

# **FIRST THINGS, Part 4**

## ***First Works: Loving God - Intimacy***

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The heart of God's will for our lives is to develop true love: love for God and love for other people. The foremost commandments of Scripture confirm this, and all the rest of Scripture supports this.

This issue is so critical, that Jesus, in writing a letter to the churches, said in effect, "You have done many things well and have kept yourself in the truth, but I have this against you: you have left your first love. Repent and turn back to me, and do again the things you did at the first, or I will extinguish your light." (Revelation 2:4-5)

Thus, we are taking the time to explore the meaning of "the things you did at first," based on the two great commandments: loving God and loving other people.

When it comes to loving God, what are the first works, the first steps we all take at the beginning of this relationship?

Last Sunday, I suggested three: communion with Him, celebration of His grace, and commitment to serve Him. These three form a solid basis for spiritual growth.

Today, I want to lead you deeper still into intimacy with God.

We may be inclined to think of intimacy in terms of intense emotions and pleasurable feelings, so let me first clarify. Intimacy may indeed include ecstatic feelings, but not all the time. In fact, not most of the time. People who think otherwise usually equate intimacy with sex. However, the ecstatic feeling connected with sexual intercourse is essentially the same as that connected to masturbation, which involves no intimacy at all. Intimacy is more than sexual release and does not even require sexual relations. Actually, sexual intercourse is only one of eight definitions offered by the dictionary for intimacy.

Most definitions revolve around closeness, familiarity, and understanding. Whether in a marriage, or with Almighty God, developing intimacy is chiefly about growing in personal closeness, familiarity, and understanding.

To deepen our communion with God, heighten our celebration of His grace, and strengthen our commitment to serve Him, we must develop intimacy with God. If we fail to do this, the rest will eventually fall into disuse or hollow routines.

Intimacy with God is built by regularly practicing the three disciplines that I spoke of last week, but it is rooted in two attitudes of the heart, without which we will have only empty religion.

### **Submission to God**

The first attitude or mind-set to develop is submission to God.

Perhaps because of the historic blight of human slavery and oppression in America's past, which has not altogether ceased, submission is a term most people find repulsive. But if, for the moment, we set aside humankind's abusiveness toward one another, and look to God, we may discover another kind of submission which is not forced, but wooed and won by love.

God requires submission, if we are to walk with Him (for He is God and we are not), but He never *forces* it upon anyone. Instead, He first loved us, demonstrating His love by sending His own Son to take away our sin by His death and restore us to God's favor through His resurrection. Then, He *invites* us to respond to His love by submitting our will to His.

Submitting our lives to God is the gateway by which we may enter salvation and eternal life, but that is only the beginning. Eternal life is not the reward of a mere gesture of submission in a moment of crisis, but of a habit of submission developed and lived out day by day, one day at a time.

Jesus faced a critical test in this arena, when He prayed in Gethsemane's Garden. Confronted by the horrific prospect of agonizing death by crucifixion, He begged the Father for another way to accomplish our salvation. Yet, even as He pleaded, He understood that no other way existed, concluding: "Yet I want Your will to be done, not mine." (Matthew 26:39)

This is the essence of submission: two wills (two desires), one yielding to the other, not by force, but by choice.

God asks us to *choose* to yield to Him, to surrender our will and willfulness to Him, accepting His will as wiser and better, and rooted in love.

Andrew Murray wrote: "God will assume full responsibility for the soul that is wholly yielded to Him." This principle applies also to us, as in the case of a mother and her infant. She assumes full responsibility for her baby, to care for him, feed him, clean him, and nurture him. Only when the child is defiant does her responsibility fail, for we cannot control defiance, except by force. We can only wait for defiance to turn to submission. And so God waits for us.

God permits defiance, but He does not cooperate with it. Defiance puts us "on our own" apart from God. But when we relent, He receives us again. How gracious He is!

According to Apostle Paul, it is the responsibility of all Christians to "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." (Ephesians 5:21) Furthermore, it is particularly the role of Christian wives to submit to their husbands "as to the Lord." (Ephesians 5:22, 24; Colossians 3:18) Here you may easily recognize that mutual submission within the body of Christ trickles down from our submission to God.

Apostle James taught: "Submit to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." (James 4:7) We are generally eager to resist the devil and see him run from us, but the first move in that direction *should* be to submit to God. First things first! Without submitting ourselves to God, we have no authority with which to resist the devil effectively.

