

"The First Principle"
Matthew 7:1-5; 22:34-40

INTRODUCTION

I begin our *First Things First Campaign* with a radical statement. I want you to suppose something. Suppose that you go to one of America's finest universities, Harvard for instance, for ten years and get three degrees – a Bachelor's, Masters, and Ph.D. With that in mind, the radical statement is this. What you will learn in our *First Things First Campaign* the next two months is more important than everything that you learned in those 10 years at Harvard put together.

Most people would think that's an outrageous claim to make but it isn't. It's the truth. I speak from experience. I've had ten years of post high school education and three different degrees. But if I had to choose between knowing what I learned in those 10 years and knowing what you will learn the next two months, I wouldn't even hesitate. I'd choose knowing what you will learn the next two months.

That has nothing to do with me and everything to do with God. God has revealed to us the most important information about the most important matters in human life. And that information is what I will preach and teach the next two months.

I say that to say this. Participate in our *First Things First Campaign*. Learn and apply what is preached and taught. Two incredible things will eventually happen if you do.

ABUNDANT LIFE

First, you will *"have life, and have it abundantly,"* and I'm quoting Jesus in John 10:10

Throughout its pages, the New Testament describes in detail what this life is about. It's one that encompasses every aspect of what we are and do. Dallas Willard gives us a partial but marvelous look at this life in his book *The Divine Conspiracy*. I want to read a paragraph from it: *Wouldn't you like to be one of those intelligent people who know how to live a rich and unshakable life? One free from loneliness,*

fear, and anxiety and filled with constant peace and joy. Would you like to love your neighbors as you do yourself and be free of anger, envy, lust, and covetousness? Would you like to have no need for others to praise you, and would you like to not be paralyzed and humiliated by their dislike and condemnation? Would you like to have the inspiration and strength to lead a constant life of creative goodness?" That is just a glimpse of what abundant life is about. I'd summarize generally this way. It is a condition of pervasive and habitual love, peace, and joy.

I know a husband and wife, friends of Jesus, whose 3 year-old daughter died of a malignant brain tumor. They were deeply grieved but both displayed a joy through the whole experience that is a rare and beautiful thing. It's so rare and beautiful in fact that few people including their pastor understood it. His off the cuff comment to me was, "*They're in denial.*" Maybe they are in denial. Or maybe, just maybe, they're living abundantly as Jesus Himself promised we could.

LIFE TOGETHER

A second thing will happen if you learn and apply what is taught in our *First Things First Campaign*. You will have "*life together.*" That's what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls it in his book by that very title, Life Together.

The New Testament uses a Greek word that expresses what life together is about. That word is *koinonia*. It means commonness and fellowship and describes an incredible thing. That thing is a community of people in which the agape love of 1 Corinthians 13 prevails. It is a community in which people can generally be counted upon to do what they know to be good and right.

I know a pastor, a true friend of Jesus, who lost a disgruntled leader in his church. This man left the church and talked about the pastor to others after he did. He said unflattering things about him to many people inside and outside the church. A year later, the pastor ran into

this man for the first time since he had left. When he saw him, he went over to him, gave him a big hug, and said, *"Boy, it sure is good to see you again."* To which this man replied: *"I'm surprised at your greeting. I know you've heard rumors about me talking badly about you. I thought you'd be mad at me."* "No," the pastor said, *"I really am not. I mean it. It's glad to see you."* Agape love prevails in that pastor's life. He is a man who can be counted on to do what he knows to be good and right.

Stop for a moment and think about something - what it would be like to be in a community of such people. In it, our every contact with others would be one of mutual blessing. It would be one of goodwill and respect, with each person being ready to acknowledge, make way for, or assist the other in appropriate ways. What an incredible community that would be. It would dramatically improve the quality of our lives. It would be a veritable heaven on earth.

Now, there's a reason that I've discussed abundant life and life together and it's this. They are the two things that human beings through the ages, including us, have most eagerly desired and sought.

FIRST THINGS

Well, the good news is that we can have them – if we put first things first. That is what I call "the first principle." I mean by that, it is the chief organizing principle for living abundantly and together. People are constantly seeking shorts cuts around it but there are none. There's only one way to the abundant life and life together that we seek. That one way is to put first things first.

To do that, we have to first of all figure out what "first things" are. The word "first" itself has two connotations that tell us.

The first connotation is significance. Some realities and truths are objectively more important and impacting than others are. The most important and impacting of those realities and truths are "first" things.

