

FIRST THINGS, Part 1

First Pursuit

By Rev. Will Nelken

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“First” may refer to the order of things, as “first in line,” or it may refer to the importance of things, as “first in priority.” One is temporal, having to do with time and space; the other is eternal, having to do with value.

Over the next four Sundays, we will consider what the Bible teaches are the *first* things for us to concern ourselves with. To begin with, let’s see what Jesus thought was uppermost.

First Importance

Matthew 6:24 “No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money (mammon).”

Contemporary Americans don’t understand the word “mammon.” It is really more than “money.” Mammon is the whole scheme or system, of which money is simply the currency. Mammon is the theme of Madison Avenue’s incessant barrage of advertising, aimed to persuade you that you lack one more thing to make your life wonderful and satisfying. Jesus’ words answer our need truly: “You lack one thing... come and follow me.”

Matthew 6:25 “That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life—whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn’t life more than food, and your body more than clothing?²⁶ Look at the birds. They don’t plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds them. And aren’t you far more valuable to him than they are?²⁷ Can all your worries add a single moment to your life?

²⁸ “And why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don’t work or make their clothing,²⁹ yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are.

³⁰ And if God cares so wonderfully for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, he will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith?

³¹ “So don’t worry about these things, saying, ‘What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?’³² These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs.³³ Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.

Competition drives our world. Some thrive on it, while others shrink from it. Yet, like it or not, we all must deal with it every day. Each of us is the subject of competing forces — strength and weakness, health and illness. Each of us is the plaything of competing desires — work and relaxation, greed and simplicity. “No one can serve two masters.”

These are the things of everyday life. It begins in the kitchen... What shall I eat? How much shall I eat?

And then, to the closet... What shall I wear? How will that look?

And then to the garage... Why am I still driving this heap?

And then to the job... What am I doing this for?

Jesus said, *"These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers."*

One question, please: What dominates your thoughts? Not your behavior or speech, but the private world of your thoughts. What *kind* of thoughts have been prominent?

If worries over such things occupies the majority of your thinking, it's time to pump up your faith! It's time to get back to Biblical basics. It's time to put first things (the most valuable things) first.

Stephen Covey has written a book about keeping "First Things First." He said, "I will not be governed by the efficiency of the clock; I will be governed by my conscience. Because my conscience deals with the totality of my life."

Time Eaters

In 2004, Ipsos, a global marketing research firm, announced that almost everybody agrees with the statement, "There is never enough time in the day to get done what I want to get done." Americans were among the most likely to agree; about 64-percent of us affirmed it.

When Charles Hummel wrote his classic essay "Tyranny of the Urgent," in 1967, he identified the telephone as among the worst offenders against our peace and complacency. And that was before we carried the offending instrument with us everywhere and embellished it with email, computers, cameras, downloadable ring tones and music files.

The issue, Hummel said, is not so much a shortage of time as a problem of priorities. Or, as a cotton mill manager once told him, "Your greatest danger is letting the urgent things crowd out the important."

"We live in constant tension between the urgent and the important. The problem is that the important task seldom must be done today or even this week. Extra hours of prayer and Bible study, a visit with that nonChristian friend, careful study of an important book: these projects can wait. But the urgent tasks call for instant action—endless demands pressure every hour and day." (*Tyranny of the Urgent*, Charles Hummel)

Hummel's essay does not offer a series of bullet-points to get our priorities back in order. Instead it points to the Gospel accounts of Jesus who never seemed to be in a hurry, even when his friend Lazarus was dying.

In Dependence

In a section subtitled "Dependence Makes You Free," referring to Mark 1:35 (*"In the morning, a great while before day, He rose and went out to a lonely place, and there He prayed"*), Hummel presented the secret of Jesus' life and work for God: "He prayerfully waited for His Father's instructions."

(From *Tyranny of the Urgent*) "Many of us have experienced Christ's deliverance from the penalty of sin. Are we letting Him free us from the tyranny of the urgent? He points the way: *'If you continue in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free... So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed'* (John 8:31–36). This is the way to freedom. Through prayerful meditation on God's Word we gain His perspective.

“P. T. Forsyth once said, ‘The worst sin is prayerlessness.’ We usually think of murder, adultery, or theft as among the worst. But the root of all sin is self-sufficiency—independence from God. When we fail to wait prayerfully for God's guidance and strength we are saying, with our actions if not our lips, that we do not need Him. How much of our service is characterized by ‘going it alone’?”