Submission to God always comes first. Whether you want to chase the devil away or simply improve your relationship with a brother or sister in Christ, first consider your relationship with the Lord and submit yourself to Him and His will. Not your will, but His be done.

## Dependence on God

The second attitude that underlies intimacy with God is dependence on God — the opposite of independence. Dependence is clearly related to submission, like two sides of one coin. But where submission takes a passive position, dependence takes an active one.

Some may refer to our dependence on God for air to breathe and food to eat and health to enjoy — that is passive dependence. But I am speaking about dependence that is *active* and *volitional* — it involves your will. The dependence that creates intimacy with God is *not* passive.

During tax season, we will all be asked if we have any “dependents,” such as a son or daughter to claim. This addresses their *need* to rely on us, but it does not address their *attitude*.

Dependence on God is all about our attitude, and the corresponding behaviors. We will *choose* to depend on God or we will choose to be independent of Him — by default, if not by conscious choice. To be passive and make “no choice” to lean on God is to make a choice in the negative and ignore Him.

Regrettably, that’s exactly where many Christians spend the bulk of their lives: living independently of God by default, because they failed to *choose to depend* on Him intentionally.

Let me tell you a story, in which this lesson was learned the hard way.

Joshua had just led the Israelites from an amazing conquest at Jericho, where the walls supernaturally fell down, permitting Israel to overwhelm the city. Their victory was stunning and huge. Then they came to Ai. Joshua sent spies to assess the situation, who returned to say, the people were few so they need not weary their entire army, but just send some of their troops to take the city.

Meanwhile, there was hidden sin among the people, which had set the Lord at odds with them, but Joshua was unaware of it. So he took the advice of his spies, but their army was chased from the city and three dozen men lost their lives. Joshua was stunned by their defeat, and all the people were greatly discouraged. When he cried out to the Lord, he discovered their transgression and God advised him how to proceed.

Rather than carefully pray and think about his options, asking the Lord for wisdom and direction, Joshua *assumed* they were covered by the blessing of the Lord, and went right ahead with his plan. Presumption got the best of him.

Even though his previous victory at Jericho was most clearly the result of divine strategy and intervention, not human wisdom or strength, he had transferred his confidence from God to his soldiers. He assumed they had what it took to do it again. And it backfired on them all.

What was needed in order for them to move forward in victory again? Joshua *asked the Lord* what had prevented them and how to proceed. He ceased to presume that previous strategies would work or that he had any idea himself of what to do. With heart and mind open to whatever the Lord should suggest, he asked for help.

That is how you depend on God. You don't ask God to bless *your* plans, and you don't assume that He wants to do it the same way as in the past. Like a beginner, you ask the Creative One, how you may serve His purposes, with a mind to listen and obey.

My dear friend and mentor, Mark Hinman, had traveled among the churches of the United States and Canada for twenty years, teaching thousands of people how to be effective in personal evangelism. With disappointment, he noted when he returned to those churches that little had changed for all his teaching. People weren't making evangelism their lifestyle — it was only a seminar.

He heard of a training for pastors, held by a non-Pentecostal pastor in Florida, aimed at teaching the same skills. The testimonies of lay people who had been trained caught his attention, because they were genuinely effective and enthusiastic on a regular basis. He decided to attend the seminar to see what he might glean.

As he sat down to a table on the first day and glanced at the notes, he sighed and dropped his head to the table in disappointment, thinking to himself, "Oh no! Not another canned gospel presentation!"

Before he could lift his head, he heard Dr. James Kennedy say, "Before you call this a "canned presentation" listen to the results we're seeing." Mark's face flushed with embarrassment; God had seen his arrogant attitude and nailed it.

After hearing several testimonies from lay people in the church, Mark bowed his head once more, but this time to pray, saying, "God, forgive me. Take me back to kindergarten and help me to listen as if for the first time to what this man has to say."

That seminar provided the seed Mark needed to transform his own ministry and see thousands of people actually make personal evangelism their lifestyle, and thousands more receive eternal life as a result.

And it all began when he intentionally relinquished his independent spirit and asked God to help him.

## **Two Sides of One Coin**

Submission — bowing your stubborn will — to the Lord, combined with dependence — intentionally leaning on God instead of yourself — create genuine intimacy with God: a growing personal closeness, familiarity, and understanding of the Holy One. Not to mention great joy and peace.

Don't you want to reconsider your ways today?