad she was going to let me step forward and take care of her. Now, here's the question: did I open that door for Abigail or did I open that door for me? Let's vote. How many say I opened it for Abigail? How many say I opened it for me?

Here's why I tell that story: God wants us living "you-first" lives in a "me-first" world. God wants us serving those around us, saying "you first." But that's the challenge; it's very hard for us to do something for another without thinking of what it does for us in return. Romans 15:2, "Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up." I was so captured by that when I read it thinking about this Sunday's message. I dug into it to study it and make sure I wasn't getting it wrong. This is exactly what it means. "Each of us"—every single one, lody-doddy everybody. "Should"—not a suggestion, a command; don't get the wrong idea. "Please our neighbors for their good"—serve our neighbors for their benefit, "to build them up." Each of us ought to do something, to act, to please our neighbors, to serve our neighbors. Why? Not for our good, not for our agenda, not for our profit, but for their good to build them up, under the motivation and design to help them along, for their edification and well-being. That's what God wants from us. That's living as "you-first" people in a "me-first" world. What I'm saying is, I'm not sure we can do it.

There's a range of why we do good things. Why do I do for you? It sits on a range, on a scale. The first

step on the scale is "I do for you because you do for me." *Quid pro quo*. Me doing something for you is just the beginning, the precursor, of you doing something of equal or maybe even higher value for me in return. This is at the heart of a lot of our interactions. What goes around comes around. I did a good thing; I'm waiting for my returns. The next step is a little further down the line: "I do for you because it feels good to me." I can't wait to get that feeling. When I do good, I get a great feeling about myself. There are actually studies out there about the positive buzz we feel when we do good things for others. A flood of endorphins are released along with dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin. Not to mention the feeling of superiority, the near sense of royalty we feel when the person we helped expresses humble and sincere gratitude for our beneficence. Watch out if they don't! I'm never going back there. See how this is really only a half-step away from the first position?

Romans 15:2 is saying something else. This Saturday is CityServe. Over two dozen churches are participating with us now. What began four years ago as an effort to get our folks out on the street to bless our city and help our city where it hurts has grown into a movement with leadership from multiple churches, the attention of the Mayor's office, and thousands of volunteers with the aim to restore the reputation of Christianity in Colorado Springs and love the city with no strings attached. When we hit the streets on Saturday—and I sure hope you have tried to find a way to help—we hit the streets with one goal, to help in Jesus' name. Not to receive a reward. Not to buzz with good feelings. To help in Jesus' name. This is our goal. This is what holiness requires. Romans 15:2, "Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up."

When Jesus was asked the greatest commandment, "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) Love your neighbor like you love yourself. Not to benefit yourself. Love your neighbor and seek the good of your neighbor as much as you love yourself and seek your own good. This is what holiness requires. Or Jesus' great commandment to the disciples at the end of His life, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By

this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:34-35) These are the markers, these are the precepts and foundations of Christian action. This is what holiness requires. Living as "you-first" people in a "me-first" world. It isn't, "I do for you because you do for me." It isn't, "I do for you because it feels good to me." It's, "I do for you because it is good for you." This is what holiness requires. It requires that I act with pure motives, with no concern or expectation for myself or my interests, in total selflessness and self-sacrifice with one aim and one aim only—the good of the other. I want you to see how high a calling this is. I want you to see how demanding a standard this is. Love your neighbor. It's nearly impossible. In fact, it is too high. Can we admit it? It isn't possible to perform a purely selfless act. But here's the good news—Jesus has done what holiness requires. Jesus has done it for us.

"Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.'" (Romans 15:2-3) Paul quotes Psalm 69 here, a Psalm of expectation of the Messiah. Jesus is the promised Messiah. Jesus is the one who came on a rescue mission. Jesus is the one who did not please Himself, but allowed the insults meant for others to fall on Him. What does that mean? This is the great atoning work of Jesus. Jesus came to rescue us, and if Jesus was worried about getting fair treatment, if Jesus was worried about getting something out of it in return, He never would have come and we never would have been saved. "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." (Romans 15:4-7)

I don't know if you or I could ever perform a genuinely selfless act. There are always mixed motives, if not from the beginning then they work their way in. There is always some little desire of the heart to get a payoff on the other side, even if it's just a proper Thank You, just a little gratitude, and a note, and a plaque...you know. That's not too much to ask. Can we perform a genuinely selfless act? It's what Jesus did. Jesus who humbled Himself. Jesus who left His place at the side

of the Father and humbled Himself to become one with humanity; who emptied Himself to become one with us. It's Jesus who took on flesh and then took on the insults, the undeserved hatred, the sins of all humanity. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." (1 Peter 2:24) That's Jesus. He didn't do it expecting to be rewarded. He didn't do it because it felt good. He did it for us. You and I may not be able to match the standard of holiness, to do what holiness requires. But Jesus has done it. He has satisfied the standard. And you and I, we can follow Him.

