

Seek first God's kingdom

In the most matter-of-fact, calm way imaginable, our Lord teaches His disciples that they have nothing to fear. Since God takes care of the little birds and the flowers of the field, even more so will God take care of their needs. According to Jesus, that being the settled case, the disciple is free to attend to the only truly important issue of life, namely that of "seeking first God's kingdom and His righteousness."

What does that mean?

First a note about the word "first." Jesus did not mean first in terms of a sequence, for instance, "First seek God's kingdom, and then seek to care for your family, and then take care of your job, and then your personal interests." Such an ordering of priorities can be helpful for those whose lives are badly out of order, but if pressed to the fullest extent, such ordering actually distorts Jesus' teaching. Jesus did not teach that God's kingdom has first priority over other important priorities. No, Jesus taught that God's kingdom is the **ONLY** priority.

How does this work out in actual practice?

It means we give up. Whatever it is that we are longing-for, or afraid about, we give up on. Now, this doesn't mean we give up and go away. No, we give up and stay in place. But we definitely do give up. We give up our life-concerns to the present rule of God. Our marriage now becomes God's marriage. Our finances become God's finances. Our children become God's children. Our bodies become God's bodies.

Generally speaking, a crisis will have been brewing that brings us to this point of "giving up." For instance, you may work for a boss whom you sense really doesn't like you. In fact, you feel as if he really prefers the others you work with. This is obviously a concern for you given



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the economy, but also because you are uncomfortable being around someone who doesn't seem to like you. So you really try hard to be extra pleasing to your boss. You smile, speak politely, and do your work with an extra flourish. But nothing seems to change. If anything, your boss actually seems to be more irritated around you. So you try harder. You pray harder. You enlist your friends in praying for you. You find yourself anxious during the workday, stewing over the matter while at home, and not sleeping well at night. Finally, in tears, you surrender the matter to God. You give up. You in effect say to God, "Whether my boss ever likes me or not, I give-up trying to make this happen. Lord, my relationship to my boss is now yours to do with as you please. By your helping me, I plan to do my job simply and only to please You, whether anyone else likes it or not. And if I lose my job, fine. If I get promoted, fine. But from now it is yours to do with as you please."

By giving-up in this manner, you have just sought the kingdom of God. In other words, you have chosen to place under God's rule (His kingdom) the matter at hand which concerns you. You are entrusting the governance of this matter solely to Him. This does not mean you no longer do anything. But it does mean that whatever you do in terms of your actions, those actions are yielded to God, done in trust and obedience to Him alone. The outcome you leave to God.

The disciple of Jesus gets to live all of his life in such surrender. But the troubles of this life always call for a fresh "giving up." Whatever new thing is pressing-in upon us, we probably will wrestle with for a time, then sensing the futility of trying to "go it alone" with this new crisis, we give up on it and give it over to God. Usually this "letting go and letting God" results in a fresh sense of peace and joy and relief. We wonder why we don't always live in that place of surrender!

The primary reason we don't is because we have not yet been trained to abide in deep trust. This is why the Lord permits trouble to come our way. He wants us to learn from our failures and to take the necessary steps to be strengthened by grace. This is where our practice of spiritual disciplines comes in. There is simply no possible way of responding in a Christ-like manner to the trials of life without having first adopted His over-all manner of life. If Jesus Christ needed to practice solitude and fasting, we certainly will need to as well. Spiritual disciplines strengthen us with grace so that we can have the built-in inner poise to deal with the unexpected. By practicing the worship of God in the small events of our day, living in the present moment, we will increasingly find the ability to respond easily and naturally to difficulty and trouble much like Jesus would. For after all, His Spirit does live within us.

I need to be very frank here. To seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness will move us to a lifestyle very different from others around us. Sometimes those who will be most put-off will be members of our own family. Our friends too may express concern or even distance themselves from us. Such will be part of the cost involved in living in tandem with Jesus. But so what?

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