

The Christian's Priority

*“Seek ye first
the kingdom of
God, and his
righteousness; and
all these things
shall be added
unto you.”*

—*Matthew 6:33*

SETTING PRIORITIES IS

generally recognized as being a sound practice to follow in life. To be successful in business, for example, it is essential that the primary needs of the business be given priority over personal likes

and conveniences. The same is true in every walk of life, whether in the home, in society, in family relationships, and in those between employer and employee.

Seeking the kingdom of God is a full-time, all-absorbing priority which, as Jesus states in our opening text, should be “first” in importance for all footstep followers of Christ. Seeking God’s kingdom, for the Christian, refers to a daily, determined effort to be found worthy of joint heirship with Jesus, to reign with him as kings and priests in the promised kingdom of God which will bless all the families of the earth. (Rom. 8:17; Rev. 20:6; Gen. 28:14; Matt. 6:10) Only a few will attain to such a

high position, and these are addressed by Jesus as a “little flock.”—Luke 12:32

There is nothing any of us could do of ourselves to earn such a royal position. On the other hand, the Lord offers us the opportunity to demonstrate our love and loyalty to him through daily, faithful devotion to his cause. This seems like a simple test of worthiness, but when we endeavor actually to carry out the terms of our discipleship they are found to be very exacting. This, no doubt, has much to do with why this class is referred to as a “little flock.”

“ARE YE ABLE”

Jesus’ disciples believed that he had been sent by God to be the Messiah of promise. They expected that he would set up a righteous government in Judea that would extend its domain to the whole world. They were doubtless greatly inspired by all his wonderful teachings pertaining to the kingdom, although they did not understand much that he said. However, they grasped the idea, and rightly so, that he was offering them the opportunity to share with him in the work of his kingdom.

This is why they disputed among themselves as to which of them would be greatest in the kingdom. It was for this reason, also, that two of the disciples made the request to sit on Jesus’ right hand and on his left hand in the kingdom. (Mark 9:33,34; 10:35-37) On no occasion did Jesus discourage his disciples from entertaining the hope of sharing in the glories of his kingdom. Rather, he encouraged them in this hope, assuring them that it was the “Father’s good pleasure” that they should be joint-heirs with him.—Luke 12:32

However, Jesus explained to his disciples, and to us, that to secure such a high position of honor in the divine arrangement would be very costly. He asked them, "Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of?" Those to whom this question was first asked replied, "We are able." (Matt. 20:22) Thousands since have given the same answer, and have undertaken to carry out the conditions, but many have fallen by the wayside, having become "weary in well doing."—Gal. 6:9; II Thess. 3:13

The "cup" of which the Master spoke, and from which he drank, is not a literal one. Rather, it is a symbolic cup, being suggestive of the sum total of his experiences in doing the Father's will. It was a "cup" which God had poured for him, a way of life from his baptism at Jordan to his death on the cross, which was not planned by him, but by his Father.—John 18:11

From the natural standpoint, Jesus might have preferred a course in life which would have permitted him to enjoy more fully the temporal blessings of home, family and friends. However, he had come to do his Father's will, and to drink the cup of experience which the Father had poured for him. To be faithful to this purpose, and to constantly set it as his highest priority, resulted in the giving up of the security of a home and family and becoming literally a pilgrim and a stranger in the earth. "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests," the Master said, "but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head."—Matt. 8:20; Luke 9:58

Had Jesus used his pleasing personality and the miracle-working power which had been given to him, merely to appeal to the public, he soon could have

become the most popular person in all Israel. Influenced by these qualities, many did follow him for a time. Jesus, however, was also given a message to proclaim. In doing so, he exposed popular error, and was an unflinching advocate of unpopular truth.

Jesus was able to read the hearts of the religious leaders of Israel, and knew that they were hypocrites. When he told them of their hypocrisy, rather than causing them to repent, it evoked their bitter animosity. This finally cost Jesus his life. Nevertheless, it was all a part of the cup which the Father had poured out for him, so he humbled himself, and “became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” —Phil. 2:8

When we made a consecration to do God’s will and to follow in our Master’s footsteps, we also were saying, “We are able” to drink of the cup that Jesus drank of. The beginning of another year is a most appropriate time for us to ask the question: How well are we doing with this undertaking? Perhaps we can measure the degree of our success by making a check as to whether, in keeping with our text, we are seeking “first” the kingdom of God, and making it our highest priority in life. Seeking and doing the will of God was the first priority of Jesus’ life, and it must also be first with us. Paul expressed this thought, saying, “This one thing I do.” —Phil. 3:13

SETTING OUR AFFECTIONS

When we make a consecration to do God’s will, we begin to set our affections on things above, which means that earthly things should lose their attraction for us. (Col. 3:1,2) Herein, however, lies one of the principal struggles of the Christian life. It is one

in which we must face life's realities, and are called upon to deal with them upon the basis of faith and the spirit of sacrifice. In this struggle we may at times be conflicted in the providing of needful material things as compared to the assurances given to us by the promises of God. The wisdom and strength which will assist in this struggle are based upon our faith.

