

“First Things First”

Matthew 6:33, 7:7-11

October 12, 2008

But seek first the kingdom of God and all these things shall be added unto you

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Philadelphia Free Press, April 14, 1877 The story is told of a woman at the spring doing her week's washing. Suddenly she looked up from her work to see her home engulfed in flames. She dropped her washing, hurried into the house and brought out an armful of quilts. Back she went to drag out some pillows, next she lugged out a mattress and frame. Then the house reeled, staggered, and crashed into ruins. (If you came home to find your house on fire, what would be the first things you would save?) Louder than the crash of the falling building was the wail of the woman, as she realized too late, her little child was asleep in the house.

It was surely no harm for this woman to have saved her quilts, and pillows, and bed. But for her to become so absorbed in such tasks as to forget her child was sheer tragedy. Sadly that story is the story of mistaken priorities ... a fatal mistake.

So is the story in Mark 10:17-31. One of the Bible's best known stories. A wealthy young man who rushed up to Jesus one day, had spiritual matters on his mind, but he carried with him the false thought that perhaps the insurance policy for heaven could be purchased with good deeds. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus listed some of the 10 commandments and the young man interrupted to say that he had done all of those.

There is no question – this man was a decent, civilized, respectable person. Jesus saw power potential in him. But he also knew that this guy was so tied to his possessions that it would be difficult for him to let go of them and make a leap of faith into headlong loyalty to Christ.

See, Jesus asked him to re-align his priorities - to shift what was important to him to what was important eternally. To give away what he had to the poor would be quite a shift. It would take tremendous effort and change, and Jesus challenged him to do it. (probably not because Jesus really wanted him to give away everything, but because Jesus knew the deeper issue was his values.)

He was a good prospect for the Kingdom, but there were no bargain-basement prices. No deals cut. Jesus saw through to his heart of hearts. God is to be above all else ... and he knew this wasn't the case for this young man. Soothe man turned and walked away. He hadn't been prepared to be swept off his feet by a new relationship, or such a total commitment.

This story may be 2000 years old, but we know it is as modern as today. It is our story. We understand it. It bothers us. It hits us with a Christian truth that is never comfortable. That truth is that respectability is not enough.

Jesus quoted the commandments which were the basis of a decent life. Please note, with one exception, the noted commandments were negative. Do not, do not ... The result is that this young man can say in effect – “I have never done anyone any harm.” Probably true. Well, good for you.

But the question is: Have you entered into a relationship? Have you trusted god to use you? What good have you done? Do you hear the priority?

Jesus asks - with all your possessions, and youth, and wealth, and influence – what positive good have you done? What have you do for others? Have you allowed God to work through your life? How much have you gone out of your way to help and comfort and strengthen others as you know God would have you do? In other words, it's a question of priorities.

Sadly, respectability often consists in NOT doing things. Christianity consists of doing things. And that is where this guy found an empty well in his life. He had lived his whole life only for himself. And the well had gone dry.

Jesus challenged him to get out of a mind-set that thought only of his own comfort and respectability - and to enter into the adventure of following God's will and call upon his life.

The road to heaven is not paved with conventional moralism: He's a good person. She never hurt anyone. RATHER, the road is made by a relationship with Jesus Christ., who IS the way ... a faith and setting of priorities that calls for complete trust in God. For the rich young ruler, the one thing that was missing was the willingness to surrender his life to God and to love god and put God above all else.

Again, we're uncomfortable with that. Indeed we have gotten confused by “cultural Christianity” into thinking that it's all about lead that good, clean, moral life. And again, there is nothing necessarily wrong with that. But it isn't enough. That isn't it. Because we find ourselves still caught in the same trap - so we worry about the bills, and get scared when our health fails, and run from advancing age (even at 30), etc.... And we are stunned when there is a moral failure and criticize someone who fails. All of our “stuff” is in the wrong place, according to Jesus. We're anchored where that man was.

Oh sure, a huge percentage of Americans say I believe in God, but we haven't turned our lives over to him. There's an old story about a good new Baptist who was about to be baptized by immersion. A friend called out “let me hold your wallet.” To which this wise young fellow responded, “My billfold needs baptizing most of all.” God is to be trusted above all. That should not be just a pious little saying that we repeat.

The story is told of some preachers who came from all over the country to a seminar on preaching. One of the main speakers was forced to cancel at the last minute. He was supposed to speak after lunch. So the Bishop in charge went to a young pastor and asked

him to fill in. The young preacher asked, "How can I do that? I didn't bring any sermons with me." The Bishop said, "Son, just trust in the Lord. Trust in the Lord."

The young preacher was horrified. In his despair, he saw the Bishop's Bible near, and he started thumbing through it. Inside, he found the sermon the Bishop was to give that very night. The young man was desperate, so when the time came for the service, he took the Bishop's notes and preached that sermon. The response was great. Everyone told him what a great job he did. It was exciting for him until the Bishop got to him. He was furious!

"Young man, what have you done? You preached the sermon I was going to give tonight. What am I going to do now?"

The young preacher, with a twinkle in his eye, said, "Trust the Lord, Bishop. Trust the Lord."

How glibly we often say, "just trust," when we really mean we're going to trust our own devices. Yet there needs to come that time when we settle the issue once and for all. What is the source of our ultimate security? Is it our bank accounts, our status, our manipulative control, or do we trust in the love and wisdom of God?

You see, that very problem, is also the good news today. You and I know we aren't capable of enough faith and enough trust on our own. We're always talking about having more faith. We don't have what it takes by ourselves to place god in the priority He should have. We're too selfish, and scared, and wrapped up in the things of this world. And we know it.

So did the disciples. For the scripture says they were astonished and said to Jesus - "The, who CAN be saved?" No one - they thought. We can't do it. But Jesus again put the focus where it should be. Not on us, but on God. "This is impossible for men, but not for God; everything is possible for God."

God can help us overcome our passion for worldly security, which is so fleeting. God can guide us to put Him first, above all else. God can teach us to trust. He gives us the power and strength and courage of such faith. We need only try, and receive and respond. And that is the Good News.

We CAN turn things over to him. All of our life. He will give us the power to trust him with everything. Our children, our marriage, our time, our dreams, our money, our fears, our future, our past. "I will give it all to you O God, because I want you to be Lord."

And then we will find that He take sit to himself, redeems it, and gives back to us what we need in ways we never before dreamed possible. But he can't do it without our permission.

We began with the sad account of a woman who carried pillows out of her burning house, while her treasured child was forgotten and died. It seems unbelievable. How could a mother forget her own child? we protest. How could her priorities be so messed up? But we

go about our lives everyday forgetting the most important things. Never thinking of them. Until they are gone.

Each of us understands the rich young ruler. He is us. God is asking too much, we say. God says, "I am the treasure, that which should be the first thing, above all else." God wants to be God.

Have you ever noticed in the book of Revelation that in heaven there is no temple, no sun for the day nor moon for the night. Because God is the treasure. God is the one to be worshipped. God is the source of light.

I pray for each of us that we are never found being concerned about things, while our lives are being lived, and possibly consumed like fire. And that we forget the living and loving treasure who is God. That's just ridiculous.

The Good News is that God is with us to give us the power to trust Him, to have right priorities, to be His people.

So while you worry about the economy and the conditions of the world and search desperately for just the right politician to make everything right, just remember that it is an impossible search. Only as we live the way God wants us to live, and turn our lives over to Him, and live by the values Jesus taught us - will the mess ever be cleaned up.