We see that in one of the passages I read this morning, Matthew

22:34-40. In this passage, an expert in the Mosaic Law asked Jesus a specific question. Of all the commandments in the Law or Bible, which is the greatest. Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."* He then said in verse 38, *"This is the great and first commandment."* By "first," He meant most important. The commandment to love God is more important and impacting than any other commandment including the one to love our fellow man.

The word "first" has a second connotation – sequence. Certain sequences or orders are built into the very fabric of our existence. That means that many things have links or causal connections between them. When they do, we have to experience or do an initial thing to be able to experience or do another thing. That initial thing is thus "first" in terms of sequence.

We see that in the other passage I read, Matthew 7:1-5. Jesus mentions two actions here. One is taking the speck out of someone's eye. The "speck" is a metaphor that stands for something wrong that someone is or does. Taking it out stands for condemning him or her for it. The other action is taking the log out of our own eyes. The log stands for the self-righteousness and anger with which we almost always condemn. Taking it out stands for getting rid of it.

According to Jesus, there is a sequence or order in these actions. That order is this. First, take the log out of our eyes. Then second, take the speck out of the other person's eye. Our self-righteousness and anger are almost always worse than what we're condemning. If we don't follow this sequence, therefore, we're hypocrites, Jesus says in verse 5.

You can see then what "first things" are. They are either the most significant realities and truths. Or they are the initial links or causal connections that are built into realities and truths.

PUTTING FIRST THINGS FIRST

That's what first things are and our call this morning is to actually

put them first. That means two things.

First, value and seek the most significant things. Give the best of your time, energy, effort, and resources to the most important things.

Let me ask you a question for instance. What is the chief aim in your life right now? I mean by that, what is the one thing that you value and seek more than any other? I ask you another question. What should it be? Jesus tells us in Matthew 22:34-40. It's loving God.

Some time ago, an unbeliever asked me, "*What is the one thing that you want most in life?*" I quickly replied, "*To love God as much as I possibly can before I die.*" I actually mean that. That really is my chief aim in life. God is the only utterly lovely and utterly competent being in the universe. Consequently, the one thing I value and seek the most, above all others including my family, is loving Him.

Putting first things first means a second thing. Follow the sequence or order that are built into things. Experience and do things as the links or causal connections between them dictate.

Let's go back to loving God. That is my chief aim but I can't just decide to do it and in that same moment do it. I have to do other things before I am able to do it. Loving God involves a sequence, in other words, that we can't escape or get around. That sequence is this: understanding, knowing, and loving. First, we understand God. Second, because we understand Him, we're able to know Him. And third, because we know Him, we're able to love Him. That is what our Wednesday night class titled *The First Aim* is all about. It teaches you how to understand, know, and thus love God.

That then is our call this morning. Put first things first. Value and seek the most significant things. Also follow the sequence or order that are built into them.

That's the call and the question is, "*Will we answer it?*" The hard fact is that most professing Christians in the pews of American churches won't. They simply will not put first things first.

There's a reason for that. It's the very culture itself in which we

live. The truth is that putting first things first is more difficult in our culture than in any other culture and at any other time of history. That is not an exaggeration. It's a fact.

Mother Teresa identified the problem quite definitively. Robert Schuller asked her why American Christians don't feel God's presence like they should. She quickly replied, *"Too many distractions."* She was right. We have far too many things to experience and do. The most significant things, in other words, have too many rivals.

But let's put those rivals in their place. Let's put first things first.

Some time ago, a busy Christian, not from our church, told me that she doesn't have time for the kind of devotional life that she wants to have. So I asked her how many hours a week she spends reading the Bible, praying, and practicing solitude. She said about three. I then asked how many she spends watching TV. She said about 12. She immediately got my point and protested. *"12 hours isn't much compared to most people,"* she said. *"And besides, I need a little entertainment in my life."* She was right on both counts. But still - 12 hours on TV and 3 on God. She should have put first things first and reversed it - 12 hours on God and 3 on TV.

CONCLUSION

You can see from what I've said that putting first things first will require some dramatic changes in our lives. Most of us will have to radically alter the things that we value and do.

Which is what the rest of our *First Things First Campaign* is about. You will learn practically and in detail the things that you and I need to value and do. It will then be up to you and I to value and do them.

The prize though is worth the price if we do. The price is putting first things first. The prize is a condition of pervasive and habitual love, peace, and joy and a community in which the agape love of God prevails. As you can plainly see, the prize is worth the price. So, do it! Put first things first!