In the context of our opening Scripture, Jesus admonishes his followers to "take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on." (Matt. 6:25) Instead, as stated in our opening text, we are to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all our temporal needs "shall be added" unto us. That is, the entire matter rests upon what we are seeking "first" in our life.

In elaborating the lesson, Jesus said that the "Gentiles"—the world in general—seek after food, raiment, and other material things of life, meaning that they make these their first, or primary, consideration and priority. This is natural and proper for them, in so far as the desire to feel secure in providing for themselves and their families, both for the present and also the future.—vs. 32

As Christians, we likewise realize the need to eat, to be clothed, and to have shelter. These requirements for ourselves and our families are very real, and affect us so vitally that they may become a severe test of our faith. How do we carry these out properly while still seeking "first" the kingdom of God? Each morning when we arise we may start the day by saying, "What shall I render unto the LORD for all his benefits toward me." (Ps. 116:12) This is the

proper attitude for those who are seeking first the kingdom of God. Yet, often we may find that our earliest thoughts are mostly concerned with the temporal affairs of life, and that they become the predominant focus of our day's activities.

GOD'S CARE OVER US

When Jesus said that we should “take no thought” for our life, he used a Greek word which means “anxious thought” or, as we might say, “to be troubled with worry.” It is essentially the same thought as conveyed by the Apostle Peter when he wrote, “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.” (I Pet. 5:7, *The Emphatic Diaglott*) Similarly, Paul wrote, “Be not anxious about anything; but in everything let your petitions be made known to God, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving.”—Phil. 4:6, *Diaglott*

Paul then assures us that if we are not anxious about anything and are thankful for the blessings provided by the Lord, the “peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” (vs. 7) With this peace of God ruling in our hearts we are in a position to concentrate our thoughts on the things pertaining to the kingdom. Logically, Paul then further admonishes us to “think on these things.”—vs. 8

There is no mistaking the end result in Christian thought and action of casting all our care upon the Lord, and therefore not being anxious about the material needs of life. Paul climaxed his admonition along this line by writing, “Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you.”

(Phil. 4:9) How plainly is the matter stated! If we want the God of peace to be with us, continually giving us the peace which surpasses all human understanding, there are things for us to do—things which we have “learned, and received, and heard, and seen” exemplified in the life of those such as the Apostle Paul.

This is merely another way of saying that we should follow the example of Christ. We have many noble examples of those who followed Christ, and Paul is one of them. He knew that, according to the flesh, it was not an easy way, but was a way of sacrifice, weariness and suffering. Paul, though, wanted to know Jesus in the sense of having a “fellowship,” or partnership, in his experiences and in his suffering. This was the “one thing” which dominated his thinking, his planning, and his action. It was his first and foremost priority.—Phil. 3:10,13

Not all in the Early Church were of this persuasion. Paul tells us about this, saying, “Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample. (For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: ... who mind earthly things.)”—Phil. 3:17-19

We are not to suppose from this description that the ones Paul refers to were morally corrupt. It is just that he uses strong language to emphasize that they were not walking in the way of sacrifice, that they were not seeking first the kingdom of God. They were “minding earthly things” to such an extent that these were demanding all their attention, and the “first” things of their spiritual life had nearly been crowded out entirely. They had forgotten that

their citizenship was supposed to be in heaven, and that their main objective in life was to set their “affection on things above.”

In the case of those whom Paul thus describes, it would seem that they had become believers in name only. They may still have believed in, and even enjoyed, the message of the Gospel. If there was any time left after they had made adequate provision for their earthly needs, they would perhaps seek the fellowship of their brethren. They likely had not denied the Lord. Yet, in all this, their course in life was evidently in opposition to the principle of sacrifice to such an extent that the apostle said they were “enemies of the cross of Christ.”

Similarly, the danger to us is not so much that of going to the full extent of giving thought only for the material needs of life, but of compromising between this extreme course of unfaithfulness and that of making our spiritual interests absolutely first in priority. To avoid compromise is both difficult and costly. That is why Jesus asked the disciples, “Are ye able?” Only by divine grace and strength are any of us able to walk in such a “narrow way.”—Matt. 7:14

Paul said that we should follow his example and “do” what he had done. Let us notice what he actually did. When first he realized that Jesus was the Christ of promise, he inquired, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” (Acts 9:6) Here is the true spirit of consecration. Obedience to this spirit led Paul to devote his entire life to the great mission of proclaiming the Gospel of Christ and serving the brethren of the Early Church. Moreover, this would not merely be under pleasant circumstances, nor when no inconvenience to the flesh was involved.