So here's a fourth option. Not, "I do for you because you do for me." Not, "I do for you because it feels good to me." Not even, "I do for you because it is good for you," the pure and selfless act that only Jesus can do. But the fourth option: "I do for you because Jesus did for me." I love you because Jesus loved me. I serve you because Jesus saved me. I accept and help and build up you because Jesus accepted me when He had no reason, no cause—but He loved me anyway. God wants His love for you to turn into love for others. It can. 1 John 4:10-11 says, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." Love starts with God, and it runs to you, but it doesn't stop there. Since God loved us, we also love. We are a "you-first" people in a "me-first" world because God loved us first. That's the banner of Christian service to fly over everything we do next weekend in our city. God loved us first.

My first international mission trip was with Young Life when I was sixteen. We went to an orphanage in Tijuana and stayed in a makeshift border community. It was my first time seeing people living in dirt-floor plywood homes built out of whatever was nearby. In the middle of this town was a nearly-finished cinder-block building. We asked our hosts about it. "What's that?" "Oh, we're not sure." "What do you mean?" "Well, another mission team came down and built that. They had a lot of kids to keep busy and they said they wanted to build something. We didn't want them to leave disappointed, but it's kind of an eyesore now. We hoped they would finish it the last day, but the kids got into a paint fight. Anyway, there it is." We could see the half-finished walls were all splashed in paint. We asked if they wanted us to tear it down, but they said if it was finished they might find a use for it so we paid a local worker to finish the

walls and roof and we painted it at the end of the week. It was my first exposure to service for the wrong reasons. Service to serve your own needs. Whoever that mission team was, they knew what they wanted to do and they did it. They had very little awareness, and probably very little interest in what the community actually needed or what would actually be good for them. They served, I'm sorry to say, for their own good.

You know, the more our culture moves away from Christianity, the more post-Christian our society becomes, and the more what it means to be a Christian is a novel or unknown thing to those around us, the less of that stuff we can afford. People don't believe us when we try to tell them the good news about Jesus because they don't believe we have their best interests at heart. Paul wrote to the Christian in Rome under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to say, "Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up." (Romans 15:2) That's a high standard. Read on in Romans 15 and you see just how important it is. The "Gentiles" as it says here, the Romans, the world outside, the citizens of Colorado Springs who don't know the Lord, they're watching. May we have the endurance and the encouragement we need to have the same mind as Jesus, not to serve ourselves or see what we can get, but to genuinely serve others for their up-building. Then God, the light and life of Christ, will be on display.

It's a high standard. Higher than I can reach in my power. But Christ can do it. Christ did do it. And as we follow Him, His power and His Spirit in us can do it again. With God first, we can be a "you-first" people in a "me-first" world. Can you imagine the difference that would make? We try to say in our household, "We are not a 'me-first' family." Actually we say it all the time. Just about every time we are getting in the car and someone wants the best seat, or we're sitting down to dinner and one has more milk than the other, or there's something sweet to be divvied up, or a present to open, or a show to watch, or toothpaste to be... Actually we say it a lot. But it's harder to live it out. With God in first place, with Jesus first, with His love pouring first into our lives—we can be a "you-first" people in a "me-first" world in the name, and under the power, of Jesus Christ.

STUDY GUIDE

FIRST THINGS FIRST • You First

Romans 15:1-7

Start It

"It's not about you. The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born *by* His purpose and *for* His purpose." These are the opening lines of Rick Warren's famous book, *The Purpose Driven Life*. You are not first. Understanding the true purpose of your life begins with accepting that opening sentence: "It's not about you." Putting God first allows us to put others first before ourselves. God wants us living "you-first" lives in a "me-first" world.

Study It

- Read Romans 15:1. Who are the strong and who are the weak (you may need to read back to Romans 14)? Why should the strong be the ones to build the bridge toward the weak?
- Read Romans 15:2. What does it mean to please your neighbor "for their good"? What does it mean to please your neighbor "to build them up"? Why is this a difficult command?
- Read Romans 15:3. How does Christ model what we are called to do in verse 2? What were the insults that fell on him?
- Read Romans 15:4-7. How do you find encouragement for endurance in Scripture? When it says that the Scriptures should give us the same attitude of mind for others that Christ had, what is that attitude of mind (cf Philippians 2:1-11)?

Pray It

Lord Jesus, You modeled selfless sacrifice for us, putting the needs of others before Your own. You gave Your whole self to save us from our sins. Help us to regard one another with the same mind we find in You, loving one another and serving one another in genuine selfless service. And let this reflect the glory and the beauty which is Yours alone forever and ever. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Live It

Perform an act of service for which you will receive no recognition. If possible do it anonymously.