

Russell Kelfer

Seeking First the Kingdom

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Series: Let God Be God

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

10602 Mossbank, San Antonio, TX 78230 • (210) 226-0000 / 1-800-375-7778 • www.dtm.org • dtm@dtm.org

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It is utterly amazing how confusing the English language can be; how the same word can mean a variety of things. On the one hand, for instance, you can say, “I *like* that!” and mean that you have a deep affection for something. You can also say, “I want one *like* that, and mean you want something similar. You constantly hear people say, “Gimme a *break!*” meaning “give me a chance”. But in the next breath that same person will cry out, “Ease up, or you’ll *break* me!” In one sentence the word means “give me a chance”; in the next it means, “you won’t give me a chance.” No small wonder that foreigners shake their heads in disbelief at what our words really mean. On the one hand you might say, “She’s *crying* for help”; but in the next breath you might say, “Leave her alone, she’s *crying*.” One phrase means she’s asking for something; the other that she’s grieved over something... yet in both cases, the same English word is used. You will “try hard” to help someone, and then turn around and “try” them in a court of law to put them in jail.

In even more cases a word may mean almost the same thing, but there will be just enough difference to change the thrust of its meaning. You might “single” someone out as special, meaning set them apart as unique; and then refer to them as “single”, meaning they are not married. You might “free”, someone up to help, then charge for their services; so while they are “free” they’re not! English! What a challenge it is. How many words there are in our language whose meanings vary *just enough* to confuse us.

Such a word is the word “first”. It can mean “first” as in “I’ll do this first; then do that”. Or it can mean “first” as in “He will be first in my life from now on”. One indicates precedence; the other preeminence. The difference may be slight, but it’s everything. And in interpreting Scripture, and in applying Scripture, it is best to be certain, as we read our English Bibles, which interpretation is intended.

As a case in point, perhaps few passages in Scripture are

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more often quoted than Matthew 6:33. Children memorize it in Bible School. Adults quote it in Sunday School lessons, and pastors use it with quivering voice in heart-rending sermons. It says,

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness;
and all these things shall be added unto you.

(Matthew 6:33)

We read that passage hurriedly as we moved through the closing verses of Matthew six in our last lesson. And with bowed heads and, I trust, open hearts, we uttered a solemn “amen”. That might suffice, and it might be well to press on and consider the topic complete; but I don’t think so. For somehow, I believe there is buried within that brief but powerful phrase, uttered from the lips of God Himself, a design for living that puts to rest the constant struggle between the two kingdoms that clamor for our attention while we live in these bodies on this earth inhabited by God’s Spirit.

So that is our title for today: “Seeking First the Kingdom”.

Our outline:

I- The Call

II- The Curse

III- The Characteristics

IV- The Question

THE CALL

Jesus continues to outline the divine distinctives of His Kingdom as He lovingly sketches on the scrolls of eternity, phrase after phrase of amazingly simple but incredibly deep truths to live by. Again and again He takes man’s master plan for success on planet earth and turns it inside out, reverses its order, and orders man to walk in patterns that run completely at odds with everything they have ever learned before. Christianity was not going to be a delightful addition to man’s philosophy. Christianity was going to be a total alternative to man’s philosophy; the two would *never* be compatible. Man has never really learned that truth. The church has for centuries struggled with that truth. We continue to either stand on a pedestal and condescendingly preach to the world; or in defiance of that pharasaical approach, we crawl down into the world and try to join the world. Neither works.

The church is to be *in the world*, not above it, but *apart from*

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the world...not a part of it. And until and unless we learn the difference, we are hopelessly bound to mediocrity. Nowhere is that truth more evident than in the understanding of this brief, but all-inclusive statement from the lips of our Master.

To see the statement in context, we must remember to whom Jesus was speaking, and what it was He was speaking about. He was speaking to the disciples, and He was speaking about that totally different life to which they were being called. Their new calling was to a life characterized by meekness, poverty of spirit, an insatiable hunger for righteousness, and a constant desire to be a peace-maker. It was to be characterized by the presence of the indwelling God Himself who, when set free to be Himself, would totally transform a man or woman's attitudes towards life. He was calling them to admit they were the ones who couldn't, and He was calling men and women who had been trained to assume that they were the ones who could.

Then He turned their concepts of prayer inside-out. And once He had outlined totally new patterns for praying, the Master quietly moved right into the realm of treasures, having the audacity to state dogmatically that no man can serve two masters; therefore, a drive to accumulate the things of this world and a drive to satisfy the God of Eternity were not compatible. Then He proceeded to define which treasures man could lay up that would last and which ones wouldn't. Having done that, the Master drew a series of word pictures designed to make the believer see that the right to worry is a right given up to God the day Christ comes into your life. He called worry a sin and asked them to look at the little birds and to consider the lilies. They toiled not; they didn't fret...yet God met their needs. He fed the birds continually and clothed the lilies magnificently. Then Jesus asked the question, "Won't that same God take care of you, oh you of little faith?" And the King of kings then concluded this portion of His address on trusting God with these words:

Therefore do not worry and be anxious, saying, What are we going to have to eat? Or, What are we going to have to drink? or, What are we going to have to wear?

