

FIRST THINGS FIRST

by Walton Weaver

One of the greatest problems we all face is that of *priorities* in our lives. Most of us have a difficult time setting them and then working for them. Peoples' attitude generally is: give me results without responsibilities, wages without work, and acceptance without achievement.

One does not have to look far into his Bible, however, before he begins to notice that the Bible is quite specific about some priorities. By this we mean that the Bible teaches that some things must come first, or they must be prior to, other things before certain benefits that will follow are assured. Let us now briefly take a look at some of these priorities

Listening To God

Before we take our thanksgivings and petitions to God, thinking that He will hear us, we should first consider whether we are willing to hear God when he speaks to us through his word. *Listening to God precedes God being willing to hear us.* We should remember that the "Lord is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous" (Prov. 15:29). Again, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear" (Ps. 66:18). Of the hypocrite, Job asks, "Will God hear his cry when trouble comes upon him?" (Job 27:8-9). Peter says that "the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayers; but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil" (1 Pet. 3:12). James concurs, when he says, "the effective fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (James 5:16b). God heard the prayers of Cornelius and remembered his alms (Acts 10:31), but Cornelius was first a man who was willing to "hear all the things commanded . . . by God" (Acts 10:33).

Reconciled To A Brother

What we have discovered to be true about our relation to God is also true of our relation to our brother. Just as we must first be willing to hear God before he will hear us, we must also *be right in our relation to our brother before God will accept our worship.* Consider the following statement from Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount:

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to our brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matt. 5:21-24).

Brethren oftentimes do not consider this matter seriously enough. They go on trying to worship God while being alienated from a brother. Jesus says this is an impossibility. When one is separated from a brother as a result of some wrong that has been done, true worship is not possible. It is such an important matter that Jesus says that one should interrupt his worship (or attempted worship, we should say) by leaving it behind and going at once to his brother to bring about a reconciliation— then come back and offer your worship to God.

"If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his

brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also” (1 John 4:20-21).

Examination Of One’s Self

A lot of people who know very little Bible can quote Jesus’ statement, “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Matt. 7:1), but almost without exception, when they do quote it, they misapply it. Jesus is not condemning all judging in this statement. If he were, everybody would be violating it every day.

We must make judgments about things and about people. If we were not permitted to do this we could not do a lot of things that the Bible commands us to do. We could not, for example, judge between teachers, and yet just a few verses later we are commanded to “beware of false prophets” (Matt. 7:15), and John says to “test the spirits, whether they are of God: because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1).

If all judging is condemned how could a person decide whether or not a thing is worldly, and if he can’t make this judgment, how would he be able to avoid it? If all judging is wrong, how could a Christian who is spiritual know when a brother has been overtaken in a fault, and that he should therefore attempt to restore him (Gal. 6:1)? You get the point by now. Jesus does not condemn all judging, but judging that is unfair. Elsewhere Jesus commands, “Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment” (Jn. 7:24).

In Matthew 7:1-6 Jesus is addressing a situation where there were those who were quick to find fault with others when there were worse faults in their own lives. He calls them hypocrites and then tells them they should “first remove the plank from their own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Matt. 7:5, NKJV). In this statement Jesus gives us another priority: one must examine himself first, and only then is he permitted to proceed to examine others.

Seeking God’s Kingdom

At one place in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus dealt at length with our service in the kingdom of God. He pointed out that one cannot serve two masters, “for,” he said, “either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt. 6:24). Following this statement, he went on to point out the uselessness of worry, and he shows that the remedy for such anxiety is trust in God as our loving heavenly Father. The things that people worry about the most, he said, are things that have to do with food, clothing, and length of life (Matt. 6:26-31), and, yet, “your heavenly Father knows that you have need of these things” (Matt. 6:32). So what is the answer to worry? Jesus answers, “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble” (Matt. 6:33-34).

According to Jesus’ answer, what must come first? *Seeking God’s kingdom must come before material things, such as food, clothing and shelter.* Things that pertain to our physical needs and comforts are important, but they are not *as important* as the things that pertain to our spiritual needs and growth. Those who begin to make excuse fail to understand this truth. They have their priorities confused. They say, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father,” but Jesus says, in so many words, “No, that’s not what must come first in your life.” Here are his exact words: “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:59-60). We must seek the kingdom of God first!

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Showing Mercy

If one expects God to be merciful to him, he must first be willing to show mercy toward others. James says, “For judgment

is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment” (Jas. 2:13). Don’t expect mercy from God if you have not first learned to show it yourself. Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (Matt. 5:7).

Do you have someone you have been unwilling to forgive? Then don’t look to God to forgive you. Forgiving hearts are loving hearts, and no one can say he loves God and not forgive his brother. Remember Paul’s words:

“Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do” (Col. 3:12-13).

“And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:32).