A GREAT EXAMPLE

Paul's seeking first the kingdom of God took him among enemies in Jerusalem, where he was mobbed and almost killed. It took him on weary journeys by land and by sea. It led to bitter persecution, imprisonment, stripes, hunger, and other hardships. It finally resulted in his death in a Roman prison, just as Jesus' faithfulness led to his death on the cross. Now we can understand what Paul meant when he wrote that we are to do what we have seen in him. It was surely true of Paul that he took "no thought" for his life, but cast all his care upon the Lord. For this reason he was "not anxious about anything," but always thankful for whatever material things the Lord provided for him.—Matt. 6:31; Phil. 4:6, *Diaglott*

Paul did not, however, expect that his food and clothing would drop down to him from the sky. When necessary he worked at his trade of tent-making in order to secure his material needs. (Acts 18:1-3; II Thess. 3:8,9) Always, however, his first priority was to seek those things which pertained to his spiritual life, and to the righteousness necessary to attain a share in the heavenly phase of the kingdom of God.

When Paul admonished us not to be anxious about anything, he did not imply that the Lord always makes abundant provision for our material needs. Later in the chapter, he wrote concerning himself, "I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."—Phil. 4:12,13

We can be assured that Paul did not at times go hungry or suffer need because he was a poor manager of his material affairs or of his tent-making business. Rather, he was “abased” at times because he had followed the leadings of the Lord in a life of sacrifice. Such a course relegated material needs to a position of relative unimportance to an extent that at times he was temporarily hungry or lacked in some other material way.

Paul is not advocating the idea that in order to be a faithful Christian one must deliberately forsake all thought of providing the necessities of life with the certain knowledge that the result will be to suffer want and hunger. To do so would be to tempt God, which is sin. Rather, the apostle was indicating that he would be content in any given circumstance as it might come. Quoting again a portion of verse 12 from the *New International Version*, Paul says, “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry.”

To the faithful apostle this was all in God’s providence, and he valued the lessons he had learned. He had plied his trade of tent-making when opportunity offered. However, when the call came to make another pilgrim journey, he accepted it as from the Lord, and did not worry because he had no surplus funds laid aside for the proverbial rainy day.

It is important to note, of course, that Paul, so far as we know, had no family obligations to consider. He needed only to provide for himself so far as material needs were concerned. For this reason he was justified in giving less consideration to food and raiment than those who have family responsibilities. It was pleasing to God that Paul took a course which

left him hungry on occasion. However, none of us has the right to expect others to go hungry or to suffer a lack of temporal necessities on account of our own lack of providing such things to those who depend on us. This would be sacrificing them, instead of ourselves. Paul's own words are clear in this regard: "If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel."—I Tim. 5:8

Paul's own course of faithfulness, to the point where he did not always have ample food, or suffered other material need, provides for us a very high standard to emulate. Seeking the kingdom was not only the first priority of his life, but it can nearly be said that it was the only real matter of importance to him.

Not many, perhaps, have been in a position to abandon their interest in material things so completely as Paul, but his example is the ideal to keep in mind. Our first priority should be to do the will of God. He knows that we need food and clothing and shelter, and has promised to help overrule the providing of these if we keep the main objective of our consecrated life at the forefront of our daily walk.

BUILDING LARGER BARN—A DANGER

Jesus' instruction to his disciples not to take anxious thought concerning tomorrow's needs is also recorded in Luke 12:22. His advice begins with the meaningful word, "Therefore." This indicates that the preceding verses have a close bearing on what follows. Looking back, we find in verses 16-21 that Jesus had just related the parable of a man whose land yielded more bountifully than he had expected. His barns were filled. Thinking the matter over, he decided

that he would tear down his barns and build larger ones. He concluded that in this way he could attain economic security and would not need to be at all concerned about his future needs, but then he died.

Then come Jesus' instructions, "Therefore, ... Take no thought for your life." In other words, "Do not take the sort of thought this man did," which was an anxious, selfish thought. It never occurred to him that the Lord had blessed his land in order that he might have a surplus which he could use to benefit others. Instead, he used this abundance as if the Lord had provided it solely for his own personal security. This was wrong.

The challenges of the Lord's people today are not unlike they were at the beginning of the age. It is necessary to make a living, and regardless of how we do this, proper attention must be given to it. If employed by another, we should render faithful service. If we are conducting our own business, proper concern must be given to it in order that it might return to us that which we need.

There is no set rule laid down in the Bible as to how much time or effort we should devote to material needs, and how much of our time and effort should be given directly to the Lord. This is a matter each consecrated follower of the Master must determine according to his or her circumstances. Where our lesson does draw the line, however, is with respect to the manner in which we approach our necessary temporal responsibilities and the need to keep them secondary to seeking "first the kingdom of God." (Matt. 6:33) With this, our work in the office, the factory, the home, or in our own business, should always be done as unto the Lord. It is his will that we take care of our own,

and we may properly consider whatever means of livelihood we have as being by his providence.

God has his own way of taking care of the sparrows, and so he also has of adding necessary material needs to those who seek first the kingdom of God, and who “are of more value than many sparrows.” (Matt. 10:31) An eye that never sleeps watches over us. (Ps. 121:2-4) An arm that is strong and tireless bears us up and gives us strength to continue. Let us, then, cast all our care upon him, and press on in the way of sacrifice until we hear the Master’s words, “Well done.”—Matt. 25:21 ■