For the Gentiles [heathen] wish for and crave and diligently seek all these things, and your heavenly Father knows well that you need them all.

But seek [aim at and strive after] first of all His kingdom, and His righteousness [His way of doing and being right],

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and then all these things taken together will be given you besides.
(Matthew 6:31-33 Amp)

God has given man a creative alternative to worrying. He has given man a creative alternative to laying up treasures on earth. He has given man a creative alternative to craving for and seeking after the things this world calls pleasure and success. It is more than a creative alternative. It is an eternal alternative. It is, Beloved, an exclusive alternative...there is no other...if you want the Mind of God.

It is that alternative, that divine imperative...that we will consider together in this lesson. It is called *seeking first the Kingdom*. It is something all of us claim to want to do; it is something some even claim to do; but the question remains, do we even fully grasp what it is we are being called to do? Is *seeking first the Kingdom* something the church of Jesus Christ considers the “normal Christian life”? If not, why not?

Apparently, this is our calling. This is what we are being commanded by God to do. Let's look at it a word at a time.

A- The Substance of seeking.

Before we can “seek the Kingdom first”, we must understand what God means when He says “seek”. Once again, in our language, this word carries with it a variety of meanings. To some, the word “seek” means to casually observe a situation with an eye to catching something of meaning. Mary doesn't know why Bill doesn't like green beans. She has said she is “seeking to find out”. She'll observe, maybe even ask a question or two, and draw a conclusion. There will be little or no effort expended, but there is an expression of desire to find a solution or reach a goal if there is not any major obstacle in the way. It is to resolve an issue by casual observance. That is not what Jesus has in mind here. The words translated “seek” in the New Testament hold the connotation of a treasure hunt. They speak of an exhaustive search, at great personal risk, with no turning back, until the answer is found or the objective met. When Jesus says *seek first the Kingdom*, He means leave no stone unturned. He means forget everything else for the moment. He means pour yourself into a treasure hunt for eternal rewards that is of such importance, that in the light of its value, nothing else is of any value at all. *Seek...unreservedly sell your life for the Kingdom of God.*

B- Finding What's First!

That brings us to the key word in the verse, the word “first”. That word can mean one of two things. It can mean “first” as in Mark 13:10 where we read “The Gospel must *first* be preached to all nations,” and as in Mark 7:27 where it reads, “*First* let the children be fed”. These and many other passages use the word in the context of doing something *before* you do something else. That something may not be more important than what follows, or it may be a prerequisite to what follows; but the word indicates precedence rather than preeminence.

But as we have noted, the word “first” has an even deeper meaning much of the time. On some occasions the word means “to elevate something or someone to a higher position, thereby giving it or them a place of preeminence”. Such is the case in Revelation 2:4, where we read, “I have this against you, you have left your *first* love.” (The one who occupied first place in your life has been usurped by someone who is, in reality, less important.) It means much more than first in order. It means first in place of. It means first above all. It means *first*, period.

That is what Jesus was saying to His disciples on that hillside. Perhaps the Living Bible captures it best. It reads like this:

So don't worry at all about having enough food and clothing. Why be like the heathen? For they take pride in all these things and are deeply concerned about them. But your heavenly Father already knows perfectly well that you need them and he will gladly give them to you if you will give him first place in your life and live as he wants you to.

(Matthew 6:31-33 TLB)

“Give Him first place in your life!” That's the real meaning of Matthew 6:33; God wants nothing less than to be preeminent in your thinking, in your priorities, in your emotions, in your decisions. He wants to be the measuring stick by which you make your every move. To seek Him first, then, doesn't mean that the things of God ought to be tended to first, it means that, too, but it means so much more than that. It means the things of God are everything.

It means that whether or not you take that job ought not to be decided by what that job can do for you, but rather by how your taking that job can best further the Kingdom. Is that where God most desires your witness? Is that where God has provided

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a boss to best work into your life the character qualities you so desperately need to have the mind of Christ? God's perspective isn't to be considered first, then the world's. Not precedence. God's perspective is to be considered, period. Preeminence. It means that whether or not to buy that new car ought not to be decided by how badly you want that car, but rather by whether how your buying that car can best further the Kingdom. If seeking first the Kingdom means fixing your old car and giving the difference to further the Kingdom, that's not your first consideration, it's your only consideration.

The first century Christians understood that. But our generation of unnecessary affluence has redefined the word "first" to mean that we do whatever would glorify God that conveniently fits into our plans. The early Christians had no plans but that His Kingdom come, His will be done...on earth as it is in heaven.

