

Central Christian Church
Waco, Texas
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Rev. Richard Roland
"First Things First!"
Matthew 6:25-34

During the time I was a church growth consultant, I developed several workshops to address things I saw pastors, church leaders and congregations struggling with. One of these workshops was titled "When Everything Is Number One". It dealt with choosing priorities, figuring out what to do and how to do it when people were overwhelmed.

Our scripture, part of the Sermon on the Mount, deals with priorities. It provides a game plan for structuring life and living it with meaning. Four words frame our thinking.

The first word is "seek."

Jesus goes straight to the point. He doesn't say think about it. He doesn't say consider it. He doesn't say wait for it. He says seek. The definition of seek is "to go in search of, to look for, to try to discover, to attempt."

Jesus is in good company. In I Chronicles the writer says, "Look to the Lord and his strength, seek his face always." (I Chronicles 16:11) The Psalmist writes, "O God, you are my God. Earnestly I seek you." (Psalm 63:1) Paul, encouraging the Colossians, admonishes, "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God." (Colossians 3:1 RSV)

Are we seekers? Are we active lookers, discoverers of God and Christ, or do we expect to find God and faith by osmosis or some other inactive process? Osmosis is "effortless often unconscious assimilation." It produces little or no faith.

The story is told of a student who failed his math test. His father asked, "Did you study? Did you prepare for the exam?" To which his son replied, "No." And then added, "But I did sleep with the math book under my pillow!" We will get about the same faith results if we sleep with the Bible under our pillows!

The second word is the word "first."

Finding and growing faith is a matter of putting God first, at the top of the list. God is picky about this! The definition of first is very clear. First is "preceding all others in time, order and importance; the earliest." Recently we discussed the qualities of pastors and leaders in vital churches. One of these was a personal relationship with God and Christ. But it's not just leaders who need this quality. Everyone who claims the name of God and Christ needs a personal

relationship. Matthew records the story of a man who came to Jesus claiming that he wanted to follow him. He then says to Jesus, "First, let me go bury my father." Jesus responds, "Follow me and leave the dead to bury their own dead." (Matthew 8:18-23) This is a startling encounter until we know that in Jesus day a son could be committed to his father until the father died and then the son was free. This is likely the situation with this man who came to follow Jesus. Jesus says now! Jesus says relationship with God and following me is more important than your commitment to your father!

How much do we really love God? Where is God on our commitment list when the chips are down? John Stuart Mill wrote, "One person with belief is equal to a force of ninety-nine who have only interests."

Seek first what? "His kingdom and his righteousness."

Kingdom and righteousness are not exactly household words for us. Kingdom is defined as the realm in which God's will is fulfilled, the eternal kingship of God. Righteous is acting in accord with divine or moral law, free from guilt or sin. The kingdom for us now is the presence of God in our hearts and lives as we attempt to live in accord with his teaching through Jesus Christ.

Luke records an interesting encounter between Jesus and one of his disciples. Jesus is praying. When he finishes, one of his disciples says to him, "Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples." (Luke 11:1) And Jesus does. The disciples wanted to be part of the kingdom, to be righteous men. A tax collector came to the Temple to pray. He would not look up to heaven but bowed his head and prayer, "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:13) He was searching for the kingdom and righteousness.

How much time do you and I invest in being a part of God's kingdom now? What guides and dictates our decisions? Her name was Mrs. W. L. Cammack. She was an Elder in the First Christian Church in Owenton, Kentucky. She knew her Bible. She prayed spiritually beautiful prayers. She was always more concerned about others than herself. She was a peacemaker. A man of the church said to me, "Mrs. Cammack is truly a righteous woman. I would love to be like she is."

"All other things will be yours."

This is an astonishing statement. If we seek first God's kingdom and righteous, then we will have everything else we need. The prophet Malachi records, "The Lord said 'Bring the full tithes into the storehouse that there may be food in my house. I will open the windows of heaven and pour down an overflowing blessing'" (Malachi 3:10) Jesus, as recorded by Matthew, says to his disciples, "O ye of little faith! Don't be anxious about what we shall eat, what we shall drink, or what we shall wear. Your father knows you need these things." (Matthew 6:31)

What do we receive when we seek and find God's kingdom and righteousness? Are there really rewards? Research tells us there are.

There is the ability to have good relationships. People of faith who trust and love God get along better with others than people who have no faith. There is better health. People of faith generally are sick less and live longer than people with no faith. There is less worry and being anxious. People of faith are not worry free, but they are less anxious and better able to cope with life even in the tough times than people who have no faith. There is security for the future. People of faith are safe in the promise of eternal life for those they love and themselves. They are more secure and happier than those who have no faith or hope.

What faith rewards have you received in your life? Where do you fit in all of this? Vince Haver wrote, "Faith will not always get us what we want but it will get what God wants us to have."

First things first is seeking God's kingdom and righteousness and then having all other things added. How are we doing with the challenge and the reward?