

FIRST THINGS, Part 3

First Works: Loving God - Basics

By Rev. Will Nelken

The first purpose of life, given to each of us by the One who created us, is this: *Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously.* It is accompanied by a promise from Jesus: *He will give you everything you need.* (Matthew 6:33)

The concept is plain enough: If I put God's purposes and interests above my own and live in a way that honors Him, I will experience life in its fullness. I will have all I need to do His will, and all I need for myself.

However, I have discovered that many people subscribe to the concept, but fail to apply it effectively in their lives.

To assist us in applying that purpose, Jesus has identified two divine commandments that top the list of all that God requires of us; these two define the way to fulfill God's purpose: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength; and, Love your neighbor as you love yourself.* (Mark 12:29-30)

If God's purpose identifies our life-destination, then His chief commandments are the life-compass that will lead us there. Anyone who has traveled by compass knows, however, that a destination and a compass, essential as they are, are insufficient to insure that we reach our goal. We must also attend to, and respond to, the immediate conditions, landmarks, and road signs along our individual paths.

First Works

This is where the rubber meets the road. This is where principle and value are applied to everyday life. In other words: How do we do it? I know that my purpose is to honor God with the life He has given me, and I know that, in general, the way to do it is to love God and to love my neighbor, but how, in the course of everyday living, shall I do that? What are the practical steps involved? Is there a road map?

Jesus gave us a verbal road map in His letter to the Church in Ephesus:

Revelation 2:4 But I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first!
⁵ *Look how far you have fallen! Turn back to me and do the works you did at first.*

"Turn back to me and do the works you did at first."

Last week, we took the first step: turning back to Jesus. But turning back to Him is only the first step. If your prayer of repentance ended when you said "Amen" it remains incomplete. You must put feet to that prayer. You must begin to do the corresponding works.

What are "the works you did at first" with respect to loving God?

I will speak briefly of three: Communion, celebration, and commitment.

Communion

By communion I do not refer to the ceremony of the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist. I mean the act of communing with God, and this act takes many forms. It may involve prayer, silent reflection, contemplation, or meditation. It may be done alone, in a small group, or a large congregation. It may include bread and juice, or not.

Fundamentally, communion is the simple act of sharing together intimately, an interchange of thoughts and emotions. It may range from communing with nature, to communing with associates at work, to communing with your spouse or children, to communing with Almighty God.

Communing with God involves listening, thinking, and responding. Communion begins with the Word of God, the Bible. Apart from the Bible, we may have spiritual experiences, but we will not have communion with God. God's people are characterized as a people of the Book.

The Bible is a library of God's messages to us — about Himself, about ourselves, and about the world around us. It is not primarily a history of the world, but of the select, significant moments and examples of God's relationship with humankind. It reveals His heart and purpose, His plan of salvation. It identifies His only Son, Jesus, as the Christ, the Messiah. And it teaches us how to love Him.

Communion begins with the Word. To do the first works again, each of us should develop a close relationship with the Bible. We should become familiar with its overall theme, recognize its fundamental divisions and characters, and discover its essential truths.

This can only happen if we read it frequently and repeatedly. A "once-over" is barely an introduction.

Reading alone, of course, is not communion, since communion involves an interchange of thoughts and emotions. We must read with careful attention, anticipating the "voice" or emphasis of the Holy Spirit drawing our attention to specific passages. When He does, we must pause and think about the passage and why He highlighted it for us. We should ask for understanding and guidance as to what He wants us to do about it.

I suggest that your time with the Bible begins by figuratively knocking on God's door and asking to be admitted to His presence. Invite Him to speak to you through the pages of Scripture. Offer Him an open heart and mind that is willing to be surprised and instructed by Him. Promise Him that you will thoughtfully consider all that He says to you.

Work your way through one book at a time, so you can grasp the author's (Author's) intended context and design. There are many ways schedule your reading — the whole Bible, the New Testament only, the Psalms and Proverbs together, and so on — but if you simply count the number of chapters you intend to read and divide it by the number of days you hope to take, you can map out your daily plan and check your progress.

Celebration

Communion with God through His Word is the first step in loving Him. Celebration of what you have discovered in the pages of the Bible, and what God is doing in your daily life, is the second.

God's people are characterized as worshippers. "My house," God said, "shall be called a house of prayer." Prayers, doxologies, and songs of praise, punctuate the Scriptures. The centerpiece of the Bible is the book of Psalms, a collection of Hebrew worship songs.

We emphasize worship through singing here, but we celebrate God in other ways as well. He may be celebrated with dance, with shouting, with clapping, with leaping, with music, with singing, with sharing stories, with giving thanks, and even with silent adoration.

Have you tried these varied ways of celebrating God? Why not? They are all biblically based; they will not hurt you. Unfamiliarity may make it an uncomfortable exercise at first, but if you persist, perhaps in the company of someone else who will practice it with you, you will discover its value.

That said, I must add that all means of celebrating God are not appropriate in all situations. With discretion, use the one that is appropriate: the one that honors God without distracting other people's attention away from Him.

Here's the thing: to do this first work again, we've actually got to take our celebration of God beyond the walls of this sanctuary! We cannot compartmentalize it to Sunday mornings on this campus. We must learn to worship the Lord in *all* the settings of our lives. Outdoors, at work, at the mall, and at home. Just do it appropriately. But, for God's sake, *do it!*

Once you get in the habit of celebrating Him freely, you'll find that it doesn't always require scheduling time, but can be spontaneous and brief, just like you might celebrate with a friend who just announced good news.

Commitment

The third step in loving God is committing yourself in service. God's people are characterized as His servants.

Developing a servant's heart — a readiness to serve — is a process that involves listening and obeying God, either in direct response to the Bible, or in response to the nudging of the Holy Spirit whom God has given you.

The first hurdle is in overcoming any innate reluctance to serve. When you discover an inner resistance, take it to the Lord in prayer and ask Him for grace to overcome it. It won't simply disappear; you must overthrow it. You must dare to push past it and obey God, even if you are timid or afraid. The moment you do this, you will find God's power assisting you to do what you imagined impossible!

Committing yourself to serve God with the life He has given you involves numerous opportunities in your everyday life — many small and some large, as varied as your circumstances. But there are a few fundamental areas of service that I can identify for you.

Serving God with your life begins with a commitment to grow spiritually, in the context of a local church. This is not just a pattern found in Scripture and history, it is God's design.

Psalm 68:6 God sets the solitary in families.

You were designed to belong. You are but one member of the body of Christ, and your function is minimized or entirely lost, if you cut yourself off from the supply of the other members.

Granted, the body of Christ is much larger than any local congregation — it is global and timeless. But the local church is the context for which you have been fitted by God. The finger cannot attach itself to any part of the body it chooses; it is made to function within the context of the hand. From there, it can effectively serve the entire body and its many other parts.

Dig in! Involve yourself with the local church. Invest in its mission. Participate in its ministries. It won't always be easy; expect it to be challenging — you're being disciplined. But in the context of the local church you may find the support you need to keep in touch with God and accomplish what God has given you to do.

Your commitment to God's work through your life will take you through some difficult, dark, and dangerous spaces, but will always lead to exciting, glorious, and peaceful places.

You are on a mission for God!