C- The Call of the Kingdom

And what does it mean to seek the Kingdom? We've looked at that these last few weeks in some detail. Seeking the Kingdom means seeing this life from the perspective of the life to come. Which means, of course, that the very things this life deals us that would cause us to become bitter or to flee in frustration, only give us cause to praise. Death is our ally. Grief is our ally. Pain is our ally. Persecution is our ally. No, we don't go out and *seek them*, but when a sovereign God allows them, we rejoice... for *His is the Kingdom*. Those very things we recoil from are the heavenly sandpaper He has designed to bring in the Kingdom. They change us into His likeness.

To seek first the Kingdom, then, is to place as our only priority in life the mind of Christ. It is to have as our only goal in life, to see life from God's perspective. It is to consider the birds of the air when we fear for our food. It is to consider the lilies when we fear for our clothing. It is to take one day at a time, never borrowing from tomorrow the things tomorrow might bring that will cause us pain, while bringing God glory. He suffered untold pain to bring us to glory. We are commanded to "count it all joy" then when we have the opportunity to suffer pain to bring Him glory. Understanding that, and believing that, and living like that is seeking first the Kingdom.

D- The Reality of His Righteousness

One more thing. Seeking first the Kingdom means seeking

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first His righteousness as well. We love the first part. We ignore the second part. Seeking His righteousness means *never knowingly at any time compromising the principles of God or the Word of God to accomplish what you deem to be important*. It means never violating a moral principle to get business. It means never violating the standards of purity God has ordained, regardless of how it might seem to appeal to the world. We are not to appeal to the world by copying the world. We are to draw the world magnetically to Christ by the incredible purity and guilelessness of our lives. We are to do this not condescendingly, but lovingly. We are to do it not self-righteously, but unselfishly. We are to demonstrate the nature of God to man, not reflect the nature of man to God. We want the “all things” to be added unto us, but we do not often grasp what seeking His righteousness first entails.

E- The All These Things He'll Add

And what are the “all these things” He will give us? He'll give us everything we need to live in this world triumphantly while He brings in the Kingdom! Everything! But it doesn't mean that if we “seek first the Kingdom” He will give us a new Cadillac. If we're seeking first the Kingdom, we may not want a new Cadillac... not if we are hungry Christians in Venezuela, or a family with a need in San Antonio, or a way to spread the gospel to more people in the far corners of the earth. No, it doesn't mean God will give us “all things” the world considers essential. It means He will give us all things necessary for “His Kingdom to come, His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

We tend to place the emphasis on the “all these things”. I believe God places the emphasis on “seeking first the Kingdom.” The “all these things” is just to remind us that God knows what we need even before we ask. He knows that even the heathen are asking for the same things. His exhortation is to stop worrying about the “all these things” and let God determine what they are and when to give them to us. He is, rather, tenderly asking His children to lift their eyes off of that which is finite and focus them on that which is infinite. He is asking us to cease worrying and start living. The prescription He gives us is simple: we are to start “seeking first His Kingdom.” We are to start looking at the traumas of life and the crises of life and the tests of life for what they are: divine appointments with destiny, physical exercises to strengthen our spiritual muscles, the tools with which to put off the old man and put on the new, the agents of a loving God to

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give us the mind of Christ.

II- THE CURSE

But the curse of the church of Jesus Christ in our day, in our land is that we have been *plagued with prosperity*. We have redefined spiritual success in physical terms and to us, seeking the Kingdom is seeking to tell God what we want to make us happy. Beloved, that is the *opposite of seeking first the Kingdom*. To seek the Kingdom, we are to seek to see *all of life from God's perspective and desire His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, regardless of the personal cost to the church or to us as individual believers*. We are to want to see Him glorified even if it costs us all of our buildings, all of our cars, all of our reputations and all of our comforts. It may not cost us any of that, *but if we are not willing to forsake all that we have*, we cannot be His disciples. We live in an age where men are dictating to God what His will is. His will, according to today's theological success stories is for us to be comfortable on this earth, successful on this earth, healthy on this earth, and peaceful on this earth. That isn't seeking first the Kingdom. That's seeking to have the benefits of the Kingdom before you get there and avoiding the battles of the Kingdom necessary to bring in the Kingdom. It is asking for the blessings of God rather than the mind of God.

III- THE CHARACTERISTICS

We do not have the time to explore it in depth, but there is in the Word of God a pattern, I believe, to teach us what the characteristics are of a church which is *seeking first the Kingdom*. It is found in Acts chapters 2-5. It is the early church just after the Lord's return to heaven, living out the New Testament reality without the man-made limitations time and tradition have imposed upon the church. Just look at what life was like when God's people were *seeking first the Kingdom*.