“The opposite of such independence is prayer in which we acknowledge our need of God's instruction and supply. Prayerful waiting on God is indispensable to effective service.”

Someone once observed that time was invented by God “to keep everything from happening at once.” Solomon cynically observed that God “*has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*” (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

Looking ahead to 2008, don't expect to have the time to do everything you want to do. It may even be hard to get done what you have to do. But resolve that you won't let the urgent get an upper hand over the important events in your life. That's the first step you can take to make “everything beautiful in its time,” in your life.

Matthew 6:33 *Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.*

It's simple, isn't it? Your part; His part. You seek the Kingdom and live righteously; God will give you everything you need to do so.

If you were seeking an earthly kingdom, how would you be thinking? Wouldn't your thoughts be focused on yourself, your desires, your needs, your popularity, your security, your obstacles, your enemies?

If, instead, you were seeking a Kingdom for God, how would your thinking change?

It is one thing to *resolve* to seek the Kingdom of God, and another thing to actually *do it*.

Create a Revolution

You will turn your resolution into a *revolution* by dealing with the most critical aspect of your daily life. What is that?

Stephen Covey expresses it this way: “I am your constant companion. I am your greatest helper or heaviest burden. I will push you onward or drag you down to failure. I am completely at your command. Half the things you do you might just as well turn over to me, and I will be able to do them quickly, correctly. I am easily managed—you must merely be firm with me. Show me exactly how you want something done, and after a few lessons I will do it automatically. I am the servant of all great people; and alas, of all failures as well. Those who are failures, I have made failures. I am not a machine, though I work with all the precision of a machine plus the intelligence of a human being. You may run me for a profit or turn me for ruin—it makes no difference to me. Take me, train me, be firm with me and I will place the world at your feet. Be easy with me and I will destroy you.

“Who am I? I am a habit.”

Vince Lombardi (a great football and leadership coach) said, “Winning is a habit. Unfortunately so is losing.”

You turn your resolution into a spiritual revolution by addressing your *habits*. How do you stop bad habits and create good ones? The answer is hidden in this maxim: Most people don't plan to fail; they just fail to plan.

An old habit cannot be stopped without being replaced. And the change will be strongly challenged. So, you must have a plan.

Planning Ahead

What will you stop and what will you begin? When will you do it? Who will you tell of your plan (you *must* tell someone)?

How will you respond to temptation to revert? How will you deal with discouragement or relapse (they *will* come)? Who will you call for prayer and encouragement (you *must* have someone's assistance!)?

Finally, which habit will you tackle first? It takes a minimum of thirty days to plant a new habit, so don't think of tackling more than one at a time.

If you need to create a daily quiet time with God, ask yourself, "What has kept me from it in the past?" That is where your strongest temptations will arise from. *Be prepared.*

Then, decide where and when you will make the time for God. Usually, early morning is best, before other demands arise. But, for some, late in the evening, after other things have settled down works better. Know this: whichever you choose, you will still have to *choose* to stick with it, because urgent demands will arise at all hours, especially when you are trying to build a new habit. *Be prepared.*

How will you practice it? Perhaps, *read* a Psalm or a devotional and praise God, to begin with. Then, *invite* God to speak to you and strengthen you, and read a passage in the Bible (I suggest your reading plan covers an entire Bible book before moving to other sections of Scripture). Then, *apply* what you have read through prayer, praying for yourself and others. Add any other needs that require God's help and conclude with *thanksgiving*.

Keep a pad of paper handy, so you can write down the distracting ideas, inspirations, and obligations that occur during this time, resolving to think about them only *after* you have completed this task. And don't forget, the task is not to simply read a certain number of verses and say your prayers, but to really grow *quiet* and recognize God's presence and love and purpose. Tell competing voices to "be still."

It's Your Choice

Making a quiet time for God is only one of many spiritual habits that develop a thriving spiritual life, but it is certainly the first. If you've got that one down, you're ahead of many in the churches, but there's still more for you. Pick your target for 2008 and tackle it.

Maybe you need to develop your trust in God through tithing.

Maybe you need to develop your service for God through intentional evangelism of friends and neighbors.

Whatever angle you need to pursue, make your first pursuit this year seeking the Kingdom of God and living righteously. Everything else will fall into place; He'll see to that.