1- They were bold in their witness. Read Acts chapters 3-4. In Acts 3 Peter spoke to a potentially hostile crowd without apology. Listen:

Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may
be blotted out, (Acts 3:19a)

Peter most likely would have been considered a wild-eyed evangelical extremist in today's theological circles. What he was preaching wasn't popular then either. It was simply true. And

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those who responded found eternal life. All Peter wanted was to seek the Kingdom. As a result, seeking to please God rather than men, he preached and taught with boldness. It was a boldness considered out of place in our “liberated society”.

2- They were committed to the Body of Christ.

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.

(Acts 2:42)

You couldn’t keep them from meeting together. They were hungry to be taught. They were hungry for fellowship. They were hungry to obey the commandments. They were hungry to spend time together in prayer. They didn’t read the bulletin to see who was preaching. They didn’t check the television guide to see what they might be missing. They didn’t consider not sitting in an auditorium once a week for spiritual nourishment for living the Christian life in a hostile world. They were committed to the church and committed to learning the Word of God. *They were seeking first the Kingdom.*

3- They had all things in common.

And all that believed were together, and had all things common;

And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. (Acts 2:44,45)

So committed were they to one another that if one had a need, everyone had a need to meet. It wasn’t socialism, an organization taking one’s money and giving it to another; it was Christianity, one man’s heart so breaking over the needs of another that he couldn’t help but share. When you seek the Kingdom, you can’t clutch what is yours, while others have nothing... you just can’t.

4- They were filled with joy.

They ate their meat with gladness and singleness of heart.

(Acts 2:46 paraphrase)

Their lives were characterized by singing and praising God. Wherever they went the joy in their hearts radiated from their faces. They were *seeking first the Kingdom*. Nothing man could do to them could take from them their joy.

IV- THE QUESTION

The question is: “What’s happened?” Where has all of the

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power gone? Where has all of the love gone? Where has all of the sharing gone? Where have all of the committed gone? Where is the boldness in our preaching? Where is that level of devotion to the body of Christ? Where is that kind of generosity? Where is that kind of joy? The question is, “Why aren’t men and women seeking first the Kingdom?”

I believe we’ve confused the kingdoms. I believe we have become so immersed in this world order and so blinded by this world’s goods that we have bought the lie that all God wants of us is for us to be healthy and happy on our way to heaven. *What God wants of us is for us to seek first the Kingdom.* It may cost us our health. It may cost us our wealth. It may cost us our reputations. But, Beloved, it will never cost us what it cost God. It cost Him everything.

And I believe He is looking at some of us today with a saddened heart. Many of us are no longer seeking His perspective with reckless abandon. Many of us are no longer viewing life from the standpoint of His preeminence. We have been willing to fit God into our lives, so long as fitting God into our lives doesn’t disturb our lives, or take from our lives what everybody else has. So long as we don’t have to give up anything, we’ll “seek the Kingdom”. That isn’t seeking it first. That isn’t really seeking it at all.

What I believe Jesus is saying to us is this: “My child, have you possibly lost your first love?” Could it be that “the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches and the lust of other things entering in...” have choked the Word and we have cast a loving glance in the way of the world, making an inward and maybe even an unconscious decision to seek both kingdoms? Jesus lovingly beckons to us this hour and whispers, “Choose you this day whom ye will serve.” Because, Beloved, the truth of the matter is...to seek His Kingdom first means to seek His Kingdom, period.

Oh, dear God,

As you have reminded us, now renew us even this hour and then restore us to that total abandonment that truly gives You first place — preeminence in our lives! You will not be glorified with anything less; therefore, we must not be satisfied with anything less.

Amen

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An Assignment on Seeking first the Kingdom

1– Make a list of the words you often use in your “spiritual vocabulary” that have somewhat changed in their meanings. Can you see how Satan has taken the language of the evangelical and changed the doctrines of many, just by changing what the words stand for?

2– Begin a notebook of key words such as “faith”, “salvation”, “grace”, “mercy” and “love”. Over a period of time, using your concordance and reliable study materials, develop a “Key Word Dictionary” of your own. List verses to illustrate the correct meanings of the words.

3– Go back over the last year in your mind and think about the major decisions you have made. Did you honestly “seek first the Kingdom”? Were those decisions made asking only what would best glorify God? If not, can you honestly say you are “seeking first the Kingdom”?

4– Review the four characteristics of the first church that resulted from its seeking first the Kingdom. Measure the effectiveness of the boldness of your witness against theirs; of your commitments to the body of Christ; of your generosity; of your joy. Has God changed? Have the needs of man changed? Then why are our lives not reflecting the same level of intensity of spiritual zeal?

5– Ask yourself, “Where has all the love gone?” in your own life. Write down three specific things you can do this week to demonstrate the love of God to people who perhaps you would otherwise not minister to. Now go forth and do those things.

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